STUDENTS
AT THE CENTER

TEACHING AND LEARNING
IN THE ERA OF THE COMMON CORE
A **JOBS FOR THE FUTURE** PROJECT

THE STUDENTS AT THE CENTER SERIES

CHANGING SCHOOL DISTRICT PRACTICES

By Ben Levin, Amanda Datnow, and Nathalie Carrier

MARCH 2012

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
THE EDITORS, *STUDENTS AT THE CENTER* SERIES

School districts seeking to prepare more students for college and careers by implementing student-centered approaches to learning face significant challenges in their efforts to move beyond the status quo. Any educational reform effort encounters barriers, but the difficulties inherent in changing the traditional nature of teaching and the culture of classrooms present particular problems. Understanding these dynamics at the outset of planning for districtwide change will aid efforts to put student needs, motivations, and interests at the center of educational practice.

What would it take to move districts toward student-centered learning? And how much of this work is occurring in U.S. school systems? While there is evidence of student-centered practices in some schools and classrooms, student-centered approaches are not predominant, especially system-wide.

To understand the work that school districts are doing to support student-centered learning, Ben Levin, Amanda Datnow, and Nathalie Carrier reviewed research about high-performing school districts, and examined the scope of commonly defined student-centered practices in school districts and charter schools. They observed that:

> School districts are essential actors in any education reform and will have to play a vital role in any efforts to expand student-centered approaches to learning. Without district leadership of student-centered reform initiatives, widespread implementation is likely to fail.

> System-wide implementation of student-centered approaches presents particular problems because it aims to change longstanding traditions of teacher practice and classroom culture.

> While there is little direct research evidence of student-centered approaches to learning across high-performing districts, the practices and processes of these districts are pertinent to such innovative approaches.

> Districts do not appear to be deeply involved in implementing student-centered practices. Most examples of district engagement are programmatic and tailored to serve particular groups of students, rather than intended for all of a system's students.

> In any effort to implement student-centered approaches, districts will need to assess policy and administrative requirements and state accountability measures that impede or support such approaches.

> A strong, districtwide student-centered agenda would likely include implementing special programs and/or schools as well as working simultaneously to change practice in all schools and for all students.

EXPANDING STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACHES REQUIRES DISTRICT LEADERSHIP

Whether viewed as bureaucratic barriers to innovation or influential organizations that can expand effective educational practice, school districts remain essential actors in any educational reform effort. Despite debate over how they fulfill their role, the fact remains for now and the foreseeable future that districts will continue to be the dominant local governance structure for U.S. schooling.

School districts play crucial roles in orienting systems toward their goals, providing instructional leadership, establishing policy coherence, and maintaining a focus on equity. Districts also carry out many important logistical tasks: they may hire and assign teachers and principals, manage facilities, decide the location of school programs, assign students to schools, and manage a large portion of budgets. Through these actions, they help shape school cultures and priorities. They also serve as a key connection between communities and their schools.

Given their leadership responsibilities and decision-making authority, districts will play a vital role in any effort to provide and extend the principles of student-centered approaches to learning across a system. Without widespread district support, student-centered practices will remain a marginal activity; they will have no chance to gain the traction they need to make a difference in the lives and prospects of youth across the country.

IT IS NOT EASY FOR DISTRICTS TO CHANGE TEACHER PRACTICE AND CLASSROOM CULTURE

Educational reform of the depth and breadth required to implement student-centered approaches to learning will require school systems to undergo monumental changes in structure, policy, and culture. Among the most significant, districts will need to support challenges to longstanding ways that schools and classrooms operate—the way teachers teach, students learn, and outcomes are assessed; the hours of the school day; and the location of school programs. Underlying all else, school districts will need to understand and foster fundamental change in the relationships between teachers and students. Teachers will focus on understanding not only their students' learning styles but also their interests, anxieties, and motivations. Students will take much more responsibility for what and how they learn.

Some of these practices may collide with broader systemic rules and state and national regulations, such as assessment and accountability mechanisms, graduation requirements, financing guidelines, and collective bargaining laws. They also may conflict with the philosophies of teachers or the beliefs of parents and community members. It will be the job of districts to align stakeholders at all levels of the school system to these new approaches and mobilize political and community support.

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HOW DISTRICTS SUPPORT REFORMS CAN INFORM IMPLEMENTATION OF STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACHES

The roles that effective school districts play in supporting educational reform of any kind are complex and interrelated. Drawing from recent research on high-performing districts—those that have improved student outcomes—a number of system practices and processes are pertinent in supporting innovative approaches in general and student-centered approaches in particular. These include: a clear leadership focus on improving student learning; a commitment to equity and excellence; combining top-down support with bottom-up innovation; learning-focused partnerships between districts and schools; data-informed decision making; capacity building at all levels; and productive partnerships with local and national organizations.

One of the most important ways a district can support educational reform is establishing a clear leadership focus on continuously improving student learning. Ideally, this would translate into a shared system-wide vision focused on closing achievement gaps and bringing all students to high standards. Practically, it requires aligning resources, administrative efforts, and policy around this vision.

For expanding student-centered approaches to learning, the specifics would include such actions as: endorsing a curriculum with instruction that is more project-based than textbook-driven; giving teachers the flexibility to make adjustments that suit students' needs and interests; and establishing measures of achievement that are broader than traditional tests. Effective instructional leadership is critical because districts must help schools and staff develop the capacity to teach in new ways. This would include more than traditional professional development. Often, it is important to make teaching practices more public and transparent; teachers will need to open their classrooms and their minds to constructive feedback from peers, instructional coaches, and other observers.

At the same time, teacher support for reform effort is critical. District leaders would be wise to consider how student-centered practices can be structured—and introduced—to genuinely motivate, rather than alienate, the teaching staff. Likewise, effective school districts balance top-down central management with flexibility and autonomy for schools.

The relationship among all of these factors is critical. For example, when district leaders articulate clear goals for reform and a strong theory of change, staff are more likely to coordinate resources throughout the system to support new practices.

SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE IMPLEMENTING STUDENT-CENTERED PRACTICE MOSTLY IN SPECIALIZED PROGRAMS OR AT INDIVIDUAL SCHOOLS

There has been little research on the extent of district efforts to establish student-centered practices to improve student achievement or on how districts should go about doing this work. A review of websites of selected "high-performing" districts and charter management organizations (CMOs) begins to fill this gap, identifying the ways in which their activities reflect elements of student-centered learning.

The research reveals that student-centered learning is still in its infancy as an educational model in the United States. Neither districts nor CMOs appear to be deeply involved in implementing student-centered approaches. Virtually every district or organization has some elements consistent with the concept of student-centered learning, but many elements of student-centered approaches are not evident at all.

Student-centered practices most often employed by districts tend to be programmatic and, in some sense, peripheral to the daily lives of teachers and students across all schools in the system. The review found many initiatives that appear to embody aspects of student-centered learning, rather than supporting system-wide changes in the daily cultures of schools, such as changing

relations between teachers and students or modifying curriculum to meet student interests and choices. Districts are more likely to create programs for distinct populations or purposes that reach only a small proportion of students.

The review did find patterns in the kinds of approaches utilized. Common approaches include: dual-credit and early college programs; district-supported virtual schools; district-supported specialty schools; community-district partnerships; pilot programs; districtwide curriculum-specific initiatives and programs; school reconstruction projects; and choice and admission processes.

One might expect to find evidence of more student-centered learning approaches in CMOs because they provide alternative educational models to those provided by districts. However, the review did not always find this to be the case. As with districts, few of the charter programs reviewed provide educational programs that fundamentally disrupt "industrial" notions of classroom culture and learning.

Examples of significant CMO practices include: small class sizes, small schools, and personalized designs; curriculum-specific programs; mandatory parent involvement; afterschool programming and internships; extended school day; alternative teacher induction; college-bound support; no tracking; and specific instructional strategies.

SCHOOL DISTRICTS MUST BE STRATEGIC AND DELIBERATIVE IN REFORM EFFORTS AND CONSIDER FULL RANGE OF STUDENT-CENTERED OPTIONS AND EVIDENCE

Districts face many challenges as they seek to implement student-centered approaches to learning—whether in a single program or districtwide. First there are state and district policies and politics that can constrain change—teacher contracts, accountability measures, administrative requirements, and views of community stakeholders. In addition, before moving ahead, districts should examine a range of student-centered options, from charter schools, to virtual schools, to dual enrollment programs, and others. District leaders would be wise to consider the rationale for each practice and the range of choices overall, as well as the evidence base for each. Few districts appear to have an overall strategy for selecting student-centered alternatives to teaching and learning. Instead, they appear to adopt them one at a time, usually as someone thinks a particular model is a good idea or perhaps as internal or external pressures give rise to certain programs.

Among the key questions to answer regarding selection of implementing particular programs are: Which students would benefit? How would the programs or practices improve outcomes? What is the evidence that they will work? Then there are a host of logistical questions: How many students will participate? Where will programs be located, how will they be funded, and how will they be staffed? What will be the measures of success?

Various features of student-centered learning approaches may distract from or even conflict with one another. For example, efforts to remove barriers of time and space actually may make it harder for teachers to get to know students well, while a strong emphasis on good student-teacher relations may militate against relaxing rules on attendance. Opening up what counts as learning to, say, community or postsecondary study may make it harder to build strong communities inside a school. Providing more student choice may inadvertently increase racial and economic segregation. Choices will have to be made about which elements of student-centered learning will be prioritized.

Even after this long list of internal considerations, districts face state and federal policy issues, including graduation requirements, accountability mandates, funding provisions, and equity considerations.

For implementing student-centered practices districtwide, there needs to be system-wide understanding of the model and its goals, clarity of how these approaches specifically relate to each teacher's classroom practice, training opportunities for staff to gain the skills to be effective, and, ideally, low turnover at the district's highest levels so that system priorities do not change in the middle of the process.

A STRONG EFFORT TO IMPLEMENT STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACHES TO LEARNING REQUIRES BOTH NEW SPECIALIZED PROGRAMS AND SYSTEM-WIDE CHANGE

The right combination of student-centered approaches to teaching and learning for any given district depends on a variety of demographic and system factors, including population, geography, facilities, resources, public support, and opportunities for partnerships with outside organizations.

Given the challenges of implementing student-centered approaches to learning throughout entire school districts, a strong effort to adopt such approaches should probably combine special programs or schools with efforts to change practice in all schools and for all students.

To reach most students in a district will require comprehensive changes in teaching practice. Focusing only on innovative or special programs seems likely to leave large numbers of students unaffected. However, establishing specialized schools or programs also plays an important role. New options can provide good alternative opportunities for particular groups of students whose needs otherwise are not being met. In addition, this approach may be a way to begin to provide student-centered approaches in a district that is not ready for broader change and a place to start exploring student-centered strategies before committing to comprehensive changes.

JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

nellie mae
EDUCATION
FOUNDATION