



The Rise of Networks

How Decentralized Management Is Improving Schools

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Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

School districts across the country are shifting away from their traditional management paradigm—a central office that directs its schools through uniform mandates and policies—toward a new vision where district leaders support autonomous schools while holding them accountable for student performance. The advent of new governance mechanisms between districts and schools that have come with the rise of charter schools, contract schools, and various systems that allow district-managed schools greater freedom of action in hiring, budgeting, and instructional planning has transformed the command-and-control relationships that were long the hallmark of public school management. As a consequence, school-district leaders increasingly recognize that greater school autonomy requires rethinking their models of district-level management and support.

In 2006, New York City pioneered the transformation of the relationship between the central office and its schools by launching an initiative that gave autonomy to all schools regardless of their performance.¹ During the two-year pilot program that preceded the initiative's launch, an initial cohort of 26 schools organized itself into four networks of schools that worked together to solve common problems. These networks were supported by a small team of central-office staff who understood school autonomy and helped schools address a broad range of issues, from instruction to hiring to budgeting.² As the pilot program scaled up, additional schools followed suit and voluntarily affiliated into networks of similar-size schools. These new networks were also supported by expert teams of district personnel or by staff from a select group of education nonprofits. By 2010, every public school in New York City was required to select a support partner and join a network.³

Today, New York City's public schools are affiliated in networks based on a common interest: a similar type of school, such as an all-elementary-school network; a common instructional approach; or a similar target population, such as English language learners.⁴ These school networks are supported by teams of about 15 experts, either from within the system or from a nonprofit education partner, who help principals hire teachers, manage budgets, find and create school-specific professional development, analyze student data, and troubleshoot technical and operational problems.⁵

This report describes the current state of school networks in New York City and outlines the successes and challenges the city has faced in implementing school networks. It also explores how networks have been implemented in other cities—Baltimore, Maryland; Chicago, Illinois; and Denver, Colorado—to show how the school-network concept has been adapted to a variety of local contexts. Educational researchers note that few, if any, urban public school districts consistently provide their schools with effective supports to improve instruction for disadvantaged children.⁶ As districts struggle to improve their supports for schools, especially those serving large numbers of disadvantaged students, school networks show promise as an emerging strategy to help schools improve student learning and to solve the operational problems that can suck time and energy away from a focus on instruction.

Research on school networks in New York City and other districts is still in its infancy. However, based on a review of existing research related to New York City schools and interviews with experts on school networks in Baltimore, Chicago, and Denver, we offer these emerging findings:

- **Networks can deliver district supports more effectively than traditional central-office departments.** Organizing district support by cross-functional teams responsive to a small group of schools builds greater trust between school leaders and their district and helps district-level staff better understand the needs of the schools they serve. Network teams can serve as a single point of contact between principals and district leaders, which gives principals more time to focus on teachers and instruction.
- **Networks can open the door to collaborative problem solving among groups of schools, leading to improved student outcomes.** New York City educational leaders report that a handful of high-performing school networks used cross-school collaboration to make significant strides in school improvement during the 2011-12 school year. However, New York City's networks have had varying degrees of success fostering such collaboration across their schools. In Chicago, an externally managed, voluntary network of high schools has improved graduation and college entrance rates for students. Other cities have made less effort to use school networks as a tool for cross-school collaboration.

- **Outsourcing can enhance networks, but locale is key.** In cities such as New York, where robust educational nonprofit sectors exist, external partners can lead networks of schools in instructional improvement. However, New York City’s experience with outside networks indicates that external partners still need district liaisons to solve problems with operations. In cities with a weaker base of educational nonprofits, district staff must continue to lead both operational troubleshooting and instructional improvement.

Although New York City’s school networks made other significant changes to the relationship between the central office and city schools, two key strategies—deploying cross-functional teams to support schools and allowing schools to choose their networks—have changed how schools view their relationship with the central office, improved service delivery, and ultimately helped schools improve their performance. When districts in other cities have experimented with school networks, the strategy of delivering district supports through network teams has taken root more deeply than has the approach of allowing schools to choose their network affiliation. However, initial findings from New York City indicate districts may want to invest more heavily in voluntary, self-affiliated school networks and to give schools the time and tools to collaborate on solving problems of instructional practice.