Districts’ Use of Research to Support Struggling Schools

AYPF Forum - 2/4/13

Principal Investigators:
Alan J. Daly, University of California at San Diego
Kara S. Finnigan, University of Rochester
Making the Hippos Dance
Spoiler Alert - Evidence

• Data and research: interchangeable and treated with skepticism
• Educators rarely diagnose problems of low performance or consider evidence in support of improvement strategies
• Use of evidence for improvement is superficial, with educators relying on less credible evidence
• School/district climates do not support use of research or collaboration necessary for organizational learning
“New” ideas and practices are least likely to reach lowest-performing schools.

Weak internal connections and high levels of distrust are exacerbated by pressure of accountability policy sanctions.
Central offices play an important role in supporting (or constraining) the work of schools.

Higher levels of trust result in exchange of best practices and ability to bring about complex change across a system.

Movement of evidence is highly reliant on “brokers”.
Our work

• 5 year longitudinal study (2008-2013)
• 1 mid-size and 1 large urban district (currently expanding to 2 more large districts)
• Over 900 educators involved (survey/interview) at school and district levels
• Funded by W.T. Grant Foundation and Spencer Foundation
Moving Information
Finding: Narrow View of Evidence

“When I think of evidence in school improvement I think of statistics. I think of drop out rates. I think of test scores. I think of the GPA of students and how that’s factoring in. I don’t necessarily agree that those are the best way to show but I think that if you’re looking for an objective way in a numbers based kind of No Child Left Behind manner then that’s pretty much what you’re looking at.”
Finding: Types of Evidence Used

- Student performance data: 64%
- Research/evaluations conducted in my district: 52%
- District administrators: 52%
- Professional associations: 40%
- Education books: 40%
- Local experts: 39%
- Higher education faculty: 39%
- Staff at another school: 36%
- Non academic student outcome data: 32%
- Research/evaluations published in scholarly think tank or federal/state department of...: 32%
- Think tank or federal/state department of...: 31%
- Research/evaluations published in practitioner...: 28%
- Popular press: 28%
- Web-based clearinghouses or listserves: 19%
- Educational blogs: 17%
Finding: Weak Ties; Isolation of Leaders in Low-Performing Schools
Finding: Bifurcation of the System

Red = Central office
Blue = Principal
Finding: Importance of District-Level Brokers of Research
Finding: Importance of Principals as Brokers of Research at School Level
Policy Implications

- Emphasis on technical aspects of improvement overlooks relational component to complex, system-wide change
- Moving from compliance oriented responses to capacity-building systems
- Lack of attention to preparation and professional development of leaders (district/school) throughout the system (area sups, principals) relating to evidence interpretation may limit capacity for brokering
- Continued emphasis on consequences (with little attention to support) may increase the distrust and fragmentation that already exists in low-performing systems
Contact

Alan J. Daly, Ph.D.
University of California, San Diego
805-252-7819
ajdaly@ucsd.edu

Kara S. Finnigan, Ph.D.
University of Rochester
585-275-9942;
kfinnigan@warner.rochester.edu
Related Publications

- Daly, A. J., & Finnigan, K. S. (2012). The social side of district change: Relationships can play a key role in reform efforts. *District Administration*, 34.