



Best Practice: Providing Operational and Instructional Support for Schools

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CITY: NEW YORK CITY

POLICY AREA: EDUCATION

BEST PRACTICE

The Children First Network (CFN) support system is an initiative of the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) designed to provide operational and instructional support for schools through tailored support teams. The result is that as much decision-making power as possible has been devolved to the people who know their schools best—principals, teachers and school staff—and that principals can devote as much time as possible to improving instruction.

CFNs combine an instructional support team and the back office functions of the district office to create an integrated, small cross-functional team that delivers targeted services directly to schools. Schools self-affiliate with networks of their choosing, and networks accordingly organize to serve the unique needs and articulated priorities of their schools.

ISSUE

In order to realize New York City's ambitious reform agenda based on the principles of leadership, empowerment, and accountability in 1,600+ schools citywide, NYCDOE leaders recognized that principals need to focus on classroom instruction rather than time-consuming operational tasks including busing, budget planning and compliance with legal mandates. Specifically, principals needed:

- 1) A simplified back-office service delivery model aligned with the needs of their schools;
- 2) Increased operational capacity within their schools; and
- 3) An expanded pool of resources directly under their control.

To meet these needs, the NYCDOE team, led by Deputy Chancellor Eric Nadelstern, developed a theory of change designed to pave the way for reform:

- a) If operational and instructional service providers are integrated in a small, non-geographically based team that is tightly aligned with schools' educational goals,
- b) And this team of service providers is empowered to solve problems for schools and is directly accountable to principals for their performance,
- c) This leads to innovation, which improves quality and efficiency of service and drives down costs.
- d) Then principals spend less time and funds solving operational problems, and have more time and financial resources for instruction and supervision,
- e) Resulting in a school support structure that is efficient and cost-effective, that drives increases in student achievement.

The ultimate goal of establishing CFNs is to streamline operations, aligning resources to schools and building capacity within schools so principals can focus time and resources on instruction and accelerating student achievement. This practice results in differentiated network staffing configurations oriented to meet the specific needs of a network's schools.

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GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Objective 1: Provide Superior, High-Quality Service to Schools

Each CFN's small team structure allows staff to form close relationships with the group of schools they support. The integrated instructional and operational team facilitates collaboration to develop comprehensive, innovative solutions to common challenges schools face.

Objective 2: Build Operational Capacity in Schools

In order to relieve principals of operational burdens without disempowering them, the CFN simultaneously builds capacity at the school level, and provides customized, easy-access service at the network level.

Objective 3: Produce Cost Savings

The CFN cost per school is less than the cost of the previous operational support structures and yields savings to both schools and the overall system.

Principles

Underlying CFN's objectives are three key principles that help promote development for the CFN team and its schools, as well as for the NYCNYCDOE: Innovation, Competition, and Accountability.

Innovation and Competition

The ultimate goal of a CFN is to enable principals to focus on instruction and student achievement. Each CFN's cross-functional support team, in collaboration with the CFN's management team, works to meet this goal by innovating beyond the NYCDOE's current structure and systems, and by pursuing more effective, economical and tailored operational services for CFN schools. In the long-term, such innovation will create new markets for operational support and services within the NYCDOE, fueling competition, and ultimately, better services for schools.

Like previous reforms that focused on increasing competition among instructional support providers, CFN aims to ignite competition around the operational aspects of school management. As NYCDOE embraced competition among education service providers, it welcomed the competition among operational service providers that naturally follows from this reform.

Accountability

A robust, multifaceted accountability system guides and refines a CFN's innovation: each CFN holds itself directly accountable to the schools, principals, and school staff it serves. By surveying principals twice per year, measuring student achievement, and tracking operational goals, a CFN maintains constant communication between network staff and school leaders to help fuel professional development within schools and networks. The CFN's unique structure and accountability mechanisms challenge the traditional management belief that freedom to innovate will impair execution. The system of CFN's in New York City promises to be a leader in developing innovative solutions to improve quality and efficiency.

IMPLEMENTATION

The CFN model was adapted from existing models of school portfolio management by Charter Management Organizations and Education Management Organizations.

Currently, there are 60 CFN's, which marks significant growth from the program's birth in 2007, when it was launched as a pilot. In order to transition effectively from the pilot program to the CFN model citywide, NYCDOE implemented a lean management structure to provide support and oversight to a manageable number of networks and schools. Six Cluster leaders, along with a small cluster support team, assumed instructional support and operational oversight for approximately

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ten networks each. These teams, which report directly to Deputy Chancellor Eric Nadelstern in NYCDOE's Division of School Support and Instruction tightly manage their networks, proactively providing training and support wherever needed.

COST

Funds for instructional and operational support previously maintained centrally have been distributed to schools so they can determine what type of support they need. Schools then pay a fee to the network they self-select to provide them with support. Fees vary by network, based on the types of support and professional development provided to schools.

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

In 2009-10, 96% of principals affiliated with a CFN team strongly agreed or agreed that the support received from their CFN team helped them improve students' outcomes in their schools.

TIMELINE

August 2007: Launch of Pilot Phase

Program launched as one network serving 28.

2007-10: Expansion Phase

After successfully testing the CFN as a small pilot, NYCDOE sought to implement the program on a larger scale. In school year 2010-11, all schools were affiliated with CFN's. This increase occurred in phases between 2007 and 2010.

LEGISLATION

N/A

LESSONS LEARNED

Challenge 1: Increasing the program's scale while maintaining high-quality service and execution

In the first year of the pilot program, a central team supported the efforts of just one CFN and 28 schools. This focused incubation of the model allowed NYCDOE to build the network's capacity through coaching and access to resources. Year two of the pilot presented a new challenge: maintaining the first year's high-quality service even though the central management team became spread across several networks.

Lessons Learned:

Leveraging the expertise of CFN team members to provide guidance and feedback to their peers enabled team members to broaden their impact, share knowledge, and build capacity in order to decrease dependence on central support.

Challenge 2: Managing performance within the CFN teams

Initially, CFN teams were somewhat overwhelmed by the challenge of managing their own performance. Network Leaders were often pulled in many different directions at once. Team members were managing complex, interrelated workstreams, and time spent at school sites limited opportunities for collaboration and team learning.

Lesson Learned:

Making use of technology was important: successful team members collaborated via conference calls, webinars, frequent emails and online sharepoints.



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Sharing network leadership and authority was crucial: Network Leaders deputized strong members of their teams, granting more authority to a Director of Operations or a Deputy Network Leader, who assisted in managing other team members.

TRANSFERABILITY

Given that NYC is the largest school district in the country with 1,600+ schools and 1.1 million students, the fact that this personalized management model works here suggests that it is transferable to smaller districts with different profiles.

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Facts and figures in this report were provided by the highlighted city agency to New York City Global Partners, Inc.