



**RELATIONAL COORDINATION**  
RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE

**Central Office Transformation in a Major Urban School District:  
A Relational Capacity Strategy**

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RCRC Case Study. For more information on this case, visit [www.rcrc.brandeis.edu](http://www.rcrc.brandeis.edu)

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The RCRC is a research and learning collaborative housed at Brandeis University that uses the theory of relational coordination to help organizations transform relationships for high performance. The RCRC connects researchers and practitioners around the world to develop and test new models of change, exploring how participants transform their relational dynamics and how they redesign their structures to support and hardwire the new dynamics. The RCRC examines how these changes impact critical performance outcomes including quality, safety, efficiency, engagement, learning, and innovation.

## Table of Contents

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1. CENTRAL OFFICE TRANSFORMATION THROUGH BUILDING RELATIONAL CAPACITY .....</b>	<b>4</b>
RELATIONAL CAPACITY AND THE RELATIONAL MODEL OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE.....	4
<b>2. CHANGE PROCESS THUS FAR .....</b>	<b>5</b>
STAGE 1: EXPLORE CONTEXT AND INTRODUCE PRINCIPLES OF RELATIONAL COORDINATION .....	5
STAGE 2: CREATE CHANGE TEAMS .....	7
STAGE 3: ASSESS RELATIONAL COORDINATION FROM PERSPECTIVE OF KEY STAKEHOLDERS.....	9
STAGE 4: REFLECT ON FINDINGS AND ENGAGE IN SENSEMAKING.....	9
STAGE 5: DESIGN AND IMPLEMENT INTERVENTIONS.....	11
STAGE 6: ASSESS IMPACT AND REFINE AS NEEDED. ....	12
<b>3. FACTORS THAT WEAKEN RELATIONAL CAPACITY.....</b>	<b>12</b>
SCHOOL PLACEMENT BASED ON PARENT PREFERENCE/MANAGED CHOICE.....	13
WEAKENING OF COMMUNITY SCHOOLS .....	13
COMPLEXITY OF TRANSPORTATION AND OPERATIONS.....	14
GROWING BEHAVIORAL HEALTH NEEDS OF STUDENTS.....	14
AUDITION SCHOOLS CREATE INCOME-BASED BARRIERS.....	14
OVER-CLASSIFICATION INTO SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR LOW-INCOME STUDENTS.....	15
ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM ENCOURAGES OVER-CLASSIFICATION AND UNEQUAL PLACEMENT .....	16
SILOED ACCOUNTABILITY IS EMBEDDED IN CENTRAL OFFICE CULTURE.....	17
CENTRAL OFFICE ACCOUNTABILITY TO THE BOARD.....	17
INFLUX OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER STUDENTS.....	18
INSUFFICIENT RESOURCES FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS .....	18
SHORT TERM TENURE OF SUPERINTENDENTS.....	18
SKEPTICISM FROM THE COMMUNITY .....	18
BACKGROUND FACTOR: GROWING INCOME INEQUALITY.....	19
<b>4. STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING RELATIONAL CAPACITY .....</b>	<b>19</b>
STRENGTHS.....	19
<i>Committed, Dedicated Staff in the Central Office .....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Parent Preference and Selection .....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Clarity of Vision Regarding Placement Within Central Office .....</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>The following elements of a successful placement process were identified consistently across all stakeholders:.....</i>	<i>20</i>
OPPORTUNITIES.....	20
<i>Need for Senior Leadership to Demonstrate Accountability, Set Direction .....</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Improved Content and Consistency of Communication.....</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Greater Clarity and Visibility into the Placement Process for Parents and Schools.....</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Shared Accountability and Rewards.....</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Shared Protocols for Placement Process .....</i>	<i>21</i>
<b>5. SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>23</b>

## Executive Summary

To better meet the needs of its stakeholders - students, families, and schools - Major Urban School District has engaged in Central Office transformation. A new superintendent took office in September 2016. Following her arrival, the District completed a planning process and, as a result, engaged in a system-wide reorganization of the Central Office and its key divisions. The overarching goal of the Central Office transformation was to build relational capacity to enable staff to think and act more systemically, to better serve students, parents, and principals. To inform its efforts and achieve its goal, the superintendent and her leadership team used the relational coordination framework and the Relational Model of Organizational Change (RMOC).

This report analyzes efforts to build relational capacity in the school district, and in particular, to change how interdependent workgroups work together in Student Placement and Special Education. To prepare this report, a Brandeis University research team conducted a series of observations and semi-structured interviews between August 2017 and February 2018 with 15 key district personnel in the Central Office representing Student Placement, Special Education, Accountability, school principals, and a lead consultant.

To begin the process of addressing the challenges faced by the Office of Student Placement and Special Education, the school district engaged in the six stages of change, guided by the RMOC:

- **Explore context and introduce relational coordination principles.** Leaders from Central Office divisions attended an RC Intervention Workshop in June 2017. Coming out of this workshop, the participating leaders decided to focus their change efforts on two distinct but interconnected work processes - **Student Placement** and **Special Education** - and to provide each with its own stream of training, workshops, survey administration, and intervention support. They selected these two work processes because of their impact on student performance and equity outcomes, the high degree of coordination they require with district stakeholders, and the expected willingness of their staff to proactively engage and participate in Central Office transformation.
- **Create a change team.** An external facilitator was hired as a consultant to this project and engaged in biweekly coaching sessions with Central Office leaders beginning in July 2017 to guide this process. A series of workshops were facilitated to engage key staff members in the change process.
- **Assess relational coordination from the perspective of key stakeholders.** To date, baseline relational coordination measurement has been conducted within the internal SP team. SP has begun planning to launch a second RC survey to gather feedback from beyond their own internal team, from external stakeholders who receive service or support from the SP department, including families and school-based staff.
- **Reflect on findings and engagement in sense-making.** RC Survey baseline results were shared with Student Placement staff during a workshop session co-facilitated by the external facilitator. Staff used this session to identify target areas for improvement and intervention and to articulate the next steps for implementing a plan of action, including the choice of performance metrics to monitor progress.

- **Design and implement interventions.** The early change process included relational interventions - RC mapping, measurement, reflection on findings, and conversations of interdependence in the workshops. Positive customer experience was a desired outcome for this Central Office transformation with both Principals and Parents/Caregivers identified as two key customers. As part of the reorganization, the case management model was also reorganized. The case management model had been based on case managers who worked across schools and was reorganized to be a school-based model consistent with the theme of decentralization.
- **Assessment of impact and refinements as needed.** Central Office leadership has committed to conducting periodic assessments to evaluate progress, and support continuous quality improvement cycles over time, as relational coordination patterns evolve and as new stakeholders become engaged. The RCRC research team at Brandeis University was engaged to conduct an impact assessment of RC interventions and the impact on performance outcomes at the end of the contract period.

Interviews with key stakeholders in Central Office revealed twelve factors impacting relational capacity in the school district, against the backdrop of growing income inequality in the larger national context.

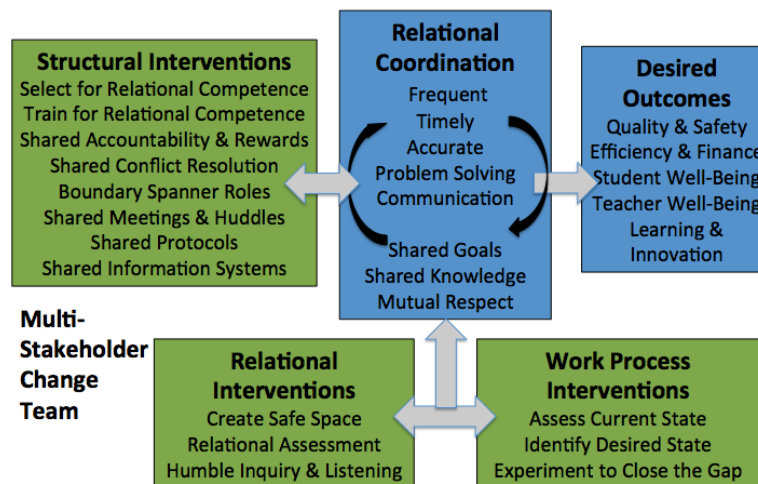
Together, the data summarized in this report suggest a set of strengths and opportunities for Student Placement and Special Education. For one, the placement process for students who are English Language Learners and students with special needs does not sufficiently meet the needs of these students. Further, a combination of relational, organizational, and district challenges interact to limit the ability of these departments to achieve their shared goal of successfully placing students. Within the school district, there is an opportunity to transform the processes for Student Placement and Special Education into a model of co-production and partnership with the families and schools they serve. To do so will require leveraging strengths, acknowledging feedback, being honest about weaknesses, and taking deliberate and decisive action to be responsive to the opportunities for improvement.

## 1. Central Office Transformation Through Building Relational Capacity

To better meet the needs of its stakeholders - students, families, and schools - Major Urban School District is engaged in Central Office transformation. The new superintendent took office in September 2016. Since her arrival, the District has completed a planning process and, as a result, has begun a system-wide reorganization of the Central Office and its key divisions including technology, finance, operations, transportation, placement, and others.

The overarching goal of this Central Office transformation has been to build relational capacity to enable staff to think and act more systemically, to better serve parents, students and principals throughout the school district. The incoming superintendent had used relational coordination concepts in her previous leadership roles and had participated in RC Intervention Training before joining Major Urban School District. Based on this experience, she identified relational capacity as an area for further development to strengthen coordination between divisions to better anticipate and meet the needs of key stakeholders. The superintendent selected Dr. Tony Suchman, an experienced process consultant with expertise in relational coordination methods, to facilitate the Central Office transformation process.

**Figure 1: The Relational Model of Organizational Change**



### Relational Capacity and the Relational Model of Organizational Change

The Relational Model of Organizational Change, depicted in **Figure 1**, is an evidence-based approach for building relational coordination and other forms of relational capacity (Gittell, 2016). At the heart of the Relational Model of Organizational Change is relational coordination. Defined as communicating and relating for the purpose of task integration, relational coordination is a form of social capital that can be developed among professions and with community partners to create a relational ecosystem for high performance (Gittell, 2002; 2003; 2006; 2009). Relational coordination is empirically associated with a wide range of desirable outcomes, including quality, safety, efficiency, client engagement, worker well-being, learning and innovation (Gittell & Logan, 2018).

The Relational Model of Organizational Change is a six-stage empirical model that includes 1) exploring the context and introducing the principles of relational coordination, 2) creating Change Teams that represent key stakeholders, 3) measuring baseline relational coordination among key

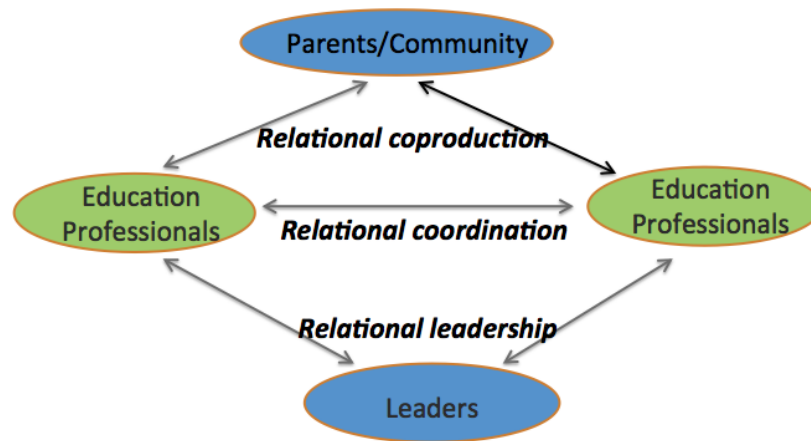
stakeholders, 4) reflecting on findings and engaging in sensemaking through conversation among key stakeholders, 5) designing and implementing interventions, then 6) assessing the impact of those interventions and refining them as needed (Gittell, 2016). These stages are summarized in **Figure 2**.

**Figure 2: Six Stages of Change**

<b>Stage 1</b>	Explore the context and introduce principles of relational coordination
<b>Stage 2</b>	Create a multi-stakeholder change team with space to disagree respectfully
<b>Stage 3</b>	Assess relational coordination from the perspective of all participants
<b>Stage 4</b>	Reflect on findings and engage in sensemaking
<b>Stage 5</b>	Design and implement interventions
<b>Stage 6</b>	Assess impact and refine as needed

Through this process, relational capacity can be built in three forms - relational coordination among school professionals, relational leadership between school professionals and their leaders, and relational coproduction with parents and the broader community. See **Figure 3**.

**Figure 3: Three Types of Relational Capacity**



## 2. Change Process Thus Far

The superintendent invited Central Office staff to build relational capacity by engaging in a series of trainings, workshops, and organizational changes, informed by the Relational Model of Organizational Change. **Appendix 1** details all retreats and workshops that have been scheduled thus far.

### **Stage 1: Explore context and introduce principles of relational coordination**

To begin this work, five leaders from Central Office representing Human Resources, Information Technology, Accountability, Operations, and Finance attended an RC Workshop in June 2017 in Boston, MA. The purpose of the workshop was to learn how to use RC methods to improve

collaboration and performance across the organization. The workshop included the following learning objectives:

- Assess the local context and the performance outcomes of interest
- Identify work processes that would benefit from better relational coordination
- Use relational mapping to identify the work groups involved, including patients or clients
- Introduce the RC survey to those work groups
- Design and set up the survey
- Interpret the survey results
- Share the results with the work groups, and
- Design specific interventions with the work groups based on the particular pattern of survey results

Coming out of this workshop, participating leaders decided to focus their change efforts on two distinct but interconnected work processes - **Student Placement** and **Special Education** - and to provide each with its own stream of training, workshops, survey measurement, and intervention support. Leaders selected these two work processes because of their impact on student performance, the high degree of coordination needed with district stakeholders for their success, and the expected willingness of their staff to proactively engage and participate in Central Office transformation. Student Placement as they mapped it out in the workshop was understood to be a challenging process with frequent breakdowns in coordination, a lack of shared goals, and highly problematic outcomes including the lack of quality, efficiency, and equity.

**Office of Student Placement.** This office takes the lead in placing students in schools and assigning them to programs across the district. Student Placement also interacts with many other workgroups across the district, including principals, registrars, the transportation office, etc. Student Placement includes 14 staff members who engage in a variety of activities related to placing students in general education, English Language Learner and Special Education programming and are responsible for:

- Providing a professional education placement experience for parents and students
- Providing positive customer service to parents and students
- Providing accurate and timely information to parents regarding school choice, programs and services offered
- Assessing each child and making placements based on individual student needs and parent preference as reflective of the School Choice Policy
- Working collaboratively with school principals and departments within the District to provide information needed to ensure student success
- Working with schools and parents on problem resolution and voluntary and safety transfers
- Implementing the Parent Preference Managed Choice Policy (see attached)

**Figure 4: Performance Outcomes for Student Placement**

Performance Outcomes for Student Placement
Safety of children
High-quality education
Not disrupting the child's education - if child moves, continuing their education seamlessly without interruption, down to the specific courses they are taking



Keep children on track for timely graduation, keep them at correct grade level
Minimize distance between home and school, travel time for child, parent can get to school in emergency
Timely, accurate communication with all parties (including teachers)
Perceived equity of placement process
Overall parent/guardian satisfaction with their treatment
Overall satisfaction with placement outcomes
Percent of students placed by start of school year
Percent of students placed by July prior to the school year
Percent of families participating in school choice
Demographic representation of families participating in school choice
Engagement of families in school choice process

**Office of Special Education.** The Office of Special Education coordinates the placement of students with special needs. It is a separate office and thus would be treated as a separate work process. Special Education is responsible for the following activities:

- Reviewing Individual Education Plans (IEP) and current vs. needed program assignments
- Identifying, screening and placing students with special needs, including language needs
- Providing resources and support for English Language Learners
- SP placing newly arrived students with disabilities into appropriate classes pending CSE meetings and based upon same level of need, age, learning style, etc.

**Figure 5: Performance Outcomes for Special Education**

Performance Outcomes for Special Education
English and math proficiency increase by 10% per year. Same goal as for general education but special education has not been held to the same expectation in the past.
Student attendance. Could be 45-50% for special education kids. 20% absent or more is considered severely chronic absence.
Cohort performance. How many are credits achieved by end of grades 9, 10, 11.
Suspension and failure rates. The district has been cited for disproportionate suspensions of black and brown students, mostly male.

## Stage 2: Create Change Teams

To introduce relational coordination concepts and build readiness for change in Student Placement and Special Education, Dr. Suchman conducted interviews and workshops in both departments.

**Student Placement.** Appreciative interviews were conducted by Dr. Suchman with Student Placement staff, resulting in themes that included 1) coming together for a unifying purpose, 2) harnessing differences as a resource, and 3) identifying values. Following those interviews, an RC

workshop was held for staff on October 6th. The Director of Student Placement reported that participants enjoyed the workshop and were motivated to continue the work.

**Workshop for City Schools  
Office of Student Placement**

**October 6, 2017**

**Themes from the appreciative interviews  
about system-ness**

Coming together for a unifying purpose  
The whole is greater than the parts  
Seeing the bigger picture  
Shared/aligned vision  
Clear focused goal  
Helping others

Harnessing our differences as a resource  
Diverse perspectives and skills  
Teamwork and cross-training to help understand  
each other's roles  
Collaboration  
Communication – clear, all the facts

Identifying values  
Caring  
Trust  
Positive energy from kindred spirits  
Risk-taking – going outside the lanes  
Honesty – model it

**Special Education.** An RC workshop was then held for the Special Education Office on December 1. Those who participated appeared to be enthusiastic and well-engaged, but the turnout was unexpectedly low. Participants engaged in icebreaker conversations based on personal stories that revealed the roots of their commitment to the school district and its students. At the end of the workshop, the superintendent made an impassioned appeal to the group that improving services by improving the way people work together would be a unique, legacy accomplishment, and a landmark in urban education. Staff reported that they valued learning about the RC model and learning new insights about their colleagues.

Initial assumptions regarding a lack of interest were later replaced by concerns about scheduling conflicts. Some staff reported that the workshop was scheduled during times that conflicted with their ability to conduct school-based site visitations, thus creating a conflict of importance, as some felt a need to be at the schools supporting principals and special needs students. Another RC workshop was held for Special Education February 1, 2018, for those who did not attend the first workshop. However, that session also had low attendance.

One case manager sat in the back of the room in the first workshop, off to the side, not communicating with others and leaving the room frequently. When approached about her role, she shared that there was no appreciation of case management in her view and that the role had been recently reorganized to make the job virtually impossible to perform. This perspective, if widespread, may help to account for low engagement of Special Education staff. In addition, the district's inability to maintain a leader of the Special Education department was likely to cause further delays in the process of building relational coordination with this key department.

Project leaders worked to identify an alternative engagement strategy that would leverage the engagement and buy-in from those who had already participated in the RC workshops.

### **Stage 3: Assess relational coordination from perspective of key stakeholders.**

Relational coordination is typically assessed from the perspective of key stakeholders who are involved in a work process, using the RC Survey. See **Appendix 1** for RC Survey. The RC Survey is a fully validated, unbounded measure of team effectiveness offered by Relational Coordination Analytics. As part of this project, the school district planned to conduct baseline and follow-up measurement with analysis and periodic reporting to track and monitor progress in the development of relational coordination.

**Student Placement.** To date, baseline measurement has been conducted within the internal Student Placement team. A baseline RC Survey was administered to a total of 17 staff within the team with a response rate of 82% (14 out of 17 respondents). Each respondent answered questions that assessed the strength of communication and relationship ties between colleagues within the Office of SP. The focus on RC *within* Student Placement was intended to provide an initial self-reflective assessment of the current state of the way the department *internally* organizes and coordinates its placement work, with a plan to then assess RC between Student Placement and its external stakeholders, where RC was believed to be a far greater challenge.

**Special Education.** As a result of low workshop participation and turnover in its leadership, Special Education did not conduct a baseline RC assessment.

### **Stage 4: Reflect on findings and engage in sensemaking.**

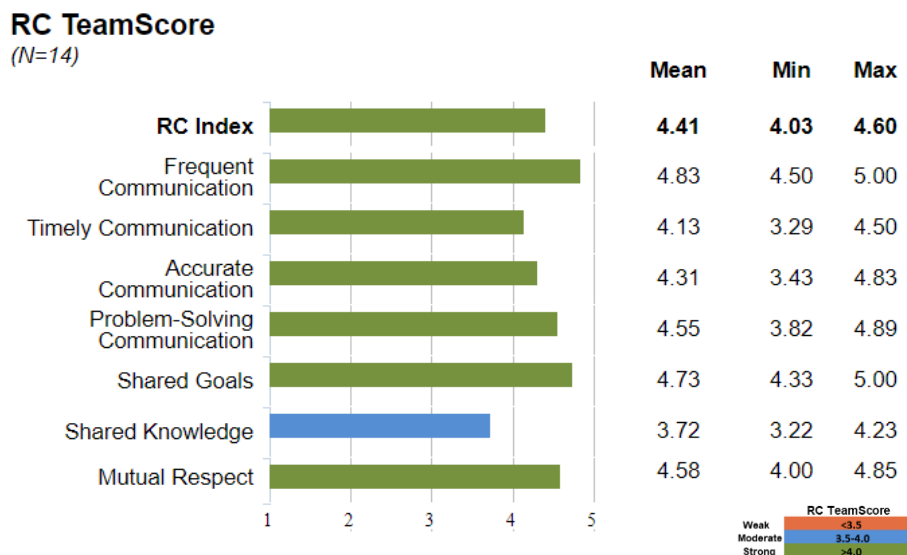
RC Survey baseline results were shared with the Student Placement Department during a workshop session co-facilitated by Dr. Suchman. Given that the Student Placement process was reported to struggle with coordination, the baseline scores were unexpectedly high. The mean RC Team Score for the SP Department was 4.58 (3.72- 4.83), suggesting a cohesive internal working dynamic anchored by strong shared goals and mutual respect (see Figure 6). Shared knowledge was assessed as the lowest rated dimension with a mean score of 3.72 (3.22 – 4.23), suggesting an opportunity to create greater visibility and cultivate greater understanding of the connectedness of work within SP. Participants noted that Student Placement is a small team that relies on the quality of its relationships with each other to get things done, given limited and sometimes changing staff resources.

Dr. Suchman interpreted these results as reflecting strong internal coordination of a process that may not be working for key stakeholders outside the core group:

*We reviewed the team-level results of the RC survey for the 7 RC dimensions and the overall RC scores. They seemed pleased but not at all surprised to see that their scores were quite high. This echoed the themes of their stories from the first workshop of being like a family and having each other's backs. When I asked what they thought about the lower score for "shared*

knowledge” – the degree to which they felt that other people didn’t fully understand the work they do – several people said that when they answered that specific question, they were thinking about other groups outside their office; they have a strong feeling of not being well-understood by these outside groups.

**Figure 6: Baseline RC Survey Results Within the Office of Student Placement**



Given the limited scope of this baseline survey, however, which only allowed them to rate the other internal work groups in SP and didn’t allow them to rate outside groups, I wonder if this explanation really accounts for the lower score. The subgroup analyses, which I did not present at today’s workshops, shows some internal workgroups receiving low ratings for shared goals.

When thinking about potential action steps, their attention focused mostly on the supplemental survey question about what resources would be most helpful to them, specifically more staffing. They also talked about getting other external workgroups to have a deeper understanding of the overall placement process. They did not identify any changes they wanted to make in their own internal work processes but were eager to move on to the next phase.

I next invited them to try having conversations of interdependence with each other, a method for fostering greater shared knowledge and peer accountability. They found it interesting and useful but also wondered if they’d be able to hold such conversations with members of the external workgroups, given the nature of existing power relations. I told them that this was only one of many possible methods and that we’d have a better sense of what methods to use after we conduct the next round of the survey to include their external stakeholders.

I asked them to list the external stakeholders that should be included in the next round. The groups they listed were School Chiefs, Principals, DOME, Office of Parental Engagement, Special Education Office, the Board of Education, the Office of Accountability, the Legal Department and parent and student representatives. We will need a steering team or

*stewardship group comprised of representatives from most of the above groups to build trust, help with communication and secure adequate participation.*

*Overall, the workshop was well-received, with an overall average score of 7.55 (on 0-10 scale) for how valuable they found the session. A number of people found the conversations of interdependence to be most useful; others appreciated the validation and reassurance of finding that everyone found the collaboration to be good [within Student Placement].*

Student Placement used this session to identify target areas for improvement and intervention and to articulate next steps for implementing a plan of action, including the choice of performance metrics to monitor progress. As a follow-up to initial RC Survey results within Student Placement, Dr. Suchman facilitated a second workshop on November 28 for twelve Student Placement staff with the following goals:

- Reinforce the concept of interdependence introduced at the first workshop
- Review and interpret together the results of the RC Survey that they recently completed
- Use the survey results as a springboard for further group reflection on how they are working together and to identify any opportunities for improvement, and
- Set the stage for Part 2 of the student placement intervention, which will expand participation to include key external stakeholders for the Student Placement department

SPP had begun planning to launch a second RC survey to gather feedback from beyond their own internal team, from external stakeholders who receive service or support from the Student Placement Department, including families and staff from the schools themselves. According to Suchman:

*The next phase – engaging the wider set of stakeholders – will be the heavy lift, but it was gratifying (and worthwhile) to start with Student Placement and to see that they're working together well. That will position them well for the external work to come.*

### **Stage 5: Design and implement interventions.**

Some relational interventions - RC mapping, survey measurement, reflection on findings, and conversations of interdependence - were already being carried out in Student Placement as described above, beginning to strengthen relational coordination within that group and to prepare them to reach out to build relational coordination with their external stakeholders.

In addition, a process called *Let's Talk* was designed to respond quickly to parent requests and complaints in order to create positive customer experience, a key desired outcome for the Central Office transformation. According to one Central Office leader:

*We are accountable to the parents. We have a new process called "Let's Talk." When a parent calls with a problem, we get a note, and we can connect with them electronically.*

*Let's Talk* was seen as an early success for the new superintendent and her leadership team. In addition to meeting an immediate need, it had the potential to strengthen relational coordination going forward among district staff and with the families they serve by providing a shared information system regarding customer complaints and a structure of shared accountability for responding to those complaints.

A more contentious intervention was the *redesign of case management*, carried out prior to launching the RC change process. The case management model was previously staffed by Special

Education case managers who worked across schools and was reorganized into a school-based model based on the principle of decentralization, with significantly reduced case manager staffing. According to one leader of Special Education:

*We wanted more structural support in the classrooms. So, we reduced case manager staffing, and we created a new role in the classroom. We are working on the redesign after the case manager staffing was cut. We try to spread students around so that they are mixed across case managers. Part of the thought of bringing Special Education Annual Individualized Education Plan Review meetings into the schools rather than keep them central is to make them "our children." The principals are the instructional leaders, so they should be responsible for all the students. If the child isn't behaving, the approach has been - let's move them out. Rather than working with them, they were moving the child to another school. This could create challenges for the parents. This redesign of case management is expected to help by placing more support within the school.*

An unintended consequence of this intervention was to weaken relational coordination between existing case managers and other roles. As noted above, case managers felt displaced and disrespected, suggesting that the intervention may have been carried out with insufficient attention to their voices. This may have accounted for the difficulty of engaging Special Education staff in the process, undermining some of the positive consequences of case management redesign.

According to the Relational Model of Organizational Change, human resource management practices (how staff is hired and trained, how conflicts are resolved, how performance is evaluated, how rewards are allocated, etc.) also shape relational coordination and resulting performance outcomes. These strategically important HR practices had not yet been assessed for how well they supported or did not support relational coordination. On the positive side, the district's Assistant Director of Human Resources indicated his interest in doing this assessment.

### **Stage 6: Assess impact and refine as needed.**

Central Office leaders were committed to conducting periodic assessments to evaluate progress and to support continuous quality improvement cycles over time, as relational coordination patterns were expected to evolve and as new stakeholders were expected to become engaged. However, RC data had only been collected regarding the internal dynamics of Student Placement, and none had been collected for Special Education. Despite these delays, the Chief Accountability Officer expressed his hopes about the work accomplished to date:

*I know as we have progressed in our district-wide process redesign work that the teams in the Office of Student Placement and Special Education have been focused on goal-setting. RC will bring our work processes and system-ness together to serve our students and families in a more timely, well-focused, effective and efficient manner.*

## **3. Factors That Weaken Relational Capacity**

Interviews conducted with key stakeholders in the Central Office, including Accountability, Student Placement, and Special Education, as well as school principals and community stakeholders, identified several factors that tend to weaken relational capacity. Many of these factors had been inherited from the past. Still, they would have to be addressed as part of Central Office efforts to strengthen relational capacity.



## School Placement Based on Parent Preference/Managed Choice

School placement for students in this school district is governed by a policy of Parent Preference/Managed Choice, adopted unanimously by the Board of Education in 2001. This policy was adopted with the intent to promote an education system that is fair and equitable and to ensure all students have access to high-quality education responsive to their individualized needs.

*[The School District] is legally and morally obligated to educate all the students who are legally enrolled in the school district, to educate students in a way that is fair for all students, and to allow students in under-performing schools to transfer to the extent feasible – to a more successful school within the school district....The district is also obligated to improve the lowest achieving and least chosen schools and target them for immediate technical assistance and special school improvement initiatives. –Parent Preference/Managed Choice Policy, 2001*

The written policy details implementation principles that are intended to guide decision-making and resource allocation to achieve the goals of a fair and equitable educational system, accessible and available to all eligible students. These implementation principles include:

- Availability of all schools to all students via preference selection
- Commitment to continuous improvement of all public schools and programs
- Commitment to providing sufficient and timely information and advice to parents
- A fair and impartial school selection and assignment process, and
- Continuous monitoring, evaluation, and improvement of the preference plan

Contrary to the intent, this policy is now perceived by Central Office leaders as exacerbating inequality rather than promoting equality, in part by creating fragmentation in relationships that need to be strong. According to one Central Office Leader:

*We are now doing a redesign, reconsidering our school choice policy. It was intended to be an equity policy. We were trying to provide equitable access across programs and services, access to highly successful schools. In essence, along the way, we've begun to re-concentrate poverty, and it's a result of these decisions.*

*We recognize that the school district didn't apply the policy with fidelity. I know what [the superintendent] wants to do now is to give us a sense of what we need to do right now if we "re-up" the managed choice policy. The district looks different than 20 years ago when we first implemented it. The school district is not applying the policy with fidelity - and apparently hadn't at a very early stage.*

*Ultimately, we may end up keeping it .... managed choice policy is one that people think can work. But only with fidelity and with an equity lens. There is subtle racism. Principals refuse to take a student. Then, even if they do, parents know the student is not wanted and won't send them there. A student will have a behavior issue, then gets classified, then needs special services, then gets shifted out of the school. The school says: "We don't offer these services, and this is what the student needs." We will offer better support going forward.*

## Weakening of Community Schools

The Parent Preference/Managed Choice policy has also appeared to weaken relationships in the communities surrounding neighborhood schools. According to a principal:

*From a school perspective, especially in high poverty neighborhoods, [the managed choice policy] is hard. Parents don't have vehicles sometimes, and the transportation system here is not conducive for parents and people in poverty. It takes you all the way across town. I'm not*

*sure I understand the logic of how it works. We need to ask ourselves 'What does that do for the school community? How does that encourage support for the school in that community?' When I first started teaching, I had all these parents coming into the school. Kids walked to school. When I went out into the neighborhood, everyone knew who I was. Now, busses are picking kids up to bring them to another school across town. It's costly. There may be some benefits to attending different programs but its challenging to strengthening a neighborhood.*

Leaders in Special Education and Student Placement agreed:

*The programs we have to place students in are not equitable even though [the policy] says they are. The neighborhoods are not equitable; the schools aren't equitable. There's good schools and bad schools in the district. It seems like most of our self-contained or most needy kids are in the schools that are not perceived as good schools.*

*Violence and gangs are seen among secondary level schools more [than in the past], and being from different geographic areas [than one's school] increases the vulnerability.*

### **Complexity of Transportation and Operations**

The school choice policy also exacerbated the complexity of predicting, planning and allocating resources. One principal shared that:

*There are less opportunities for students to stay within a zone when certain services are only offered at some schools. We have difficulty predicting and preparing for the school year [in terms of classroom space and student needs].*

A Student Placement staff member identified similar challenges:

*A transportation crisis results due to students being from different geographic areas requiring more travel by buses. Buses crisscrossing town means we have an inefficient use of resources. Sometimes travel time for students is an hour one way.*

### **Growing Behavioral Health Needs of Students**

At the same time, the behavioral health needs of students were growing. This growth had outpaced the professional development resources needed to support staff in cultivating learning environments where all students can be successful regardless of need *and* where teachers feel empowered and equipped to provide the needed support. In particular, there appeared to be insufficient in-district options for students with complex behavioral health needs. A leader from Special Education shared that:

*School choice sucks for our kids...I had a parent yesterday who put down options 1-5... her kid is starting 9th grade in the fall. He's got a CSR of 15:1. Of the 5, only one of the schools has a 15:1, and we can't guarantee what schools are going to have that next year so he might not even get his top 5. Here's a parent that's involved; that's got a child at 15:1 – it's nothing more than needing support academically, and here a child might not get his first five choices because of the special needs that he has and that is totally discriminatory.*

### **Audition Schools Create Income-Based Barriers**

Under the Parent Preference/Managed Choice policy, schools are allowed to create criteria for admission, for example, auditions and interviews, that tend to favor students with years of costly



training and the family resources to participate on traveling sports teams. As a representative from Student Placement noted:

*There is non-equitable admission into the special schools. For example, Audition and Interview Schools have special programs, but it's very hard to get students into them - no students with special needs are in these schools. Also, very few kids in these schools [are] from poor families. To succeed in these auditions and interviews, it helps to have had expensive lessons and other resources. Some of these standards are set by schools in order to get certain kids and to deny other kids. We are trying to avoid this gaming.*

### **Over-Classification into Special Education for Low-Income Students**

Classification of students into Special Education had grown over the years in this school district. A special needs classification is driven to some extent by parents seeking support and services that will enable their child to thrive in a classroom setting. Classification is also driven by teachers and principals striving to meet performance goals in the context of limited resources and punitive performance monitoring system. *Over-classification* occurs when the classification is conducted inappropriately as a workaround in the absence of other available solutions or in response to negative stereotypes. Some central office representatives noted that:

*We were under a consent decree in the 1980s for 20 years - sued by an advocacy group - saying that we weren't following rules and regulations with respect to special services. The (Council of Great City Schools) showed that once we were lifted from those rules, we went back to the way we were doing it before the consent decree.*

*We have an advisory board for youth in transition, and we are starting to look at their classification as specialized education. Most of them have disabilities. We ask whether they are being classified correctly because that's been an issue here as elsewhere.*

*If you are doing appropriate instruction with kids, you can avoid classification. Our classification rate has grown from year to year. We can't always figure out why but I do think there are more behavioral challenges, stemming from a multitude of issues, parents working, poverty situation. When behavior arises, it's easier to refer than to address the challenge yourself.*

From the perspective of a Special Education staff member:

*Classifications are influenced generally by racism. Now we are doing more restorative practices. There is a new code of conduct for the way we treat our kids, based on restorative practices promoted by the Gandhi Institute.*

One Special Education staff member brought a unique perspective to this issue as a parent:

*I got involved in education based on my experience as a parent. My son was a slow reader in second grade, and they wanted to track him into special ed. But I knew that wasn't the issue. I helped him catch up and he succeeded. He's now an engineer in Texas. If I hadn't done that I don't know what would have happened.*

## Accountability System Encourages Over-Classification and Unequal Placement

Consistent with the public education sector more broadly, the school district had seen the rise of an accountability system that links teacher and school ratings to student performance on standardized exams. Schools in the district are held accountable for the following performance outcomes:

- Test scores - these are used to rank schools, so schools do targeted interventions to get tier 2 students to tier 3 to avoid being labeled a low performing school
- Graduation rates - district-wide this is currently mid to high 60% if summer graduations are included
- Safety incidents - captured in the state database - if a school has too many high-level safety incidents such as assault, it is labeled as a "persistently dangerous" school - how you describe the incident determines whether it's a high level or not
- Attendance - measured student by student, and also by school
- Socioeconomics status of students - measured as percent of students eligible for free lunch
- Ethnicity of students

All of the above outcomes are used to assess school efficacy and quality, but test scores are the key metric for being labeled a low, medium or high performing school. Once a school is labeled "low performing," it goes under review, followed by receivership if interventions do not result in performance improvement. According to a representative from the Office of Special Education:

*All of this is evolving with the increasing emphasis on yearly exams. Teachers are thinking "I have to get my kids to perform." Some teachers want to help, but they have to ask themselves - will it assist me in keeping my job, getting my raise? It's all about "my students" and "your students," rather than "our students." It's because of the pressures teachers are facing. ELAs are coming up, and so I don't want these kids on my books. Parents do ask for referrals to special ed, but often they are coached by the teachers to do it. Teachers know the policies - if they refer, they have to document that they did the leg work - if the parents refer it's easier for the teacher.*

*All the [needy behaviorally challenged kids] are in the receivership schools. If we want to keep our building open and not in receivership, then we avoid these students.*

The perspective from Student Placement was similar:

*We are accountable for schools getting the kids they want. Therefore 80 to 90% of midyear placement kids are being placed in 3 or 4 of the schools that are the lowest performing schools. I don't think they understand the level of what it takes to place a student - the level and types of approval. It can be very hard.*

*The master schedule determines how placement is done, so principals can game the system to make themselves ineligible for incoming students.*

The test-based accountability system appeared to incentivize teachers to avoid admitting higher risk students into their classrooms and incentivize principals to avoid admitting higher risk students into their schools. Placement staff reported strategies they had developed to overcome this resistance by "making a case" for why a particular student is a worthwhile risk.

*Building relationships in the school helps us to show them how the placement is going to be good for the child. "This will be a good student for you - he's been doing great, he's achieved*

*his 9th-grade credits, or just came from a school in the south." We show them it's not just someone being pushed into their building, it's a person. We give everyone 24 hours to know the child is coming - principal, secretary, and counselor - we send an email and make a call. We meet the child in the office and give them an orientation. A parent liaison at the very least is present in every school. But schools vary.*

*Our new goal is to reduce inappropriate referrals - we could take this on jointly with general ed. Also provide support for kids who have been classified - or declassify them - but nobody wants to declassify them because it could reduce gen ed numbers and also reduce special ed numbers. Inappropriate referrals could be driven by the teacher, but they coach the parents to do it. And the pediatricians are doing it too. Could reduce it by doing more RTI and MTSS to support the teachers to do the right thing in the classroom. Resource book already exists, but it's not being utilized. Other models of teaching can help too, like Integrated Co-Teaching.*

*If it's a child receiving special services, I want key people to receive the packet - the IEP, records about special needs, transcript evaluation. It's a great road map for the school but also for the student.*

*Schools are more likely to accept the student if they get past 9th grade - that bump in the road - because then they are much more likely to graduate [a concern because schools are accountable for their graduation rates]. [We] go through the kid's transcript and sit down with the teacher. If they've failed a course, they will take the next course while taking the previous course again, this time online with support.*

### **Siloed Accountability is Embedded in Central Office Culture**

Staff reported that incoming staff are often reminded to "stay in their own lane." At a formative stage, new staff are actively discouraged from building cross-departmental relationships that foster shared goals and shared knowledge for fear of alienating their supervisors who may want efforts by their direct reports to be focused on moving the specific measures for which they, as supervisors, are being assessed. Siloed accountability thus continues to characterize the culture of this school district. One leader in Special Education shared both the problem and her hopes for the solution:

*Everybody knows there's a lot of pressure on special education. **Your student, my student, versus our student has been going on for a long time.** There was an April [2017] report saying that gen ed and special ed must work together - it doesn't work to do it separately. We need to look together at all the recommendations, how to initiate change - and it needs to be a joint effort.*

### **Central Office Accountability to the Board**

While Central Office staff are accountable to the School Board for successful implementation of all policies coming from the School Board, there are mixed and inconsistent messages as to who is permitted to communicate directly with the School Board to share their knowledge and expertise regarding the likely effectiveness of various policies. All communication is required to go through the Chief of Staff. According to Special Education:

*There is a data score card for every school that not everyone can see - just school chiefs and principals. It's called the Student Performance Assessment. It can filter out special ed and gen*

*ed students; we call it out for directors, principals, and chiefs. It's like any report card; you need to have a way to correct it once you identify a problem on your data score card.*

The perspective from a Student Placement representative was similar:

*We are accountable to the school board for these performance outcomes. ... Some decisions the School Board makes impacts placement. And if they understood the scope of and barriers to the process, they would be better informed to better serve and better represent the community they serve.*

### **Influx of English Language Learner Students**

At the same time, the school district had experienced an influx of students with ELL needs, accelerated by recent weather events that brought in students from Puerto Rico, Florida, and Texas. These events have changed the demographics of the school district's school-age population. According to a Student Placement representative:

*In Placement, we also work with a language assessment and proficiency team for students whose native language is other than English - many kids are being placed here now from Puerto Rico given the recent devastation there - earlier we had an influx of kids from Houston. 50 to 70 kids have come in since September due to the hurricane in Puerto Rico and elsewhere. They are being referred here and/or have family here.*

### **Insufficient Resources for Special Education and English Language Learners**

Across the diversity of stakeholders interviewed, there was an emergent consensus on the magnitude of this issue. Resourcing that fails to match the increased need for services will continue to have unintended, negative consequences. Students with ELL needs will be assigned to schools on the basis of available space instead of on the basis of an ELL program that meets their learning needs. Schools and teachers that do not have adequate training and support to manage the diversity of behavioral health needs will be incentivized to a) overclassify students as having special needs and b) manipulate existing policy and protocols to have difficult students transferred or removed from a classroom or school. Issue alignment, a diversity of interdependent perspectives, and existing professional expertise create a platform for identifying and testing a workable solution. The work being done to build relational capacity creates the space and occasion to convene key stakeholders and the opportunity to practice and model the skills developed from participating in the workshop series facilitated by Dr. Suchman.

### **Short Term Tenure of Superintendents**

The superintendent's role has experienced frequent turnover in recent years, a common phenomenon in major urban school districts. Central Office staff tended to be skeptical of change initiatives as a result. As one shared:

*At the higher levels – superintendent, cabinet -- the turnover rate – you just shake your head. There is no traction for anything. Every time someone new comes in, it's a whole new 'this is what we're going to do'; it's a whole new agenda. But the day in, day out grunt work still has to take place. Processes change or get dropped...there's no uniformity.*

### **Skepticism from the Community**

In addition to skepticism from staff, the new superintendent faced skepticism from the broader school district community who had seen leaders come and go. A city resident shared that:

*People I speak to in the school district feel like - here we go again - throwing a lot of money at the problem and nothing will change. There is a lot of skepticism. I think part of the problem is that there are four white faces here and we may lack the perspectives needed to understand the challenges. In this school system, who has the courage to do it differently? "Stay in your own lane" is what people hear from Day 1. If you get out of your lane, you will run into all kinds of politics, and you won't accomplish anything anyway.*

### **Background Factor: Growing Income Inequality**

A key background factor for U.S. public schools, including this School District, is the steady rise in income inequality since the mid-1970's, with levels of wealth concentration in the top 1% of the population approaching levels last seen prior to the Great Depression. This trend corresponds with a decline of the middle class and with the growth of extremes in wealth and poverty, reflected in distinct social worlds that increasingly do not intersect (Putnam, 2016). To the extent that low income and community connection are social determinants of health, then these trends may also be interrelated with the rise of complex behavioral health problems. While socio-economics and resource allocation play a powerful role in educational performance, some districts with low-income student populations have achieved high academic performance through school improvement efforts in coordination with their local communities (Rabinowitz, 2016; Reardon, 2013; Duncan & Murnane, 2011) suggesting hope for the efforts of this School District.

## **4. Strengths and Opportunities for Improving Relational Capacity**

The two target departments in this change process - Student Placement and Special Education - are highly interdependent and must frequently work together to meet student and family needs. Each of the two departments has responsibility for the placement of separate, but sometimes overlapping, student populations. Strengths and opportunities for carrying out this work were identified based upon all data collected thus far.

### **Strengths**

#### **Committed, Dedicated Staff in the Central Office**

It appears that the school district's Central Office is a reflective, learning organization committed to providing a first-class educational experience to students and families who make up the school district community. Among those interviewed and observed, each had more than twelve years of combined classroom and administrative experience, with the exception of two individuals. Their historical perspective provides a rich resource – not only for understanding context, policy implications, and long-standing obstacles but also for identifying practical, feasible solutions.

#### **Parent Preference and Selection**

Prior to 2001, families within the school district did not have the option or opportunity to participate in the selection of a school that they felt would best meet the educational and developmental needs of their students. Though there have been unintended consequences associated with the implementation of Managed Choice Policy, the underlying intent is positive - providing fair and equitable access to high-quality education responsive to the individualized needs of students and families. Further, the ability to monitor, evaluate and improve the preference plan allows the district to self-correct – to evaluate, review, update and make adjustments to the policy so that it evolves alongside the evolving educational needs of the school district community. This built-in ability needs to be used.

## Clarity of Vision Regarding Placement Within Central Office

The following elements of a successful placement process were identified consistently across all stakeholders:

- Parent satisfaction with placement outcome
- School satisfaction with timely, consistent notification of a student arrival
- Adequate distribution of the continuum of services throughout neighborhoods to minimize transportation-related disruptions
- Technology leveraged as a resource to create greater visibility into the placement process
- Leadership structure that facilitates alignment between training, learning, curriculum, and operations

## Opportunities

### Need for Senior Leadership to Demonstrate Accountability, Set Direction

Central Office front-line staff are acutely aware of the contracting cycle for executive leadership, the constant turnover in the leadership ranks and the resultant change of guard and instability that ensues. Though constant and resilient in the face of frequent change, front-line staff are both frustrated and skeptical of investing effort and energy into (what seem to be cyclical) improvement efforts. The executive cabinet is confronted with an opportunity to counter this experience and narrative by supporting, in words, action, rewards, and consequences, this work, and role modeling the principles of effective communication, shared goals, shared knowledge and mutual respect in their interactions with colleagues. According to an executive Cabinet Member:

*If someone with authority, a name, and a job title doesn't push this as a priority, it doesn't go anywhere - it will eventually, not go anywhere.*

### Improved Content and Consistency of Communication

Both within the Central Office and between the Central Office and the schools, stakeholders expressed frustration over the lack of communication about changes as well as the inconsistent availability of placement staff due to under- or reduced staffing to troubleshoot and answer questions about placement decisions.

### Greater Clarity and Visibility into the Placement Process for Parents and Schools

As one stakeholder articulated: “[There] is an opportunity to better set expectations and promote understanding of what the placement process is really like in partnership with parents and schools and central office. Students are sometimes not placed as quickly as they should or could be given the range of considerations that go into determining where a student will be placed. ‘It’s not going to be tomorrow’ – there is a process...and sometimes parents don’t want to go to choice number 8 or 4, so we need to work with them and have those conversations *with* them.”

### Shared Accountability and Rewards

Consider adopting a more holistic performance measurement system that expands beyond traditional standardized assessments tools and school climate input measures (e.g. technology, resources, courses, student qualifications, parental involvement and safety) to one that emphasizes higher-order thinking, problem-solving, communication and socio-emotional skills as well as personal responsibility and ability to work in teams. Focusing primarily on academic achievement tests undermines other aspects of the educational experience such as the school’s emotional and



social climate. Paired with a more balanced set of incentives, an expanded set of measures may provide opportunities to compare performance on a number of overlapping dimensions.

### Shared Protocols for Placement Process

Develop shared protocols that create visibility and foster understanding of the placement process for key stakeholders – including teachers, staff, parents, and principals. Discussion of challenges to the placement process highlighted fragmented views of the process that could be readily addressed by adopting protocols aimed at fostering visibility, grounding expectations and promoting understanding based on the needs and perspective of the relevant stakeholder. For example, web-based resources that detail placement may document a similar process but depending on the audience – a family, a principal, a teacher - may require emphasis on different components.

## 5. Summary and Next Steps

Together, the data summarized in this report suggest a common set of strengths and opportunities for the Student Placement Office and the Special Education Office. Specifically, the placement process for students who are English Language Learners and students with special needs does not sufficiently meet the demand for those services. Further, a combination of relational, organizational, and district-level policy challenges interact to limit the ability of these departments to achieve their shared goal of successfully placing students. Within the school district, there is an opportunity to transform the processes for Student Placement and Special Education into a model of co-production and partnership with families, students, and schools. To do so will require leveraging strengths, acknowledging feedback, being honest about weaknesses, and taking deliberate and decisive action to be responsive to threats.

To date, multi-stakeholder Change Teams have not been established to formally guide the change process, while the Relational Model of Change suggest they can play a constructive role. According to Lead Consultant Dr. Suchman:

*So far, these have been two relatively small interventions starting with assessing the internal RC dynamics of these two groups. As we move to the larger intervention, with the principals and school chiefs and School Board involved, it will require a different structure to support it. I am proposing a Steering Committee with multiple stakeholders including the superintendent to lead this change process. The report that we are preparing based on the initial interviews [this report] will be very helpful for these stakeholders to see what's the current challenge as they've portrayed it needed. We intend it to be a compassionate process, not a humiliating process.*

In February 2018, Dr. Suchman invited the superintendent and her Chiefs in the Central Office to form an Executive Cabinet. He had already met with the Executive Cabinet to negotiate their role in the change process.

*Today's meeting was a presentation to the Executive Cabinet: the superintendent and her chiefs, approximately 10-12 people in total. The purpose was to give them some background about RC and the project that's underway and to prompt them to think about what they are or could be doing to promote better system-ness and interdependence. I'm hoping that this group might work on their own coordination at some point – there is some evidence of disconnects. This is a fairly diverse group. We presented about 20 minutes to the group, and it was fraught with interruptions. We will do an RC survey if [the team] agrees. The idea is for this group to better understand their own interdependencies to support the other change processes.*





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