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Good Ideas and Engagement Aren't Enough: School District Central Offices and the
Micro-Politics of Implementing Comprehensive Human Resource Reform

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Author Note

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Abstract

This dissertation is about how organizational politics – or what some scholars call micro-politics – shapes the implementation of comprehensive human resource (HR) reform in school district central offices. Over the last decade, education reformers and advocates have promoted comprehensive HR reform as a way to improve teaching and learning in K-12 schools, especially in urban districts. These reforms call on school districts to orient and coordinate all of their HR activities around a common vision of effective teaching and use the way they hire, develop, and retain teachers to systematically build and leverage talent across all schools. For most school districts, this ambitious vision of HR is a profound departure from present practice. Emerging accounts of comprehensive HR reform suggest that implementation is often marked by organizational conflict, but they do not elaborate why this is the case or what it implies for implementation. In investigating the micro-political dynamics of implementing comprehensive HR reform, this study reveals both the sources of conflict that emerge during these ambitious reforms, how actors within central offices negotiate and resolve them, and how micro-political dynamics can -- for better or worse -- shape the implementation of ambitious bureaucratic reform.

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Chapter 1: Why Study the Micro-Politics of Implementing HR Reform in Central Offices?

Our challenge is to make sure every child in America is learning from an effective teacher -- no matter what it takes.¹

Arne Duncan

U.S. Department of Education Secretary

When it comes to improving the effectiveness of teachers...school districts must innovate at every stage of talent management -- end to end -- from teacher preparation, recruitment, and selection to development, performance management, working conditions, and compensation.²

Joel Klein, former Chancellor of the

New York City Department of Education

Today, at every level of government, policymakers are looking for ways to ensure that all students have effective teachers. At the federal level, the Obama administration has made improving teacher effectiveness a central part of its Race to the Top grant competition for the states (Yeh, 2009). In the states, legislators have enacted a wave of teacher evaluation policies designed to sort teachers by effectiveness and, in some cases,

¹ The quote is from Secretary Duncan's remarks at the National Education Association's (NEA) annual convention in San Diego, CA on July 2, 2009 (Duncan, 2009).

² Klein, 2009, p. 261.

by their ability to raise student test scores (Mead, Rotherham, & Brown, 2012). At the local level, superintendents and school boards have identified teacher effectiveness as a key lever for district-wide improvement. When the Pittsburgh Public Schools announced a new strategic vision in 2009, for example, its top three strategic priorities were, “1) increase the number of highly effective teachers; 2) increase the exposure of high-need students to highly effective teachers; 3) and ensure all teachers work in learning environments that support their ability to be highly effective” (Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2009, p. 2).

All of this policy activity and urgency about teacher effectiveness is for good reason. Both intuition and a large body of empirical research suggest that teachers are a central driver of student academic achievement (Goldhaber, Brewer, & Anderson, 1999; Hanushek, 1992; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004). At the same time, related research shows that, by almost any measure, effective teachers are inequitably distributed across schools and students, with the least qualified teachers often clustered in schools that serve low-income, low-achieving, and non-white students (Guarino et al, 2006; Lankford, Loeb, & Wycoff, 2002). These two findings – about the importance of effective teaching and its inequitable distribution – drive the urgency in Secretary Duncan’s quote at the start of this chapter and his demand that the nation’s schools “make sure all students have effective teachers -- no matter what it takes.”

This dissertation examines a particularly ambitious and promising response to Duncan’s charge: comprehensive human resource (HR) management reform in district central offices. Comprehensive HR reform calls on school districts to take a system-based approach to improving teacher effectiveness. Instead of changing outdated pay

practices or evaluation systems in isolation, these reforms ask districts to transform *all* of their HR activities simultaneously so that they form a coherent and strategic system for developing and retaining effective teachers (Curtis & Wurtzel, 2010; Odden, 2011a; Sigler & Kashyap, 2008).

The Messages of Comprehensive HR Reform

The idea of using school district HR systems as a leverage point for improving teacher effectiveness is relatively new to public education. For years, policy debates about teacher effectiveness have focused on how individual policies -- for example, licensing standards (e.g, Darling-Hammond 2001; Walsh, 2001), teacher preparation (e.g, Leal, 2004; Levine 2006), and teacher compensation (e.g., Goldhaber, 2006) -- shape the teacher workforce. Comprehensive HR reforms, by contrast, target a complex set of policies and practices that together shape how school districts recruit, hire, place, develop, retain, and reward teachers. As Joel Klein's quote at the start of this chapter notes, these reforms have implications for school district HR systems "end to end." The specific change sought by comprehensive HR reform is two-fold: first, comprehensive HR reform calls on districts to coordinate priorities and processes across multiple HR activities (e.g., hiring, development, and retention policies); and second, comprehensive HR reform calls on districts to reorient their entire HR system toward the district's overall strategy for school improvement. For most school districts today, these two overarching demands -- coordination and strategic alignment -- are a fundamentally at odds with current practice.

Traditionally, school districts have spread responsibility for various HR activities across isolated sub-units and departments inside of the district bureaucracy. Within

central office HR departments, for example, sub-units typically manage individual HR activities, such as payroll, evaluation, and certification services (Heneman & Milanowski, 2004; Kimball, 2011; Rebore, 2004). Other, less-obvious, HR-related activities are often managed by staff in different central office departments and by school-based staff. For example, staff in central office curriculum and instruction departments may manage aspects of professional development for teachers and principals; individual principals may also play a role managing professional development, as well as some aspects of teacher hiring and decisions about staff retention. Specialization in HR has the advantage of allowing staff to develop expertise in particular HR activities, but it also allows HR activities to become disconnected from and uncoordinated with one another. In the worst case, specialization can produce an HR system that works at cross-purposes with itself. For example, if a district sub-unit managing teacher selection adopts a high-quality screening protocol, the screening protocol may do little good if the sub-unit managing teacher compensation does not provide a strong salary package to attract high-quality applicants (Heneman & Milanowski, 2004). Summing up the current state of affairs surrounding HR in education, Smylie and his colleagues (2004) concluded that HR in education is “a hodgepodge of poorly planned, under-resourced, disconnected practices” (p. 41). Comprehensive HR reform calls on districts to coordinate this “hodgepodge” so that it works together in mutually reinforcing ways and the benefits of one activity strengthen and increase the benefits of others.

The second major theme of comprehensive HR reform, strategic alignment, is also at odds with traditional HR. School districts typically treat important HR activities,

including teacher placement and evaluation, as regulatory and compliance functions, rather than supports for achieving strategic improvement goals (Rebore, 2004; Smylie, Miretzky, & Konkol, 2004). By approaching HR as a rule-following and procedural function, traditional approaches to HR do little to directly develop or support teacher effectiveness or the district's broader strategic goals.³ To illustrate the difference between a traditional, compliance-based orientation to HR and a strategic one, Table 1 contrasts three core HR activities -- compensation, evaluation, and hiring -- across the two orientations.

Table 1. Traditional versus Strategic HR

	<i>Traditional HR</i>	<i>Strategic HR</i>
<i>Compensation</i>	Focuses on salary administration	Designs reward systems
<i>Evaluation</i>	Monitors evaluation processes and procedures	Manages employee performance
<i>Selection</i>	Monitors hiring processes and procedures	Provides support and counsel to hiring managers

As Table 1 suggests, a traditional orientation in HR focuses on basic organizational tasks and rule-following, whereas a strategic orientation focuses on supports for organizational performance. For example, when it comes to compensation,

³ Some evidence suggests that traditional district HR systems can also actively stand in the way of effective teaching by making job offers late in the summer (Levin & Quinn, 2003), assigning teachers to schools based on seniority (Levin, Mulher, & Joan, 2005), and using superficial hiring and evaluation methods (Liu & Johnson, 2006).

rather than simply ensuring the district's payroll system is paying people properly and on time (salary administration), a strategic HR system designs a reward structure that attracts high quality employees to positions where they are needed the most and provides incentives for them to perform at consistently high levels. Likewise on evaluation, rather than simply ensuring that evaluation procedures are completed and documented on time, a strategic HR system has a performance management system that distinguishes employees based on effectiveness and uses performance information to inform decisions about rewards, development, and dismissal. On hiring, rather than focusing exclusively on paperwork and procedures, a strategic HR system provides hiring managers (i.e., principals) with strategic, differentiated support to find and develop teachers who match their school's strategy for improvement.

Sometimes researchers and advocates refer to comprehensive HR reforms as *talent management* or *strategic human resource management* initiatives in education. Throughout this study I use the term comprehensive HR reform because these reforms focus on the entire HR system, rather than a single HR activity (e.g., just recruitment). Regardless of the terms that people use, the common theme in these reforms is the notion that if districts want to improve teacher effectiveness and student outcomes, they need to increase horizontal coordination and strategic alignment of the district's HR system.

Research from outside of education suggests that horizontal coordination and strategic alignment are promising ideas for leveraging HR to improve school performance. Research on private sector organizations, for example, suggests that coordinated and strategically aligned HR systems are associated with higher levels of

organizational productivity (Ichniowski & Shaw, 2003; Ichniowski, Shaw, & Prennushi, 1997; Wright & McMahan, 1992). Empirical evidence suggests that industrial firms with coherent systems of HR innovations -- for example, those that combine flexible job assignments, work teams, employment security, cross-training, and incentive pay -- are more productive than firms that adopt only single HR innovations, such as flexible job assignments (Ichniowski, Shaw & Prennushi, 1997). Empirical and conceptual research in the private sector also emphasizes the importance of linking HR systems to organizational strategies for performance, suggesting that organizational strategy has important implications for HR system design and vice versa (Wright & McMahan, 1992). In many ways, calls in public education for a coordinated and strategic HR system reflect the well-established view from the private sector “that organizations must...horizontally align their various HRM [human resource management] practices toward their strategic goal and that [HR] practices must complement one another to achieve the firm’s business strategy” (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004, p. 203). Despite the promise of these ideas about improving district HR, policymakers and leaders in public education are only at the very beginning of understanding what it takes to create a more coordinated and strategically aligned approach to HR in schools and districts.

Comprehensive HR Reform and the Central Office

As my title suggests, this dissertation focuses on the district central office’s role in comprehensive HR reform. I focus on the central office for two reasons. First, central offices are the natural focal point for understanding the systemic nature of comprehensive HR reform because they occupy a crossroads for key HR activities, such as recruitment, selection, and professional development (Curtis, 2010). Second, the

central office's role in comprehensive HR reform is worth studying because the type of changes comprehensive HR reform seeks in the district bureaucracy resonate with a broader set of ideas in research and policy about changing central offices to support school and district performance (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2012; Rothman, 2009). That is, the central office's role in comprehensive HR reform is worth studying because it speaks to broader questions about the process and prospects of fundamentally changing the way district bureaucracies coordinate and orient their work to support performance.

This dissertation focuses on what actually happens when district central offices try to transform their HR systems to improve teacher effectiveness. To date, most accounts of comprehensive HR reform have focused on the design of comprehensive HR reform systems and what districts *should* do to leverage HR to improve teacher effectiveness (Curtis & Wurtzel, 2010; Odden, 2011b; School Communities that Work, 2001; Sigler & Kashyap, 2008). Allen Odden, director of the Strategic Management of Human Capital (SMHC) Task Force (Odden, 2011a, 2011b), offers an example of this line of work when he recommends that districts should,

...redesign the entire human capital management system so that effective teacher talent is acquired, placed strategically and distributed in schools and...developed to the district's vision of instructional effectiveness and student performance, and retained over time (Odden, 2011a, p. 9).

Such recommendations provide important beacons for district leaders interested in using HR to support teacher effectiveness, but given the critical role implementation plays in determining policy and practice, these pictures of reform do not suggest how a district might actually develop them (Cohen, 1990; Lipsky, 1980; McLaughlin, 1990). To understand the promise and possibility of comprehensive HR reforms, researchers and policymakers need to understand how these reforms unfold and develop in the complexity of the real world (Honig 2006). What is at issue in this dissertation, then, are not the goals or plans associated with comprehensive HR reform, but the messier question of their *implementation*. How do districts actually transform the full scope of their HR systems -- their recruitment, selection, development activities and more -- to support teacher effectiveness?

As will I argue in Chapter Two, empirical evidence about comprehensive HR reform suggests that attempts to transform school district HR from a bureaucratic function into a strategic support for performance are fraught with difficulty. In particular, early accounts of the implementation of comprehensive HR reform suggest that the profound shifts in structure and work associated with comprehensive HR reform often create conflict and tension during implementation inside of central offices: turf issues (Kimball, 2008), tension (Thomas and King, 2007), and animosity within the central office (Johnson and Suesse, 2007) appear to be par for the course in comprehensive HR reform. What is it about comprehensive HR reform that can create intra-organizational conflict during implementation? If conflict emerges, how do implementers negotiate and resolve it? How does conflict affect what gets implemented? Current accounts of comprehensive HR reform raise these questions but

do not answer them. They are the central research questions of this dissertation. As my title suggests, the dissertation's results reveal how the implementation of these ambitious reforms is shaped by political dynamics inside of the district central office. I refer to these as *micro*-political dynamics to underscore their location within the central office, as opposed to political dynamics that are associated with interest groups outside of the district (Bacharach & Mundell, 1993; Ball, 1987; Blase, 2005; Iannaccone, 1991; Malen & Cochran, 2008).

I did not arrive at the studies findings about micro-politics purely by induction. Like the fourth wave of implementation studies identified by Honig (2006), I approached the dissertation with a particular theoretical perspective on the implementation process. Given evidence that HR reforms are often accompanied by intra-organizational conflict, this dissertation framed the implementation of comprehensive HR reform as a political process inside of the district bureaucracy.⁴ Political perspectives on organizations and implementation focus on exactly the issues current accounts of comprehensive HR reform raise but do not explain: conflicts, differences, the way people use power to negotiate and resolve conflict, and how

⁴ This perspective-based approach to implementation places the study somewhere between implementation studies that provide a a-theoretical accounts about what happens during implementation and those that seek to apply a general theory of implementation (Mazmanian & Sabateir, 1983). What follows belongs to a tradition that argues that a range of theories can illuminate implementation dynamics in productive ways (Honig, 2006).

political behavior shapes implementation outcomes (Ball, 1987; Bardach, 1977; Bacharach & Mundell, 1993; Malen, 2006; Mintzberg, 1985; Pfeffer, 1981; 1992).

To capture the complexity suggested by a micro-political perspective on implementation, I conducted a qualitative field study in a single mid-sized urban school district during the 2011-2012 school year. At the time of the study, Yorke School District (YSD) (a pseudonym) was in the midst of implementing a comprehensive HR reform initiative, which I refer to as the HR Reform Project (HRRP). The HRRP called for sweeping shifts in YSD's HR system that mirrored the themes of comprehensive HR reform, including demands for new levels of collaboration and coordination within YSD's central office and the development of strategically aligned HR services to support schools district-wide. YSD offered a strategic case for studying the implementation of comprehensive HR reform not only because the HRRP resonated with the themes of comprehensive HR reform but also because YSD was on the cusp of launching the implementation phase of the project when I began my dissertation, having already developed a vision document for the reform the prior summer. Since YSD was at the front-end of the implementation process, it gave me an opportunity to observe, in real-time, central office staff grappling with the far-reaching changes intended by comprehensive HR reform and the difficult task of translating them into reality. From October 2011 to June 2012, I observed central office administrators and managers in YSD as they discussed and planned for the HRRP's implementation. In total I observed 45.5 hours of central office meetings, conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with 13 participants over nine months, and reviewed over 90 policy documents. My goal was to learn about the extent to which the implementation of HRRP involved conflict and, if so,

why it occurred, how implementers negotiated and resolved it, and how the resulting dynamics shaped the reform's implementation.

Summary of Results

Despite a promising beginning and several productive months of work, comprehensive HR reform in YSD ended in failure. Six months after YSD's leaders launched the initiative, it collapsed. In the reform's wake, YSD's HR system remained focused on improving traditional HR procedures, rather than the fundamental shifts that the HRRP had envisioned. The core argument of this dissertation is that the HRRP failed in large part because of micro-political dynamics that took place inside of the central office during its implementation. In investigating the micro-political dynamics of implementing comprehensive HR reform, this study reveals both the sources of conflict that emerged during implementation, how people negotiated and resolved them, and ultimately how these dynamics contributed to the reform's failure.

Sources of Conflict During HRRP Implementation

I found that the underlying source of conflict during the implementation of the HRRP was a mismatch between two competing ideas about how the district should improve its HR department. I call these ideas a *reform logic of HR improvement* and a *status quo logic of HR improvement*. I use the word logics because these ideas stipulated fundamentally different goals for HR improvement and methods for achieving them (Bacharach & Mundell, 1993). The reform logic of HR improvement sought profound changes in HR that challenged its underlying policies and premises by asking it to move from a compliance and regulatory function to a strategic function that

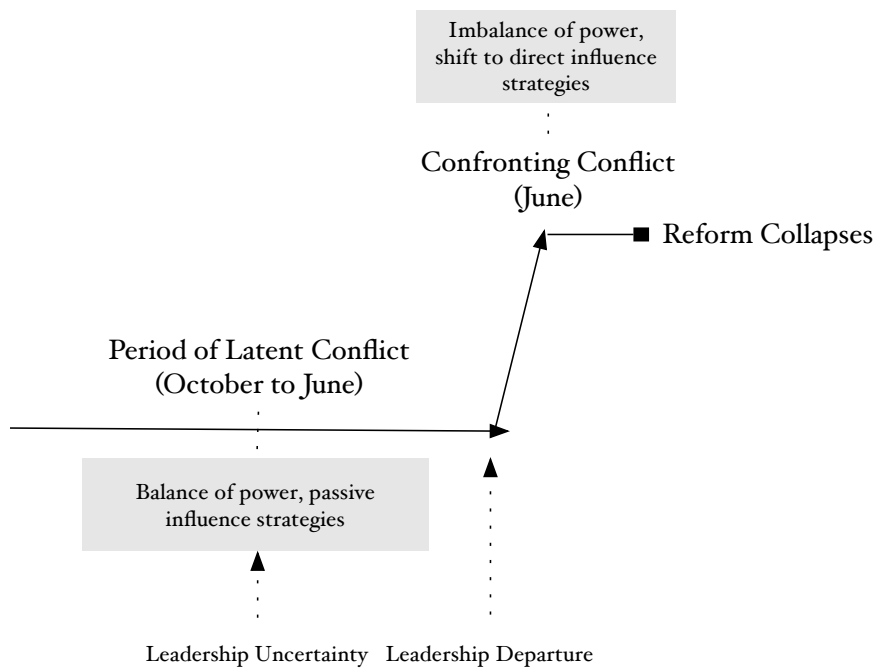
emphasized collaboration and responsiveness. The status quo logic of HR improvement, by contrast, focused on improving HR's existing policies and practices that reinforced its compliance and regulatory function. In revealing the underlying conflict of ideas in the case, this dissertation suggests how ambitious bureaucratic reforms can create organizational struggles not just because incumbent actors generally resist change, but because ambitious reforms evoke deeper disagreements about how an organization works. Furthermore, I found that the root sources of these competing logics of HR improvement were related to the district's historical context as well as contexts associated with individuals' professional backgrounds. Together, these findings show how beliefs, ideals, and norms can be sources of conflict within central offices during bureaucratic reform.

The Negotiation and Resolution of Conflict During HRRP Implementation

Although central office staff disagreed about how to improve HR under the HRRP, conflict between the two logics of HR improvement was latent for much of the implementation period. Central office staff perceived that there were different ideas about how to improve HR, but no one from either side of the debate took overt action to interfere with the other side. Three factors help explain the absence of overt conflict in the early months of the HRRP's implementation: first, both competing views had relatively strong advocates within the central office who balanced each other out; second, both sides utilized mostly passive influence strategies that generally avoided confrontation and discussion of the differences between the two views; and third, the leadership context in YSD created levels of uncertainty that encouraged a wait-and-see stance among central office staff.

This pattern of latent conflict did not hold. Several months into the HRRP implementation, a shift in senior leadership punctuated the latent conflict between the two logics of HR improvement. In response to the leadership shift, advocates of the status quo logic of HR improvement took action to interfere (and defeat) the HRRP and the reform logic of HR improvement. Meanwhile, the reform-minded actors continued to rely on the influence strategies they had used all along to support implementation: persuasion and engagement. These strategies, while arguably productive at creating buy-in among some HR staff, proved too weak to counter the actions of the opponents of reform. In summary, the micro-political dynamic in YSD was characterized by a long period of latent conflict followed by a short period of overt conflict and power plays, a pattern that I call the *slow burn* (See Figure 1). Crucially, the way that actors inside of the central office responded to the punctuation of conflict in the second phase of this pattern helps explain the failure of the HRRP.

Figure 1. The Pattern of Slow Burn and Punctuated Conflict in HR Implementation



To use the famous words of Eugene Bardach (1977), the story of the HRRP in YSD was not an optimistic story (p. 6). But by showing how the micro-political dynamics in the case contributed to the HRRP's demise, I hope that it is an informative story, one that provides more than a cautionary tale for would-be reformers. Instead, I hope that it suggests the importance of acquiring power and using it to negotiate and resolve conflicts during implementation, instead of relying on good ideas and well-meaning engagement alone.

The Plan of the Dissertation

In Chapter Two I review two bodies of literature to lay out what is currently known about the implementation of comprehensive HR reform. First, I review recent accounts of comprehensive HR reforms in a handful of urban districts. These accounts

consist primarily of policy reports and policy-focused case studies, rather than empirical research studies. As I noted earlier, these accounts suggest that comprehensive HR reform involves significant changes in organizational structures and work practices in the central office and that these changes often give rise to intra-organizational conflict. These accounts of comprehensive HR reform do not, however, elaborate why these conflicts occur or how -- or if -- staff and leaders negotiate and resolve them. If the field of education wants to build implementation knowledge about how central offices are likely to respond to comprehensive HR reform and other ambitious reforms, researchers and practitioners need a better understanding of the role organizational conflict plays in implementation, for better or worse.

To further explore the sources, negotiation, and resolution of conflict during implementation in the central office, I next review empirical studies on the implementation of other ambitious reforms within district central offices. My review of this literature points to the importance of two sources of conflict: disagreements about who is in charge during implementation, and disagreements about the meaning and substance of policy. As for the negotiation and resolution of conflict, the research on central offices provides some nascent evidence that conflicts in central offices are often resolved by power and politics, rather than rational deliberation. But these studies provide little evidence about how people gain or lose power during implementation or, ultimately, how patterns of micro-politics shape implementation outcomes. Moreover, I found no empirical research on the degree to which reforms of *operational* policy, like HR policy, involve conflict dynamics similar to reforms of instructional policy.

In Chapter Three I use political theories of organizations and implementation to frame my investigation. Political theories of implementation draw our attention to an analysis of actors and interests, of resources and strategies, and of the implementation context. I use these concepts and relationships to help elaborate my research questions about conflict and guide my methodological approach. In Chapter Four I explain my methodological approach and argue that YSD was a strategic case for analyzing the micro-political dynamics of comprehensive HR reform in central offices.

Chapters Five through Eight present the study's main findings. Chapter Five provides an overview of the implementation outcomes and events that preceded them. Chapter Six focuses on the sources of conflict in the case related to actors and interests. Chapter Seven focuses on how the root sources of conflict were linked to multiple contexts in YSD, past and present. Chapter Eight describes how the resources and strategies actors used to negotiate and resolve conflicts during implementation produced the slow burn political dynamic that ultimately put an end to the reform. Chapter Nine ends with a summary and implications for research and practice. For researchers, the study suggests the importance of combining political and sense-making perspectives on implementation that focus more squarely on how implementers interpret and understand policy demands. The dissertation also suggests the importance of longitudinal studies in implementation research and the need for further examination of the links between micro- and macro-political dynamics and their influence on implementation outcomes. For practitioners, the study suggests that although there may be such a thing as too much conflict in organizational and policy change, there may also be such a thing as too little conflict. When it comes to the micro-

politics of ambitious bureaucratic reform, avoiding conflict may favor the status quo.

This dissertation suggests that reform advocates would do well to heed Teddy Roosevelt's famous advice: speak softly, and carry a big stick (or become allies with someone who does). Good ideas and engagement are not enough.

Chapter 2 : Prior Research on Implementing Comprehensive HR Reform

In this chapter I review two bodies of literature -- literature on comprehensive HR reforms in school districts and the broader literature on the implementation of reform in central offices -- to examine what happens when school districts translate the demands of comprehensive HR reform into reality. I begin by reviewing literature on comprehensive HR reforms to discover what is known about the way central offices are working out these ambitious initiatives. As I summarized in Chapter One, these studies show that comprehensive HR reforms involve major changes in organizational structures and work practices within central office that can create intra-organizational conflict. To date, however, accounts of comprehensive HR reform do not provide much empirical evidence about the source of this conflict or how its negotiation or resolution shapes implementation. This knowledge gap is problematic because practitioners are left with little guidance about how they might anticipate or manage conflict during implementation.

To explore these issues further I turned to the broader literature on the implementation of ambitious reform in central offices, looking for evidence about why central office reforms might generate conflict and how central office staff negotiate or resolve conflicts during implementation. This broader literature suggests that conflicts during implementation can stem from disagreements about who has the authority to make decisions during implementation as well as disagreements about the meaning and substance of policy. These studies also suggest that conflicts during implementation are often resolved by power and politics inside the central office. But since these studies often treat conflict and politics as context, rather than the main phenomenon of interest,

scholars still have much to learn about how micro-political dynamics shape what policies get implemented in central offices (or not) and the ways in which people gain or lose power during implementation.

Research on Comprehensive HR Reform in Central Offices

My search for empirical studies about the implementation of comprehensive HR reform in central offices confirmed what others have previously noted: the literature does not include much empirical evidence on the topic (Odden, Milanowski, & Heneman, 2007; Scribner, Smylie, & Mosley, 2008; Smylie et al., 2004). The few studies that do address comprehensive HR reform in school districts offer conceptual frameworks for taking a coordinated and strategic approach to HR, but only limited empirical applications of those frameworks and few insights on policy implementation (Heneman & Milanowski, 2004; Smylie et al., 2004). Heneman and Milanowski (2004), for example, provided a HR alignment model that suggests how a school district might coordinate its HR system. They then applied their model to Cincinnati and Washoe County school districts and found that some of the districts' HR functions were more aligned (recruitment, selection) than others (professional development and compensation). While the authors' conceptual model is useful for analyzing the alignment of various functions in the HR system, its application in the study does not reveal how or why Cincinnati or Washoe County were able (or unable) to align their various HR functions. The result is a useful diagnostic assessment rather than empirical evidence about implementation.

Smylie and his colleagues (2004) provided a slightly different conceptual framework for understanding how school districts might develop a system of

coordinated and strategically aligned HR activities to support teacher effectiveness. Like Heneman and Milanowski (2004), Smylie and his colleagues (2004) highlight HR alignment, which, consistent with the themes of comprehensive HR reform, they define as the fit between HR strategies and organizational goals as well as the internal consistency of different HR activities. Smylie and his colleagues (2004) also introduce an additional idea: HR flexibility (Wright & Snell, 1998). HR flexibility suggest that school districts should not see HR alignment as “something that can be achieved once and for all,” but rather something that must be repeatedly reinvented and achieved as HR systems respond to changes in and around the organization (Smylie et al, 2004, p. 49). As with Henemann and Milanowski (2004), Smylie and his colleagues’ (2004) empirical illustrations are limited. For example, these authors illustrate HR alignment in one district by explaining, “The district also began aggressively recruiting and hiring teachers whose philosophies of teaching and professional orientations were consistent with its own” (p. 57). This description helpfully suggests that a strategically aligned approach to HR involves linking recruitment and hiring to the district’s vision of instruction, but it does not show how this approached worked (or failed to work) or, more importantly, what central office staff did to make it happen. Overall, I agree with Scribner and his colleagues’ (2008) assessment that academic research in education policy has yet to directly examine strategic human resource management policies and practices “as they may be actually implemented” (p. 12).

When I expanded my search beyond academic literature, however, I located a small but growing body of policy reports and think-tank case studies of urban school districts engaged in HR reform. These case studies reference San Diego Unified School

District (Campbell, DeArmond, & Schumwinger, 2004; Van Cleef, 2005), Boston Public Schools (Archibald, 2008; Johnson & Suesse, 2007), Chicago Public Schools (Kimball, 2008), Houston Independent School District (Campbell et al., 2004), the New York City Department of Education (Goertz & Levin, 2008; Goertz, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2011; Mercer, 2008), the School District of Philadelphia (Neild, Useem, & Farley, 2005; Neild, Useem, Travers, & Lesnick, 2003; Thomas & King, 2007), Fairfax County Public Schools (Milanowski, 2008), and Long Beach Unified School District (CA) (Koppich, 2008).

The earliest of these HR case studies focused on efforts to reform individual HR functions, such as recruitment (Neild et al., 2005), whereas more recent HR case studies focused on comprehensive HR reform (Archibald, 2008; Goertz & Levin, 2008; Johnson & Suesse, 2007; Kimball, 2008). Accordingly, I centered my review on these later accounts of comprehensive HR reform, again looking for clues about how school districts might actually build and implement a coordinated and strategically aligned HR system.

Before examining what these cases reveal about the implementation of comprehensive HR reform, it is worth noting some of their methodological limitations. First, their empirical base is often hard to determine. For example, Archibald's (2008) description of her method for studying Boston Public Schools (BPS) was limited to a footnote that reads, "This case is based on a review of documents and interviews with superintendents, key central office leaders from the human resources, curriculum and professional development offices, and representatives from the teachers' union" (p. 1). In her account of BPS' HR reform, it is unclear which documents she examined, how many interviews she conducted, or how she used data to support the account. The

conceptual framing in these case studies is also often hard to discern. Rather than conceptualize HR reform as a particular kind of policy or implementation problem, the case studies tend to provide technical accounts that describe district policy initiatives embedded within comprehensive HR reforms. For example, when Archibald described BPS efforts to recruit teachers she described a string of policy initiatives -- including the active recruitment of minority applicants, a district-based teacher training program, and contract provisions that facilitated earlier hiring -- but not how central office staff participated in these initiatives and made them work. As a result, those who are interested in understanding implementation dynamics must read between the lines in these accounts for evidence about how people working within central offices grapple with the implementation of comprehensive HR reform.

Comprehensive HR Reform: New Formal Structures and Work Practices

The case studies of districts engaged in HR reform suggest that creating a coordinated and strategically aligned HR system involves profound changes in the formal structures and work practices of district central offices. First, the HR case studies describe shifts in the structure of the central office hierarchy to support comprehensive HR reform (Archibald, 2008; Campbell & DeArmond, 2010; Campbell et al., 2004; Goertz & Levin, 2008). In a traditional central office hierarchy, the HR department and HR director are located under the district's business services division (Webb & Norton, 2009). In districts pursuing comprehensive HR reform, district leaders often move HR leadership positions out of business services to be closer to the office of the superintendent and other strategic leaders. Goertz and Levin (2008), for example, described how chancellor Joel Klein in New York City put a top deputy in

charge of the district's HR reforms, rather than its HR director (also see Campbell & DeArmond, 2010). Similar cabinet-level HR leadership positions were created in Boston (Archibald, 2008), San Diego, Houston (Campbell et al., 2004), and Washington, D.C. (Campbell & DeArmond, 2010). According to case study accounts, district leaders shifted these vertical relationships to increase interactions and accountability between HR administrators and district leaders, to promote the strategic orientation of HR, and to raise the profile of HR inside of the district (Archibald, 2008; Campbell et al., 2004)

Second, the case studies suggest that districts often created new cross-functional teams in the central office to help coordinate HR activities previously housed in different sub-units and positions. The case study districts primarily created cross-functional teams within their HR departments (Archibald, 2008; Kimball, 2008; Thomas & King, 2007), rather than across central office departments. Archibald (2008), for example, described how BPS created a three-person HR team to coordinate all HR related services for new teachers during a teacher's first year of employment. Likewise, Kimball (2008) described a cross-functional team in Chicago that provided a range of HR-related services that had previously been provided by different specialized positions, including "staffing and transfers, enrollments, resignations, substitute processing, salary adjustments, medical leave, and benefits processing services" (p. 40).

Third, the case studies found that districts created new central offices positions, which districts often called HR generalists, to take on the new work of providing coordinated and strategic HR support to schools. The HR generalist's job was often to provide one-stop HR consulting for a particular group of schools in the district and

navigate the central office on the behalf of schools. For example, Campbell and colleagues (2004) and Van Cleff (2005) described how San Diego City Schools took duties that were previously handled by multiple jobs in the central office and assigned them to a single position in HR. The district then assigned each full-service position to work with a particular sub-set of schools in the district. Similar positions were evident in New York City (Goertz & Levin, 2008), Houston (Campbell et al, 2004) and Chicago (Kimball, 2008).

In some districts, leaders expected that HR generalists would not just provide coordinated access to traditional HR services but also new types of strategic support to principals. Goertz and Levin (2008), for example, reported that leaders in New York City expected staff working in new HR Partner positions to act as HR consultants for school principals, providing principals with strategic advice on how to manage their teaching staff. The specific roles and responsibilities of HR Partners in New York City included, “establishing strong relationships with principals and local instructional superintendents through regular meetings, visits and other contact” and “providing high value-added HR expertise, coaching, advice and execution support to local instructional superintendents and principals (such as developing explicit strategies to address top and bottom performers)” (Mercer, 2008, p.18). Campbell and colleagues (2004) described similar expectations in San Diego, where HR generalists spoke of helping schools acquire and build a staff capable of carrying out the school’s particular improvement strategy. According to central office staff and principals in San Diego, this strategic and supportive orientation was a significant departure for the district’s traditional HR

system, which had long focused on ensuring that principals followed proper policies and procedures (Campbell et al, 2004, p. 24).

As the discussion so far suggests, current accounts of the implementation of comprehensive HR reform show that comprehensive HR reforms involve building fundamentally new formal structures and adopting new work practices inside of the central office. As I discuss in the next section, the HR case studies also suggest that making these ambitious shifts involved more than simply redrawing organizational charts and rewriting job descriptions.

Conflict During the Implementation of Comprehensive HR reform

The case study accounts also suggest that the organizational and practice changes associated with implementing comprehensive HR reforms can create organizational conflict within the central office. Thomas and King (2008), for example, described Philadelphia's first steps toward restructuring HR as stirring "deep seated tensions" in the HR department (p. 108) and the subsequent re-staffing of the HR department as "highly controversial and unsettling" (p. 110). Johnson and Suesse (2008) described how leaders in Boston were surprised by the degree of animosity and isolation they encountered inside of HR when they started pushing for reform. Kimball (2008) noted that central office turf issues persisted well into the implementation of Chicago's HR reform. Likewise, in New York City, external HR consultants encountered turf issues during implementation, noting that, "Often people [within HR] are invested in maintaining their place in the organization as the keeper of particular knowledge or a particular process at the expense of greater operational efficiency." (Mercer, 2008 p. 20).

Given that HR reform has major implications for the placement of organizational sub-units as well as people's work practices, conflict during implementation is not all together surprising. These reforms alter vertical control relationships within the bureaucracy (putting HR in the superintendent's cabinet) as well as horizontal relationships among staff (creating new cross-functional teams and calling on HR generalists to advocate for schools within the central office). They call on HR staff to work in fundamentally new ways, moving away from compliance-based HR work toward work that is strategically focused. Smylie and colleagues (2004) conceptualization of HR reform anticipated that these shifts would not be easy:

...the difficulty [with coordinating HR activities] is not only that these departments, offices, and agencies may be structurally disconnected from one another. Over time, they may have developed strong political self-interests for influence and survival that "institutionalize" the structural fragmentation and impede coordination and collaboration (p. 63).

The case studies suggest that conflict is par for the course in comprehensive HR reform, but they do not elaborate what, more specifically, caused conflict during the implementation of these reforms or how leaders negotiated and resolved the conflict, if at all. For example, the case studies mention turf battles in the central office, but they do not reveal why these battles emerged or how reformers managed them in ways that supported or hindered policy implementation. Conflict may be an inevitable, perhaps even productive, part of large-scale change efforts in central offices, but the HR case

studies never show how implementers successfully worked out conflicts -- or failed to do so -- or how the results mattered to the policies that the central offices eventually implemented. As a result, current accounts of HR reform leave would-be reformers with an incomplete account of what it takes to translate the ambitious vision of comprehensive HR reform into practice. These accounts show districts engaged in comprehensive HR reform changed their HR departments by raising the profile of the HR function, coordinating disparate HR activities, and pushing HR to work with schools in new ways. But it is unclear how leaders handled the conflicts associated with these changes or how conflicts influenced the extent to which they eventually implemented comprehensive HR reform.

Research on Reform, Conflict, and Central Offices

To discover more about why conflict might arise during the implementation of comprehensive HR reforms, how implementers negotiate and resolve conflict, and how the resulting dynamics shape implementation outcomes, I turned to the broader research on central offices and reform. As with my search for empirical studies on the implementation of comprehensive HR reform, my initial search for related evidence from other central office reforms revealed that organizational conflict in central offices is not heavily researched in the broader literature on school districts. Studies of ambitious school district reforms typically emphasize shared values and consensus as important elements of success (Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002; Togneri, 2003). When researchers consider how district-level reforms involve conflict, they tend to focus on conflict between central offices and external actors, such as community groups (Hill et al, 2013; Rorrer, 2006; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000; Supovitz, 2006), or

between central offices and school-based personnel (Bimber, 1993a, 1993b; Datnow, 2000; Rice & Malen, 2003).

The best evidence about intra-organizational conflict during implementation comes from a small but growing set of studies that look closely at central offices and the implementation of ambitious teaching and learning reforms, including small schools initiatives (e.g., Honig, 2009) and instructional reforms (e.g., Hubbard et al., 2006). Like the HR case studies, these studies recognize that ambitious reforms can create conflict within the central office. But unlike like the HR case studies, these central office-focused studies have an empirical base and theoretical grounding that begins to suggest why conflict emerges during implementation and how implementers negotiate and resolve it. Although these studies suggest that conflicts can emerge during implementation in the central office, they generally do not explicitly study politics, instead treating it as context; the empirical evidence on organizational politics within central offices is therefore limited. With two exceptions (Coburn, Bae, & Turner, 2008; Coburn, Toure, & Yamashita, 2009), studies of the central office have yet to focus directly on organizational conflict within central offices during implementation, or what scholars refer to as the micro-politics (Ball, 1987; Blase, 1987).⁵

⁵ For example, a recent literature review on the micro-politics of educational change failed to identify any research focused on micro-politics within the central office (Blase & Bjork, 2010).

Sources of Conflict During Implementation

Studies that examine implementation inside of the central office tend to describe two sources of conflict during implementation: first, they describe conflicts during implementation over who is in charge of reform-related work; second, they describe conflicts over the meaning of reform-related work.⁶

Struggles over who is in charge. Some studies suggest that reform-related conflicts in central offices emerge during implementation over who is in charge of a particular piece of the reform (Coburn et al., 2008; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006). For example, in their comprehensive study of San Diego City Schools instructional reforms in the early 2000s, Hubbard and colleagues (2006) briefly described power struggles between district instructional leaders (who oversaw principal professional development) and district-level literacy administrators (who had content-area expertise) over who would lead district literacy trainings for principals (p. 178). In a study of new small autonomous school initiatives in Oakland and Chicago, Honig (2009) described a drawn-out struggle between Oakland's small schools office and its purchasing department over a decision to issue credit cards to small schools (the purchasing department repeatedly balked giving schools the authority to control their own purchasing). In a study of a partnership between a school district and an external support organization, Coburn and her colleagues (2008) found conflicts were more likely when staff were unsure about who was in charge of a decision or initiative. For

⁶ These two types of conflicts sometimes overlap (Coburn, 2008), but my review suggests that the deepest conceptual and empirical work in education policy has focused on conflicts during implementation that stem from struggles over meaning.

example, the authors described how central office staff struggled to resolve a debate about professional development because no one was sure who was supposed to take the lead on the decision (p. 385-386). In all of these examples, conflicts during implementation were associated with authority relationships (who is in charge?) and disagreements about what those relationships implied for actors' roles, responsibilities, and rights during implementation.

Coburn and colleagues (2009) also showed that shifts in senior district leadership increased conflict during implementation. These authors argue that senior leadership turnover increased conflict by creating uncertainty about the district's strategic direction and by shifting authority relationships inside the central office. When a superintendent or a senior leader leaves, individuals who had authority under that leader may find themselves out of favor under his or her successor. Conversely, staff out of favor under one leader may find their positions improved under that leader's successor. To the degree that leadership changes result in conflict, these studies suggest that this conflict can be partly understood as a function of unsettled, and perhaps contested, authority relations.

Struggles over meaning. Studies that look at policy implementation inside of central offices also suggest that implementers' different interpretations and understandings of policy can create conflict during implementation. Differences in interpretation and understanding can emerge during implementation, as Coburn and her colleagues (2009) explained, because "the meaning of information or events is not given, but is inherently problematic. Individuals and groups must actively construct understandings and interpretations"(p.1119). When individuals interpret an ambitious

reform in different ways, and these different interpretations become an object of debate, the resulting conflict may be understood as a struggle over meaning (Coburn et al., 2009).

For example, Coburn and colleagues' (2009) study of evidence-use and decision-making in a district central office found that conflicts between central office administrators often stemmed from individuals' divergent interpretations of information and events. Did the district's low math test scores mean that its math curriculum was inadequate? Or did the low scores mean that teachers were implementing the district's math curriculum poorly? (p. 1125). In this particular case (low math scores), Coburn and colleagues (2009) argued that different groups of district administrators answered these questions differently, which resulted in a series of debates in central office meetings with the superintendent over how to respond to the low math scores.

The idea that multiple and sometimes competing interpretations and understandings exist within central offices is a common theme in the literature on central offices. Although few studies of central office administrators focus on conflict or negotiation per se, many reveal the "non-monolithic" nature of meaning in central offices (Spillane, 1998b, p. 33). For example, studies have found that interpretations and understandings among central office staff vary according to administrators' subject-area specialties (Burch & Spillane, 2005), sub-unit and departmental affiliation (Honig, 2004, 2006; Spillane, 2000; Spillane, 1998a, 1998b; Spillane & Callahan, 2000), professional backgrounds and training (Kennedy, 1982) and positions in the organizational hierarchy (Hannaway, 1989). Spillane's (1998a) study of curricular

reforms in Michigan, for example, found that different central office units held varied perspectives on reading reforms in part because of their different professional orientations and linkages to groups outside of the district office. These findings reinforce the idea that people's understandings and interpretations are heavily mediated by what they already know and believe (Hannaway, 1989; Kennedy, 1982).

Of course, different interpretations of reform in the central office do not necessarily create conflict. Indeed, when differences are walled-off in various parts of the organization, different understandings and agendas may peacefully co-exist. In fact, studies of reform initiatives that do not upset the central office's egg-crate structure find little evidence that differences within the central office create conflict (Spillane, 1998a, 1998b). When multiple units are involved in reform-related interactions and exchanges, however, especially when those interactions call for major changes in practice and policy, conflict may be more likely (Honig, 2009). As Honig (2009) noted in her study of small schools offices, "policy and practice development appeared particularly challenging...when changes in one central office unit required or implicated changes in other units" (p. 418).

Negotiation and Resolution of Conflict During Implementation

When conflicts arise during implementation in central offices, studies suggests that implementers often try to negotiate conflict with political strategies, rather than rational decision-making. Coburn and colleagues (2009) study of instructional decision-making in central offices found that when central office staff were unable to come to an agreement on how to proceed on a given issue, they addressed conflict by either narrowing the range of participants, incorporating conflicting views into policy

decisions (a compromise that the authors call structural elaboration), or exercising authority and making decisions by fiat. For example, when central office staff and other stakeholders in the study disagreed about the district's literacy framework, district leaders transferred the deliberations to a small group of leaders in the district's curriculum department and a few external consultants. By narrowing participation in this way, leaders excluded stakeholders with divergent views about literacy from the decision. In other cases of conflict – over professional development offerings, for example -- the superintendent (or an assistant superintendent) stepped in and made a decision when central office staff and other stakeholders could not reach an agreement. Conversely, Coburn and her colleagues (2009) found that political strategies like these were less common in decisions when people generally agreed about proposed solutions.

Related evidence suggests that the resources and influence strategies that implementers bring to bear on managing conflicts depend in large part on where individuals sit within the central office power structure. For example, in a study of school district collaboration with external partners, Coburn and colleagues (2008) found that central office administrators who had both authority (legitimated formal or informal power) and status (perceived social standing) primarily used a strategy of persuasion to win debates. But individuals who had authority and little status tried to win debates by controlling meeting agendas and narrowing participation in decision-making. By contrast, Coburn and her colleagues (2008) found that implementers who had neither authority nor status within the central office relied on less direct strategies, such as persuasion or enlisting an influential spokesperson to make their case. Prior studies of central office administrators also find that individuals with authority use

strategies that invoke their positional authority to win debates and resolve conflict, such as controlling agendas and participation (Hannaway, 1989; Spillane, 1996). For example, Spillane's (2006) study of school district responses to state reading policy described how an elementary education director purposefully selected people who shared her views on reading to join the district's literacy task force so there was "little doubt about the pivotal role of the director's agenda in their [the task force's] efforts to develop new instructional policies" (p. 75).

The influence strategies that Coburn and her colleagues' studies (2008, 2009) identify -- namely, agenda setting and controlling participation -- point to the importance of meetings as arenas for conflict negotiation and influence within central offices.⁷ The importance of meetings as arenas for the negotiation of conflict is also consistent with Hannaway's (1989) study of the managerial behavior of school district administrators. Hannaway (1989) found that managers often negotiated with and influenced each another in formal meetings to protect and promote their status and interests. In meetings, managers could "publicly display and legitimize their power" (p. 123). Meetings provided central office managers "opportunities to manipulate

⁷ It is worth considering, however, that this emphasis on formal meetings might simply be a function of the data that are readily accessible. Meetings are not the only place where struggles play out (Hannaway, 1989; Honig et al, 2010). Honig and colleagues (2010), for example, found that central office staff sometimes worked around the chain of command to informally influence decisions. Nevertheless, as the discussion in this section suggests, researchers have found formal meetings to be fruitful arenas to study organizational conflict.

impressions of what has happened in the past and to generate support for particular positions they hold” (p.77). In a more recent study, Honig and colleagues (2010) found that central office reformers struggled with other central office administrators over meeting agendas and the use of time in meetings (e.g., staff interrupted or short-changed reform-minded professional development during meetings to address operational issues).⁸

As with the negotiation of conflict, authority and power appear to shape conflict outcomes and implementation in important ways (Coburn et al, 2008). Inside of central offices, actors with authority and power generally prevail in debates through persuasion or, if need be, “unitary” decision-making (Coburn et al, 2009, p. 1142). In their study of a district-university partnership, Coburn and her colleagues (2008) described how an assistant superintendent compelled subordinates to adopt a particular instructional program based solely on positional power. Looking across seven instances of collaboration between multiple actors (e.g., district administrators, teachers, the superintendent, external researchers, and external consultants), these authors concluded, “Ultimately, individuals who used their authority in this [commanding] way

⁸ Indirect evidence of the importance of meetings is also found in Honig’s (2006) study of reform-focused administrators on the periphery of the central office, which found that administrators took on additional central office responsibilities -- which likely involved attending meetings -- to “increase their visibility within the central office, to strengthen their influence over central-office policies that could affect sites, and to establish relationships with central-office administrators who had such influence.” (p. 372).

were quite successful in shaping the direction of the collaborative work; direct uses of authority were successful in shaping the direction of the work in every decision point where they were used” (pp. 387-88).

Other studies suggest a softer use of positional power for influence: the bully pulpit. By continually explaining the logic of reforms to staff charged with implementing them, powerful actors can support fundamental change and reduce conflict by framing and explaining the goals and means of reform (Coburn et al., 2008; Honig et al., 2010). Honig and colleagues, for example, (2010) found that leaders promoted the implementation of ambitious central office reform efforts by continually developing the reform’s theory of action, engaging others in understanding that theory, and brokering external resources and relationships to support it. In these cases, leaders used their positional authority to handle-conflict by directly managing meaning in the organization (Morgan, 1997).

Summary and Implications

Prior research suggests important findings about the implementation of comprehensive HR reform. The HR case studies I reviewed suggested that efforts to build coordinated and strategically aligned HR systems involve fundamental shifts in formal organizational structures and work practices in the central office and, importantly, that these shifts can give rise to conflict during implementation. But these studies do not provide much empirical evidence about why conflict develops or how people negotiate and resolve it during implementation -- or, ultimately, how it shapes implementation success or failure.

Literature that looks closely at the implementation of other ambitious reforms inside of central offices elaborates why ambitious reform might spark organizational conflict and how implementers might respond. This literature suggests, for example, that conflict may arise during implementation because of debates over who is in charge during reform as well as over the meaning of reform. Debates over who is in charge may or may not emerge during comprehensive HR reform, depending on the clarity surrounding people's roles and responsibilities, but conflicts over meaning seem likely. Comprehensive HR reform requires increased coordination and collaboration among sub-units and departments whose members may interpret the reform's goals and approaches differently. More broadly, the underlying assumptions and ideas behind comprehensive HR reform may be hard for central office staff to understand. As the consultants who worked on comprehensive HR reform in New York City in the mid 2000s noted, "The value of developing a more strategically focused HR department was not well understood by many within the DOE [Department of Education]." (Mercer, 2008, p. 20)

While the broader literature on central offices provides a useful orientation for understanding organizational conflict during implementation, several questions remain about how conflict and political dynamics might shape the implementation of comprehensive HR reform. For one, whether or not intra-organizational conflicts during the implementation of comprehensive HR reform are about the meaning of reform, authority relationships, or something else, is a question about which no empirical evidence currently exists. On the resolution of conflict, studies of central offices suggest that people negotiate and resolve conflict using political strategies that,

in turn, are shaped by power relations within the central office. But these same studies provide few clues about how people develop power within the central office to influence policy implementation or, more broadly, how patterns of micro-political dynamics shape what gets implemented and how. Whether the literature's nascent findings about conflict in the central office during implementation apply in the context of comprehensive HR reforms remains an open question.

Accordingly, this dissertation aims to strengthen the field's understanding of comprehensive HR reform and, more generally, conflict during the implementation of ambitious central office reforms, by asking the following research questions:

1. What, if any, are the main sources of conflict during the implementation of comprehensive HR reform in the central office?
2. How do implementers negotiate and to what extent do they resolve conflicts during implementation? and
3. How does intra-organizational conflict and its negotiation during implementation shape what does (and does not) get implemented in comprehensive HR reform?

In the next chapter, I describe the conceptual framework I used to frame my inquiry and to elaborate the ways in which conflicts may emerge during policy implementation and ultimately shape implementation outcomes in comprehensive HR reform.

Chapter 3 : Implementation of Comprehensive HR Reform as a Political Phenomenon

To frame my investigation of conflict during the implementation of comprehensive HR reform I turned to political theories of implementation (Bardach, 1979; Malen, 2006) and organizations (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980; Bacharach & Mundell, 1993; Mintzberg, 1985; Pfeffer, 1981, 1992; Vigoda, 2003). These theories are useful for examining the study's questions because they conceptualize organizations as places where conflict is par for the course, places where,

actors use their power to advance their interests and ideas;
where conflict, competition, cooperation, compromise and co-
optation coexist and where public and private transactions
shape organizational priorities, processes, and outcomes
(Malen & Cochran, 2008, p. 149).⁹

Political theories highlight conflict, differences, goal diversity, and the way people use formal and informal power to work them out (Ball, 1987; Blase, 1991). As Vigoda (2003) summarized, political perspectives on organizations direct researchers' attention

⁹ As suggested in Malen and Cochran's quote, my conceptual framework generally assumes a pluralistic view of power in organizations. That is, I generally conceive of organizations as relatively loose networks of individuals and groups that bargain and compete for influence in a system where power is spread throughout the organization (Blau, 1964; Pfeffer, 1981), rather than vested strictly in formal structures (Herman, 1982).

to “the behavior of individuals looking to influence others for the purpose of promoting particular goals and interests in the work environment” (p. 5) (also see Blase, 1991, p. 11). Again, I refer to *micro*-political dynamics to underscore the organizational focus of my study, as opposed to the politics associated with interest groups working outside of the district. Political theories offer a set of useful concepts and relationships for analyzing political behaviors and their consequences. In particular, political theories of implementation suggest that conflict and its negotiation are a function of the complex interaction of actors with varying interests, the resources and the influence strategies these actors employ to defend their interests, and the contexts where they interact (Bardach, 1977; Malen, 2006). An analysis of each of these factors provides an organizing framework for understanding the political dynamics of implementing comprehensive HR reform and helps elaborate the studies main questions: What, if any, are the main sources of conflict during the implementation of comprehensive HR reform in the central office? How do implementers negotiate and to what extent do they resolve conflicts during implementation? and How does intra-organizational conflict and its negotiation during implementation shape what does (and does not) get implemented in comprehensive HR reform?

Actors and Interests

Identifying relevant actors and their interests is the first analytical step in understanding how conflict and political dynamics might emerge during the implementation of HR reform, especially with regards to potential sources of conflict (Bacharach & Mundell, 1993; Malen, 2006). In HR reform, relevant actors would likely include the leaders of the reform, top district and departmental leaders, HR staff, and

staff in other departments affected by the reform. Ultimately, however, the cast of relevant actors in implementation depends on the particular situation or issue under consideration. Not all central office actors may be relevant for all implementation processes. Some HR activities -- staff reclassifications, for example -- may involve only a sub-set of actors within the HR department itself while others may impact a wider range of actors.

Political theories draw our attention to the fact that actors have interests relative to particular policies, and that these interests have the potential to set the stage for conflict. When a policy aligns or misaligns with an actor's salient interests, political theories expect that the actor will seek to protect and promote those interests; if actors' interests collide, they can become an object of conflict (Pfeffer, 1981). Malen (2006) distinguishes two broad categories of interests that a policy might impact: an actor's material interests and an actor's ideological interests. Material interests are tangible and self-interested. In the case of HR reform, relevant material interests might include an actor's career ambitions (e.g., Who will lead the new cross-functional team?), organizational territory (e.g., What office will the new team have?) and finances (e.g., What is the budget for the new office?). Ideological interests, by contrast, are value- or belief-based and often less tangible. Relevant ideological interests under comprehensive HR reform might include people's values, orientations, and convictions about the proper role of HR or the mission of the district central office. For example, to the degree that comprehensive HR reform emphasizes providing strategic supports for performance, it might create conflict around the ideological interests of actors who are committed to bureaucratic values such as equal treatment, rule-following, and hierarchy (Weber,

1947). Some political scholars argue that ideological interests like these are the main source of conflict in organizations. For Bacharach and Mundell (1993), organizational or micro-politics is essentially an ongoing negotiation and struggle over the meaning of an organization's goals and the methods it uses to achieve them, what they call *logics of action*. This view that ideological interests are central to organizational politics is supported by theoretical (March & Olsen, 1999) and empirical work (Heimer, 2008) outside of education and resonates with the literature reviewed in Chapter Two (e.g., Coburn et al, 2009).¹⁰

A key insight of political theories of implementation is that conflicts and political dynamics are set into motion by the alignments and misalignments between actors' interests during implementation (Malen, 2006; Pfeffer, 1981). Policies might have premises that align with the beliefs and values of some actors and not others (ideological interests); or, policies might benefit some actors and harm others (material interests) (Malen, 2006). In some situations, these splits might occur between classic bureaucratic actors, such as Wilson's (1989) operators, managers, and executives. But in other situations, the interests of informal groups might be misaligned or aligned (Ball, 1987). For example, the ideological interests of HR staff who rose through the teaching ranks may be different than the ideological interests of HR staff with professional backgrounds in HR. If these two groups hold divergent interests with

¹⁰ Interestingly, evidence from outside of education suggests that the political behavior of people working in lower-level positions in the bureaucracy may be more concerned with defending ideological interests, such as social identity and roles, than policy interests (Brower & Abolafia, 1997).

respect to a policy (e.g., they have different ideas about the proper goals of HR), it would be a mistake to group them together as a unified group of Wilson's (1989) operators.

Sheppard (1992) provided some additional conceptual guidance for locating conflict by arguing that conflict between actors' interests can occur at multiple levels within organizations: the macro level (institutions and policy premises), the intermediate level (relationships) and the individual level (dispute episodes). An example of a macro-level conflict would be conflict over which issues are permitted in management-labor negotiations. Intermediate conflicts, by contrast, focus on how actors "learn to manage their interdependencies over time," through the ongoing negotiation of conflicts (Sheppard, 1992, p. 326). Analyses of individual conflicts, by contrast, focus on the management of a single episode of conflict between individuals. All three levels of conflict are arguably relevant to the implementation of comprehensive HR reform, but my interest in organizational change and the unfolding of implementation processes overtime suggests the need to focus on the macro and the intermediate-levels of conflict, rather than single-shot events.

The discussion so far begs a key question: what is the definition of conflict? As Kolb and Putnam (1992) note, there are "probably as many definitions of conflict as there are occasions of its occurrence" in organizational studies (p. 312). One basic dividing line definitions of conflict is whether or not conflict requires some overt clash or interference behavior on the part of actors, or whether *perceived* differences between actors might also be thought of in terms of organizational conflict, even when conflict does not come to the surface. Given evidence that conflicts are often kept below the surface in organizations (Malen & Cochran, 2008) -- for example, when powerful actors

prevent latent conflicts from becoming questions for discussion (Bacharach & Baratz, 1963) -- I take the broad view that conflicts during the implementation of comprehensive HR reform might be open and visible (for example, during points of major decision-making) but they also might exist below the surface, invisible and unacknowledged by organizational members (Morgan 1997). The impact of visible or invisible conflicts on implementation depends on how actors negotiate and resolve them, including avoidance. As the next section highlights, political theories suggest that analysts can understand the negotiation and resolution of conflict by paying careful attention to actors' relative resources and the influence strategies they use to promote their interests.

Resources and Influence Strategies

If actors interests conflict during implementation (overtly or not), political theories argue that the way actors negotiate and resolve these conflicts will depend on their organizational resources and the strategies they use to influence each other. Examples of organizational resources that give actors power in negotiating conflict might include the authority to say who participates in meetings and what is on the meeting agenda, or the authority to make promotions or job assignments (Pfeffer, 1981). Other examples of resources that actors might use to protect their interests include having access to (or control of) information or expertise, a network of trusted relationships, or the personal abilities of a convincing advocate (e.g., being well-spoken or a good writer) (Ball, 1987; Morgan, 1997; Pfeffer, 1981, 1992). Just as policy can create conflict by promoting or threatening actors' interests, policy can also increase or decrease actors' resources by giving or taking away authority or financial resources, or

by elevating certain types of expertise over others.¹¹ Political theories emphasize that actors' resources vary across meetings and other contexts. Like interests, an actor's resources are situation-specific (Malen, 2006; Pfeffer, 1981, 1992). For example, a district administrator might chair meetings among his or her top managers, a position that provides ample resources to decide what is on the agenda and who may participate, but the same district administrator may have far fewer resources at his or her disposal when invited to testify before the school board or the district's cabinet.

Resources matter because actors can marshal them to engage in different influence strategies. Like conflict, influence strategies exist on a continuum of overt to covert behavior (Pfeffer, 1981). Overt influence strategies include behavior such as lobbying, demonstrating, and negotiating; covert influence strategies include behavior such as defining problems, controlling information, avoidance behavior, and framing

¹¹ What about power? Power is a central concept in politics, but scholars disagree about its definition (Bell, Walker, & Willer, 2000; Dahl & Stinebrickner, 2003). Theorists variously view power as synonymous with influence (Pfiffner & Sherwood, 1960) as a special form of influence (Dahl & Stinebrickner, 2003), as the act of forcing others to do something against their interests (Lukes, 1974), as getting others do things they would not otherwise do (Dahl, 1957), and as being able to get what you want to fulfill your identify (March, 1994). For this study I assume Malen's (2006) straightforward definition of power as "the relative capacity of actors to exert influence on policy developments" (p. 87). Like Malen (2006) and Vigoda (2003), I view power as a social resource used in obtaining influence, which is a social process. The key question at issue becomes how actors draw on this social resource to exercise influence.

issues (Malen, 2006). For example, individuals or groups in the central office implementing comprehensive HR reform may attempt to influence each other overtly by promoting allies and removing critics in different groups or by dominating meeting agendas; or conversely, they may attempt to influence each other covertly by framing problems in HR in particular ways, selectively using information about the costs of certain actions, or by quietly delaying action in ways that slow implementation.

Another conceptual distinction among influence strategies is that influence strategies may be coalition-based or individual-based (Pfeffer, 1981). Coalition-based strategies focus on building support for an actor's preferred interests. These strategies may include building internal alliances or external constituencies; or they may involve mobilizing like-minded actors, or attempts to change the position of others through co-optation (e.g., by placing them on a committee or task force) (Pfeffer, 1981). These multi-actor strategies emphasize cooperation and coalition formation. Individual-based strategies, by contrast, have less to do with building support than acting alone to get one's way. Individual strategies may include, for example, selectively using information to favor one's position (Pfeffer, 1981) or taking action early or delaying action to influence others (Pfeffer, 1992). The core distinction between individual and group-

based strategies, however, is simply whether an actor attempts to influence the situation by acting alone or by acting with and through others.¹²

Studies of bureaucratic politics outside of education suggest that strategies, like interests and resources, can vary by position within the bureaucracy (Brower & Abolafia, 1997; O'Leary, 1994; Wilson, 1989). Brower and Abolafia (1997), for example, found evidence that people working at lower levels in bureaucracies used informal and improvisational political strategies that were largely covert (e.g., processing paperwork quickly without checking for accuracy) whereas higher-level actors used strategies such as controlling meeting agendas and co-optation more readily. This finding about differences in strategy by position resonates with the central office studies reviewed earlier (Coburn et al., 2008; Honig, 2006b). Strategies may also vary depending on the stage of the implementation process (Malen, 2006; Michaud, 2002). Malen (2006), for example, described how a district superintendent used one set of influence strategies during the adoption of a school reconstitution reform (e.g., restricting participation, using the language of *redesign* rather than *reconstitution*) and different influence strategies (e.g., rhetorical appeals) during the implementation process, in part because he was responding to resistance by teachers and the broader community. As with interests and resources, political theories take a contingency perspective on influence

¹² Thomas (1992) suggests that strategic choices about individual versus joint action may be based on rationale/instrumental reasoning but also normative reasoning about whose welfare and which time-frame matters. Neither strategy is inherently more powerful than the other, but rather is better or worse suited to the particulars of the situation.

strategies. As I argue in the next section, the significance and relevance of any of these factors and their interactions also depends on where they happen.

Context

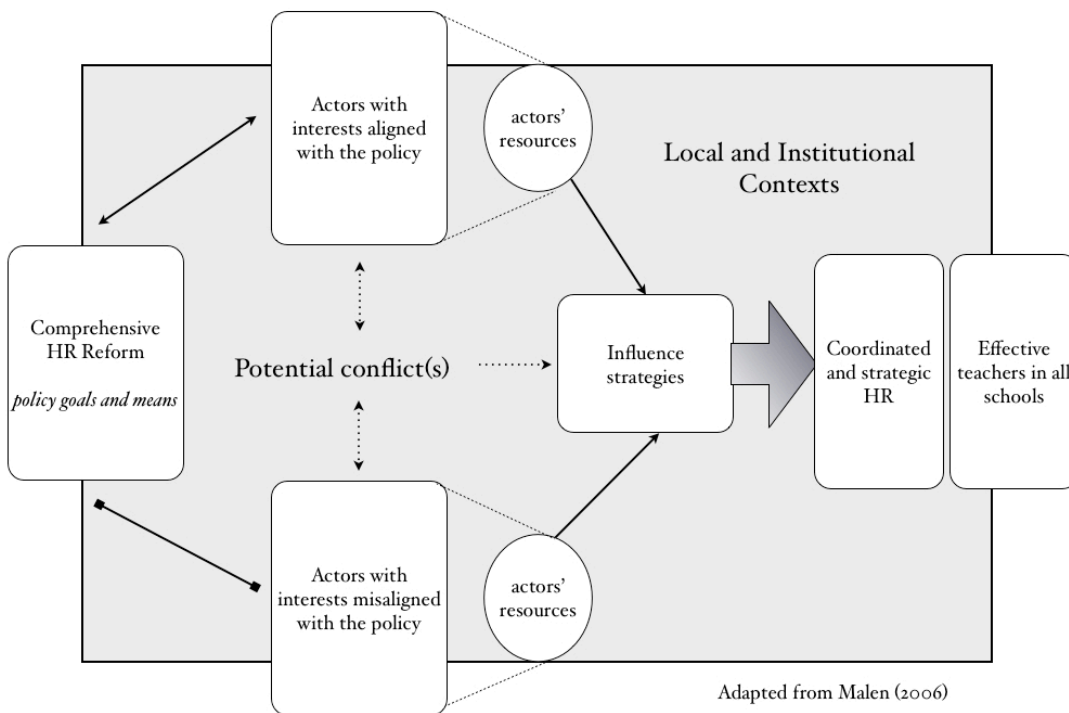
Political theories of implementation suggest that when actors in organizations use their resources to protect or promote their interests, the resulting processes are mediated by where events takes place, both with regards to particular settings of interaction as well as more general socio-cultural contexts (Malen, 2006). Local settings are rarely neutral; they affect who is allowed to participate, what topics may be discussed, what actions may be taken, and what resources are available and for whom. For example, settings such as staff meetings and committee meetings often have formal written agendas, attendee lists, and rules of order that structure how actors interact; less formal places like lunch rooms and hallways are more fluid and informal, but they too have norms of behavior and interaction that inform who participates and how. As Malen (2006) observes, different settings are “more or less open, accessible, and receptive to different players and their points of view.” (p. 86). A district administrator may, for example, find that actors in some meetings (e.g., district leadership meetings) are more receptive to ambitious ideas about organizational improvement than actors in other meetings (e.g., sub-unit staff meetings) -- or vice versa. Still other actors (e.g., mid-level managers) may have no access to district-level cabinet meetings through which to advocate for or against a particular position or program. The contexts where decisions and negotiations occur rarely offer an even playing field for all actors.

In addition to the way that local settings can influence which actors participate, what resources they have at their disposal, and the range of strategies they can use,

broader socio-cultural and institutional contexts also influence the interplay of actors, interests, resources, and strategies (Malen, 2006). As with local settings, these larger contexts are never neutral: institutional rules, norms, presumptions, and prejudices shape people's beliefs and actions in ways that may confer more authority or legitimacy upon certain actors or strategies than others. Malen and Ogawa's (1988) study of the micro-politics of site-based school councils in Utah, for example, suggested that norms of civility and a political culture rooted in the Mormon Church shaped how parents participated in the site-based councils. The broader expectations and preconceptions that shape how central office personnel interpret the world – e.g., how they view the central office's mission or the proper handling of conflict – also may filter how actors perceive their interests relative to a policy and how they interpret the policy's intentions. As noted earlier, the way that actors within central offices interpret comprehensive HR reform might be influenced by the extent to which they identify with norms of risk aversion or a means-oriented bureaucracy (Wilson, 1989).

Figure 2, based on Malen (2006), depicts a rough model of the micro-politics of implementation based on the discussion so far. The figure provides a simple picture of how actors, interests, resources, and influence strategies might interact to create, negotiate, avoid, or resolve conflict during implementation.

Figure 2. Actors, Interests, Resources, Influence Strategies, Context and the Implementation of Comprehensive HR Reform in the Central Office



The box on the far left of the figure represents comprehensive HR reform and its underlying premises about the goals of HR improvement and the means for achieving them. The next two boxes to the right present a stylized split between actors whose interests (ideological or material) are more or less aligned with the reform's premises. To the degree that these misalignments become salient during implementation, for example by expressing themselves during decisions about policy or practice or bubbling beneath the surface, they may result in overt or covert conflict between actors, shown in the middle space between the actors. The ways actors negotiate and resolve (or purposefully leave conflict unresolved) depends on how actors use their resources to

influence events to promote their interests, which ultimately shapes the degree to which the district implements a more coordinated and strategically aligned HR system, which, finally, on the far right side of the figure, improves teacher effectiveness. The figure also shows that these flows and interactions are colored by the local and institutional contexts where they take place, represented by the large shaded rectangle in the background.

Figure 2 shows the key concepts for political analysis, but it does not show how the components might interact in a patterned way that contributes to whether or not a central office ultimately transitions to a more coordinated and strategically aligned HR function. Malen (2006) and others (Bardach, 1979) extend the picture in Figure 2 by arguing that the interactions between actors, interests, resources, and influence strategies actually do occur in patterned ways overtime, and that political analysts can categorize these patterns into what Bardach (1979) famously called political games. Bardach's games metaphor draws attention to recognizable patterns made up of who is involved, what they are playing for (interests), and the resources and strategies they use to influence implementation outcomes (Bardach, 1979; Malen, 2006). For example, Bardach (1979) described tokenism as an implementation game involving implementers who make only token contributions toward a policy they disagree with while withholding meaningful contributions and resources. Malen (2006) described a policy dilution game involving actors undermining implementation through neglect, subversion, or resistance because the policy threatens their interests and resources. Conversely, Malen described a policy amplification game involving actors appropriating policies and adapting them to suit their own interests and resources. Mintzberg (1985)

identified no less than thirteen political games that characterized patterns of organizational politics, ranging from the empire building game, in which line managers increased their power by co-opting subordinates, to the expertise game, in which players built power by exploiting, feigning, or controlling technical skills and knowledge. The metaphor of the political game offers a way to characterize a pattern of interaction between actors, interests, resources, and strategies that may carry across cases and follow a familiar motif. To identify political patterns and their consequences, researchers must examine the ingredients in Figure 2 as they interact over time, tracing the interactions between policy premises, interests, resources, and strategies, and the contexts where they occur, looking for how interactions at one point in time influence interactions later and, ultimately, examining how these dynamics impact whether the central office makes fundamental shifts in its HR system.

Table 2 summarizes how the conceptualization of implementation discussed in this chapter and shown in Figure 2 helps elaborate the study's research questions. In Chapter Four, I describe the research design I used to answer them.

Table 2. Research Questions Elaborated

<i>Research question</i>	<i>Sub-questions from conceptual framework</i>
What, if any, are the main sources of conflict during the implementation of comprehensive HR reform in the central office?	<i>Who are the actors most directly involved in implementing comprehensive HR reform and what are their interests relative to the reform and each other? How are interests shaped by context?</i>
To what extent and in what ways do implementers negotiate and resolve conflicts during implementation?	<i>What resources and strategies do actors use to influence the process and outcomes associated with comprehensive HR reform? How are resources and strategies shaped by context?</i>
How does intra-organizational conflict and its negotiation during implementation shape what does (and does not) get implemented in comprehensive HR reform?	<i>What political games or patterns help explain how politics influenced implementation over time?</i>

Chapter 4: Research Design and Methodology

In this chapter I describe the research design and methodology I used to examine why, if at all, conflicts emerge during the implementation of comprehensive HR reform, how implementers negotiate and resolve conflicts (or fail to resolve them), and how the resulting dynamics shape implementation. In the last chapter I used political theories of implementation to elaborate the study's research questions into three analytical sub-questions about the implementation of comprehensive HR reform (Table 2): Who are the actors involved in HR reform and what are their interests relative to each other, and how are interests shaped by context? What resources and strategies do actors use to influence implementation to promote and protect their interests, and how are resources and strategies shaped by context? And how does the interaction of actors, interests, resources, and strategies influence implementation over time? In the sections that follow I describe my research approach, sample, data collection, data analysis, and study limitations.

Rationale for Qualitative Research

To understand the micro-politics of implementing HR reform in central offices I designed the study as a qualitative inquiry. Qualitative inquiry is concerned with investigating experiences and understandings as they naturally unfold in real-world contexts (Erickson, 1986; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002); it involves collecting open-ended information about the complexities of the socio-cultural world as they are experienced and understood by study participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007); it seeks insight and illumination, rather than empirical generalization or theory testing (Maxwell, 1996; Patton, 2002). All of these characteristics make qualitative inquiry

useful for understanding the types of real-world, political processes suggested by the study's questions and conceptualization.¹³

Within the qualitative tradition, I used a single-case study approach (Yin, 2003). Case study designs focus on the intense description of a bounded phenomenon or particular situation in its real-life context. The nature of case study designs allowed for the depth of observation and analysis I needed to capture the subtle and complex social processes at the heart of this study (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2003, 2006). The longitudinal nature of my case, which I describe later, allowed me to empirically capture the patterns of events and interactions between actors as they evolved over time. If I had examined the case at only one point in time, I easily could have missed how events at one point in time influenced later events or I could have obtained a misleading picture of how implementation was proceeding (e.g., if I sampled only at the beginning of implementation, I might have developed a more optimistic picture of implementation than might be warranted six months later).

¹³ Patton (2002) described different theoretical perspectives within the qualitative tradition, ranging from ethnography to constructivism. My theoretical stance is grounded in post-positivism or what Patton calls *reality-oriented* approaches. This view recognizes that knowledge is socially constructed and meaning-making places a central role in social life but nevertheless believes in seeking evidence about observable patterns that exist in the "real world."

The Case of YSD

Consistent with case study designs, I selected my case to provide an information-rich example aimed at in-depth understanding, rather than empirical generalization (Patton, 2002). The school district I selected for the study was a mid-sized urban school district, which I call Yorke School District (YSD). At the start of the study period, YSD was in the midst of launching an ambitious HR reform, which I call the HR reform project (HRRP). The HRRP echoed the main themes of comprehensive HR reform: it called on YSD to create a more coordinated and strategically aligned HR system. The HRRP was a cabinet-level reform initiative in YSD, so it provided a good opportunity to observe the implementation of a comprehensive HR reform that had the weight of the district's senior leadership behind it.

In addition to being on the cusp of implementing the HRRP, other aspects of YSD made it a strategic site for studying the implementation of comprehensive HR reform. YSD's central office was a large bureaucracy with multiple departments and sub-units that employed hundreds of people, like central offices in other urban districts. As I describe in the next chapter, the HRRP called for increased departmental coordination within this complex organizational structure, a policy demand that prior research suggests may set the stage for intra-organizational struggle (Honig, 2009; Pfeffer, 1981). YSD also faced severe budget constraints during the study period. Tight budgets meant that the HRRP would play out in an environment of scarce resources, where conflict might be more likely to arise than when ample resources are available since some actors' gains might be other actors' losses (Pfeffer, 1981). Finally, I had access to YSD that

allowed me to conduct the kind of extended fieldwork demanded by the study's questions.

Within YSD, my core sample of participants were central office staff in the HR department, including central office administrators and central office managers. Because I interviewed participants with an assurance of confidentiality, I identify quoted sources with broad generic titles, such as "central office manager" or "central office administrator," rather than by name or specific role. My core observational sample included regular meetings during which central office administrators and managers discussed an array of issues related to their work and HR improvement, and a series of special HRRP work team meetings where central office administrators and managers grappled with how to translate YSD's plans for improving HR into reality. I describe the HRRP's design features and the details of these meetings in detail in the next chapter.

Data Collection

I collected data from three sources: observations, interviews, and documents. I collected observational data from first-hand observations of formal meetings in YSD's HR Department. From October 2011 to June 2012 I observed 29 formal meetings total in the HR department, including both regular departmental meetings and HRRP work team meetings, for a total of 45.5 hours of observation (Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of Meeting Observations

<i>Meeting Activity</i>	<i>Hours of Observation</i>
Regular Meetings	19
HRRP Work Team Meetings	25
Board Oversight Hearing	1.5
<i>Total</i>	45.5

I observed 15 regular leadership meetings involving department administrators and managers. These regular meetings lasted between 60 and 90 minutes each, for a total of approximately 19 hours of observation. During the regular meetings the HR department administrator and his managers discussed various aspects of their work, including sub-unit reports as well as various improvement projects. I also observed 14 work team meetings specifically associated with the HRRP, as well as other HRRP related meetings. These HRRP meetings lasted between 90 and 120 minutes each for a total of approximately 25 hours of observation. During the HRRP meetings central office staff planned various aspects of the HRRP implementation. I also observed a school board oversight hearing about YSD's HR department that happened about two-thirds of the way through the study.

My approach to the meeting observations was to "capture the chronological stream of events, actions, and interactions" as best as I could (Barley, 1990, p. 232). My observations focused on gathering low-inference information via verbatim notes that I typed in real-time while I observed the meetings. Immediately following each meeting

observation I reviewed my observation notes to produce a clean transcript of the meeting (the observations yielded 593 pages of transcripts). I needed to capture verbatim notes because I could only understand the political dynamics of the case by examining patterns in the notes over time; the significance of conversations, debates, and actions became more meaningful only when I considered them overtime in the context of data on the on-going implementation of the reform (Honig & Copland, 2009). By approaching the observations in this way I maximized the chance that I would capture potentially relevant information without filtering it prematurely.

In addition to my observations of formal meetings I had a range of informal conversations with district staff before and after meetings throughout the study period and I supplemented my meeting observations with formal, semi-structured interviews with central office staff. The formal interviews occurred between December 2011 and August 2012. In total, I conducted 18 interviews with 2 central office administrators, 9 central office managers, and 2 external partners, interviewing some participants up to 3 times. All of my interview subjects were participants in the meetings I observed. I focused my interviews on director-level administrators and mid-level managers because I expected that they would act as the primary on-the-ground leaders of the HRRP's implementation, and because I wanted to ask them about how they were experiencing the meetings I was observing. Unfortunately, I was never able to conduct an in-person interview with the main department administrator in HR. I was, however, able to observe the department administrator at work nearly every week in meetings and during the school board oversight hearing. As I would later suspect, and as the findings of the case suggest, my poor luck in arranging a meeting with the department administrator

about the HRRP may have been a signal about the broader political dynamics of the reform that I had come to study.

When I interviewed participants near the beginning of the HRRP's implementation, I asked them about the district's current HR system, including its perceived strengths and weaknesses, and what they thought the HRRP was trying to accomplish and why. To ward off any reactivity and avoid having the study become a self-fulfilling prophecy in which micro-politics became a dominant theme, I always presented my study to participants as a project aimed at understanding the implementation of complex HR reforms in central offices. In subsequent interviews, I revisited staff perceptions about the goals of the HRRP and its implementation and asked them for their perspectives on developments that occurred during the study. In these later interviews, as I started to recognize themes about the HRRP's implementation and how people were responding to the reform, I tried to adopt a devil's advocate role by providing participants opportunities to agree with interpretations that ran counter to the themes I thought I was hearing from others in the department. For example, near the end of the study when I began to conclude that actors supported certain interpretations of HR improvement, I created index cards representing various improvement initiatives in the department and index cards representing various actors in the department and talked with interview participants about which actors I might associate with the different initiatives (and why). The interviews ranged from 60 minutes to 90 minutes each. I audio recorded, transcribed, and cleaned all of the interviews to produce written data records for every interview (the interviews yielded 328 pages of transcripts).

Throughout the study I also collected documents about the district's HR department and the HRRP. The documents included HRRP-related policy documents and historical accounts of the performance of the HR department in YSD. I also collected information on the central office's formal organizational structures (units/sub-units and personnel) and financial and staffing records for YSD's central office from the State Department of Education. In total I collected over 90 documents.

Together, my three sources of data (observations, interviews, and documents) provided a fuller account of the phenomenon being studied than one type of data alone (Mason, 1996). My extended engagement with the research site also provided on-going opportunities to search for instances that challenged my expectations about emergent findings (Patton, 2002). I kept all of the data records in a case study database so I could carefully trace and retrieve the chain of evidence leading to my conclusions (Yin, 2003). As I describe in the section on data analysis, my database also included memos and other writing I used in my analysis. On balance, my data collection and design allowed for a rich description of the context so that readers can hopefully judge the relevance of the study to other contexts, or what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call transferability.

Data Analysis

My data collection activities yielded a large amount of data for the study: hundreds of pages of observation notes, interview transcripts, and documents. To mitigate the risk of being overwhelmed by the data, I started data analysis while I was collecting data (Merriam, 2009), looking for evidence on the HRRP's demands on HR, who the key actors were, and how they were responding to the reform. Early on I created a matrix of key actors in the HR department and their reactions to the HRRP.

This matrix provided an important backdrop for the study that I used to place additional data and ideas on how the actors were responding to the reform as implementation unfolded.

Once I had clean transcripts of the meeting observations, interviews, and documents, I used Dedoose, a web-based qualitative data analysis application, to code all of the data in multiple phases. I began by coding the data using a set of low-inference codes associated with different aspects of the HRRP that I had identified during data collection. As I describe in the next chapter, the components of the HRRP included the ambitious transformation of HR under the HRRP as well as more incremental improvements in HR; I also coded instances when HR staff spoke about non-HRRP efforts to improve the HR department. Next, I excerpted the data by these different improvement components and applied a set of codes derived in part from my conceptual framework and in part from my inductive analysis of the data. For example, during my on-going collection and analysis of the data I started to associate actors' interests regarding the HRRP with how they viewed the goals and means of HR improvement. So I coded the improvement-component data into smaller chunks using the codes "goals" and "means." As my analysis proceeded I added additional sub-codes, such as "conflict/tension"; "resources/power"; "influence strategy"; and "context." Next I created matrices that crossed the HR improvement projects by this second round of codes and inductively developed a third round of sub-codes. These codes, shown here in parenthesis, included: goals (teaching improvement, compliance), means (collaboration, problem solving, procedures, standardization), conflict/tension (avoiding, fear of job loss, compromise, competition), resources/power (authority; expertise), influence

strategies (tokenism, persuasion), and context (leadership uncertainty; prior reforms; background). I then applied these sub-codes to the data.

As I was coding, I wrote memos to develop claims about the sources of conflict in the case and how conflict was shaping implementation (Emerson et al., 1995; Wolcott, 2009). These memos were a critical part of the analysis process, since I needed to search across the data for patterns to explain the implementation outcomes I observed at the end of the case. I used these memos to create another round of matrices to connect evidence from the coded data back to my emerging claims. Together these final-stage memos and matrices formed the basis for my claims. They allowed me to trace my claims back to the data using the matrices that displayed the data fragments by codes and source, forming a chain of evidence between the data and my study conclusions (Yin, 2003).

Limitations

The study has several limitations, some of which stem from the nature of qualitative inquiry. Like all qualitative studies the analysis in this study relied on researcher subjectivity and so the study is limited by my personal bias and perceptions. For example, the fact that I have personal experience with school district hiring systems as a former teacher and that I have prior experience, through a different research project, observing some central office personnel in YSD may have influenced my analysis. I attempted to account for these limitations in several ways. For example, I clearly acknowledged my understanding of the problem of implementing HR reform in the preceding chapters of the study. I asked colleagues and advisors to review my coding schemes and initial findings. To reduce bias during data analysis, I removed all

participant names from the data so that I was less likely to associate the data with any particular individual.

Other limitations stem from the case in question. Clearly the events that unfolded in YSD during the study were specific to the district and may be unlike the implementation of comprehensive HR reform in other districts. Perhaps most importantly, YSD experienced leadership turnover during the study that had important consequences for how the micro-political dynamics of implementation shaped the fate of the HRRP. Readers may judge for themselves whether YSD's experience seem relevant or idiosyncratic. But given that leadership turnover and instability is endemic in urban school districts, and that prior studies suggest leadership turnover has important implications for implementation outcomes, the case provides a strategic opportunity to not only reaffirm the importance of leadership turnover but also to show how leadership turnover contributes to implementation failure by shifting power relations and political dynamics within the central office.

Summary

My interest in understanding the micro-politics of implementing comprehensive HR reform led me to conceive of my study as a qualitative inquiry. I conducted a longitudinal, single-case design to examine why, if at all, conflicts emerge during the implementation of comprehensive HR reform, how implementers negotiate and resolve those conflicts (or fail to resolve them), and how the resulting dynamics shape implementation. The core participants included a purposive sample of central office administrators and managers in a school district that was actively engaged in implementing comprehensive HR reform. I collected data from three sources -- meeting

observations, interviews, and documents -- and analyzed the data using concepts from my conceptual framework and the inductive analysis of the case. I used various strategies to increase the credibility of the account, including triangulating data sources, inspecting all parts of the data (comprehensive data treatment), and looking for deviant cases (Silverman, 2001). In the following four chapters I present the main findings of the study, beginning with an overview of the HRRP's implementation outcomes in Chapter Five.

Chapter 5: “This is Not an Optimistic Story”¹⁴

This chapter provides an overview of the HRRP’s design and what happened during its implementation. What follows provides a basic orientation to YSD, the HRRP, and the district’s other HR improvement efforts. In many ways, it is an abbreviated version of the types of descriptions often found in the HR case studies I reviewed in Chapter Two. In addition to providing a basic orientation to the case, this account provides a point of comparison with what a micro-political perspective on the HRRP implementation reveals, the results of which are presented in subsequent chapters. The account draws on both YSD’s plan for the HRRP as described in a district design document as well as implementation events that would have been evident to most outside observers.

HRRP Goals and Design

Consistent with leaders of other comprehensive HR reform efforts, district leaders in YSD framed the HRRP initiative as an effort to better ensure that all students had effective teachers. As the HRRP design document said,

[Yorke School District]...aims to help all students learn at high levels. Our strategy for getting there is simple: Recruit, select, continuously develop, and retain the highest quality teachers -- teachers who support each individual student in reaching

¹⁴ The quote in the chapter’s comes from the introduction to Bardach’s (1977) classic work, *The Implementation Game*, in which he argues that even the “most robust policy...will tend to go awry” during implementation (p. 5).

and exceeding challenging learning standards. *Actually getting there, however, will take major changes in how we work.* (Identifying Document, 2011, p. 1, emphasis added).

YSD's vision for the HRRP reflected the general themes of comprehensive HR reform: it called on YSD to build a coordinated and strategically aligned HR system to improve the effectiveness of its teacher workforce and increase the quality of teaching and learning district-wide. As the next section shows, like many school districts, YSD faced a daunting gap between the HRRP's ambitious vision for HR and its current HR department.

The Shortcomings of Status Quo HR in YSD

Using terms that resonated with common critiques of school district HR, YSD's leaders justified the HRRP in part by pointing out the failings of the district's current HR system. In the HRRP plan, the leaders wrote,

Our [HR] system has evolved mainly to monitor compliance, process transactions, and staff schools rather than provide strategic supports and services to principals and teachers. The work of the human resource system is currently spread across many staff in multiple units who are not well coordinated (Identifying Document, 2011, p. 1).

The current HR system's focus on compliance and organizational fragmentation meant that YSD's central office often provided principals with inconsistent and low

quality assistance when it came to staffing their schools. Again, the HRRP plan described the current system's shortcomings,

Principals will tell you that the level of service that they receive from the HR Department depends on which staff member they are dealing with. Over the years, some principals have developed "workarounds" to get their human resource needs met...many staff throughout the district experience confusion regarding HR policies and procedures as well as what roles principals, central office staff HR staff, and central office staff outside HR play in different circumstances (Identifying Document, 2011, p. 2)

The problems described in this quote were not new. A few years earlier, a review of YSD's HR department had documented a long list of managerial and operational problems. The prior review found that YSD's HR department lacked a system to report basic information, such as job vacancy numbers, turnover rates, numbers of applicants, and processing times for HR transactions, such as job offers. This lack of basic information about vacancies, applicants, and hiring processes made it impossible for the district to forecast its hiring needs or identify individual schools that had particular staffing problems (e.g., those with high turnover rates). Without reliable systems to track data on teachers, the district also struggled to stay compliant with the High Qualified Teacher provisions of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which required all teachers to have a college degree, full state teacher certification, and

knowledge in the subject they were teaching. The prior review also found that YSD had no strategic plan or direction for HR and no standards for hiring new teachers.

HRRP's Vision for Improving HR

The HRRP proposed to address the shortcomings of YSD's status quo HR system by calling for an entirely new HR support system for schools, one that would provide principals with strategic and differentiated support to staff their schools. The HRRP's main vehicle for providing strategic support to principals on staffing was a new central office position called the HR case manager.¹⁵ According to the HRRP design team's plan, the HR case manager's job was to "advise and assist...[principals]...with all aspects of recruitment, selection, and retention/discharge processes with the ultimate goal of helping to dramatically improve the quality of classroom teaching" (Identifying Document, 2011 p. 5).

Unlike the status quo HR system, which provided principals with administrative support remotely from the central office, the heart of the HR case manager's job was to develop an on-going, collaborative relationship with principals through school visits. The HRRP design team expected the HR case manager to provide one-on-one counsel and data to principals and help principals effectively develop and implement plans to attract and retain teachers to carry out their school's particular strategy for improvement. The HR case manager position envisioned HR providing pro-active,

¹⁵ The HR case manager was similar to new HR positions described in Chapter Two, which districts variously call *HR generalists*, *HR partners*, and *HR consultants*.

strategic consultation on hiring and talent development, rather than administrative support on staffing process and procedures.

In addition to calling for the new HR case manager function, the HRRP plan called for changes in how the rest of the HR department and the central office organized itself to support hiring and staffing in schools. These changes sought to improve both the quality and strategic alignment of HR services in YSD. To improve the quality of HR services, the HRRP called on YSD to automate routine transactions that occupied significant staff time under the current system. Under the current HR system, transactions such as leave requests or notifications to teachers about expiring certification were labor intensive and time consuming. The HRRP design sought to automate these and other routine HR transactions in order to free up resources for HR staff to engage in strategic HR work, such as forecasting vacancies and developing relationships with high quality teacher preparation programs.

The HRRP called for several changes to increase strategic alignment of HR within the district. First, the HRRP called on YSD to align its HR policies and procedures to a common definition of high-quality teaching that the district had recently committed to (Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching). Second, to further support the coordination of HR support services, the HRRP called on YSD to appoint a HRRP project manager to coordinate the HRRP activities across units and departments within the central office. The project manager would be charged with addressing cross-functional issues, such as coordinating changes in the HR department with changes in YSD's technology department (whose expertise was implicated in the automation of services) or its curriculum and instruction department (whose expertise was implicated

in the alignment of HR services with the teaching framework). The project manager's coordinating role was an important position given that the HRRP plan said that the HRRP would,

...involve building out core services that contribute to...results and proceed as part of a comprehensive effort involving the HR Department plus principals,...[Curriculum and Instruction]...and others involved in the human resources system (Identifying Document, 2011, p. 3).

Finally, the HRRP called on YSD to build and coordinate new analytical capacity within the central office that would collect and use data to drive the continuous improvement of YSD's new HR system. This analytical function would help the system set performance targets and also direct supports for improving performance. As with the HRRP's other demands for coordination, this analytical function would require cross-functional collaboration between HR support services, the district's research department, and its technology department.

All of these design features meant that the HRRP was a radical departure from the status quo. The reform called for replacing a confusing HR system that provided low quality services focused on procedures and compliance with a system that would be more efficient and that would focus relentlessly on improving teacher and principal effectiveness. The initiative meant that HR would have to stop doing work that it had done for decades, and start doing something new. YSD would have to rebuild its HR system from the ground up. Echoing the comparisons in Table 1 shown in the

introductory chapter, Table 4 contrasts the way the HRRP design team characterized the status quo HR system and the HRRP vision for HR in its original plan.

Table 4. Status Quo Compared to the HRRP

<i>Status Quo HR</i>	<i>HRRP HR</i>
Monitors compliance, processes transactions	Provides strategic supports and services to principals and teachers
Staffs schools	Places the best talent in every classroom
Spreads work across multiple sub-units	Coordinates work in cross-departmental system
Ignores teaching and learning agenda	Supports and is driven by teaching and learning agenda

The HRRP design team recognized that implementing this far-reaching vision would require several critical supports. To support implementation, the design team called on YSD to make the HRRP a cabinet-level initiative and place it under the purview of a single high-level district administrator, rather than housing it within the HR department. The HRRP design team also stressed that the HRRP needed to prioritize the engagement of HR staff during implementation and provide them with professional development. The prioritization of engagement and professional development in the HRRP vision was in part a response to the perception that prior central office reforms in YSD had created conflict and chaos because they were top-down and ignored investments in staff capacity.

To move the ambitious vision in the HRRP forward, the district's design team called on the district to establish several central office work teams within the HR

department that would simultaneously engage HR staff in the reform and develop plans for translating the HRRP vision into reality. These HRRP work teams would work with external partners from a local university to develop pieces of the HRRP vision, including building out a model of the HR case manager position and assessing which HR transactions were good candidates for automation.

A Second Track of HRRP

In addition to presenting an ambitious vision for YSD's new HR system, the HRRP design team recognized that the district faced day-to-day problems in HR that required immediate attention. For example, the HR department lacked a file room, which made it difficult to track or find information about employees or applicants; HR also had no system for ensuring that all district employees (not just teachers) were fingerprinted and passed background checks. To address such pressing problems, the HRRP design team called for a second track of HR improvement. This second track of the HRRP would focus on selectively strengthening existing HR functions. To move this track forward, the design team called on the HR department administrator to make near-term improvements on compliance issues (e.g., systematizing fingerprinting) and improve HR's responsiveness to staff and school needs (e.g., rationalizing the file room). This second track of HR reform would be folded into the on-going work of the department leaders with no additional funding; the first track of HR reform was supported by a small seed grant from local funders that paid for the external partners' participation and consultation. The initiative had no other dedicated funding.

With this two-track approach, the HRRP launched two streams of HR reform in YSD, one stream aimed at fundamentally transforming the district's HR function into a

coordinated and strategically aligned system, and the other stream aimed at cleaning up and rationalizing current HR processes that were messy and ad hoc. Once I started the study, I soon learned that the two-tracks of the HRRP were not the only HR improvement initiatives in the district. Even as the HRRP design team was planning to radically transform the district's HR function through the HRRP, YSD was, like many districts across the country, already one year into an ambitious initiative to change how it evaluated and paid its teachers.

Track 3: Evaluation and Pay Reforms

Just prior to the start of the HRRP, YSD secured a large grant to develop and implement an ambitious set of evaluation and pay policies designed to improve teacher and principal effectiveness district-wide. The district had negotiated the policies at the heart of the grant in a recent collective bargaining agreement with its teachers union. The collective bargaining agreement reflected emerging policy trends in teacher evaluation design that seek to differentiate teacher performance in ways rarely seen in traditional evaluation systems. For example, the newly negotiated evaluation system included a 4-tiered evaluation scale (rather than the typical satisfactory/unsatisfactory rating), multiple measures of teacher performance (rather than relying only on principal ratings alone), career opportunities and financial rewards for high performers (rather rewards only for experience and degrees), and a common definition of high quality teaching (the teaching framework mentioned earlier).

Like the HRRP, the evaluation and pay reforms had major implications for YSD's HR Department. In the grant proposal, YSD framed the new evaluation and pay policies as part of a broader "HR Theory of Action" that included "better interview and hiring

practices, strategic movement of existing high quality talent, and expedited attrition” and “cross-functional teaming and coordination” inside of the central office (Identifying Document 2010, p. 30). As one central office administrator explained during an interview, the grant had implications far beyond evaluation and pay policy,

[The evaluation and pay reform] was meant to be a complete redesign of human resources around a human capital development strategy...[it] was all about talent management and succession planning, developing pipelines, recruiting very high quality teachers and principal into our lowest performing schools...making sure people are eligible for career ladders or mentor principals...[it was] a human resources agenda.

Unlike the HRRP, the evaluation and pay reform did not have an explicit link to cabinet-level leadership in YSD. Instead, the grant that funded the reforms was managed from within the HR department. According to the grant proposal, the HR department administrator was to oversee all of the “processes and programs that drive the attraction, retention, and development of high potential talent” and provide “human capital management and expertise in human resources throughout the district” (Identifying Document 2010, p. 61).

Table 5 summarizes the different streams of HR reform that existed in YSD during the year of the study: the HRRP’s two tracks of HR reform -- what I call the transformation track (1) and the incremental track (2) -- as well as the evaluation and pay reforms (3). The table shows that the first HRRP track (1) and the evaluation and

pay reforms (3) had several similarities. On paper, the transformation track of the HRRP and the evaluation and pay reforms shared an overarching goal of improving teacher effectiveness across the district. These two reforms planned to achieve this goal by influencing a range of actors within the district, including staff in HR but also other central office personnel and school-level personnel. Both the transformation stream of the HRRP and the evaluation and pay reform relied on systems change and capacity building efforts to achieve their goals (the evaluation and pay reform also used incentives to shape the behavior of school-level personnel; the HRRP was agnostic about pay incentives for educators). By contrast, the incremental track's (2) goal was mostly about process improvements that targeted staff within the HR department; the incremental track of the HRRP relied on management and process redesign to achieve its goals, not *system* redesign.

Table 5. Three Tracks of HR Reform¹⁶

	<i>Track 1 (HRRP): Transformational change led by cabinet-level administrator</i>	<i>Track 2 (HRRP): Incremental change led by HR department administrator</i>	<i>Track 3: Evaluation and pay reform led by administrator working within HR</i>
<i>Goals</i>	Ensure all students have highly effective teachers and leaders	Improve existing HR services	Ensure all students have highly effective teachers and leaders
<i>Targets</i>	Actors throughout the central office, school principals and teachers	Staff in the HR Department	Actors throughout the central office, school principals and teachers
<i>Tools</i>	Capacity building, major systems change	Process redesign	Capacity building; major systems change; incentives

The Collapse of the HRRP

Beginning in the fall of 2011, I observed and interviewed central office administrators and managers as they worked to improve YSD's HR department under the streams of work summarized in Table 5. The leaders in charge of these various streams of HR reform were relatively new to their positions. The superintendent had promoted the cabinet-level leader overseeing Track 1 of the HRRP six months prior to

¹⁶ The framework for this table draws on Honig (2006), who identified three dimensions of policy - goals, targets, and tools – as critical factors in shaping implementation dynamics.

the start of the study. The HR department administrator, who oversaw Track 2 of the HRRP, had also been in his position less than a year. The district administrator in charge of (Track 3) had been in her position less than a month when the study started. Between fall 2011 and the summer of 2012 the following events occurred culminating in the collapse of the HRRP:

-In November, the HR department administrator started holding weekly meetings with his sub-unit managers (e.g., employment services; compensation and benefits; recruitment) to discuss their on-going work and to set an agenda for Track 2 improvements in HR.

-In December the superintendent announced that she would leave YSD at the end of the school year but indicated that the HRRP would continue to be a top priority for the district.

-In January, the cabinet-level administrator in charge of the HRRP, who I call the HRRP director, held an all-staff meeting with HR staff to launch the implementation phase of the HRRP. During the meeting the district's external partner explained how the HRRP work teams would develop different parts of the HRRP vision, including the HR case manager position and the automation of HR services.

-From January to March, the external partner facilitated a work team made up of central office administrators and

managers to further define the HR case manager's role and write a job description for the position. By March, the work team successfully completed the case manager job description and started talking about a plan for rolling out the new position.

-In March, external partners began facilitating an HRRP work team to discuss the automation of HR services. The automation work team eventually launched two other HRRP work teams that focused on automating particular HR services (e.g., on-boarding).

-Also in the spring, the school board called the HR department administrator to testify about the HR department's improvement efforts during an oversight hearing. For the first time in years, the school board congratulated the HR department on its improvement and progress.

-In April, the superintendent and the HRRP director left the district. As they departed, the HR department administrator was promoted from a director-level position to assistant superintendent of HR.

-In April the district hired a new superintendent who made no immediate staffing changes in the central office.

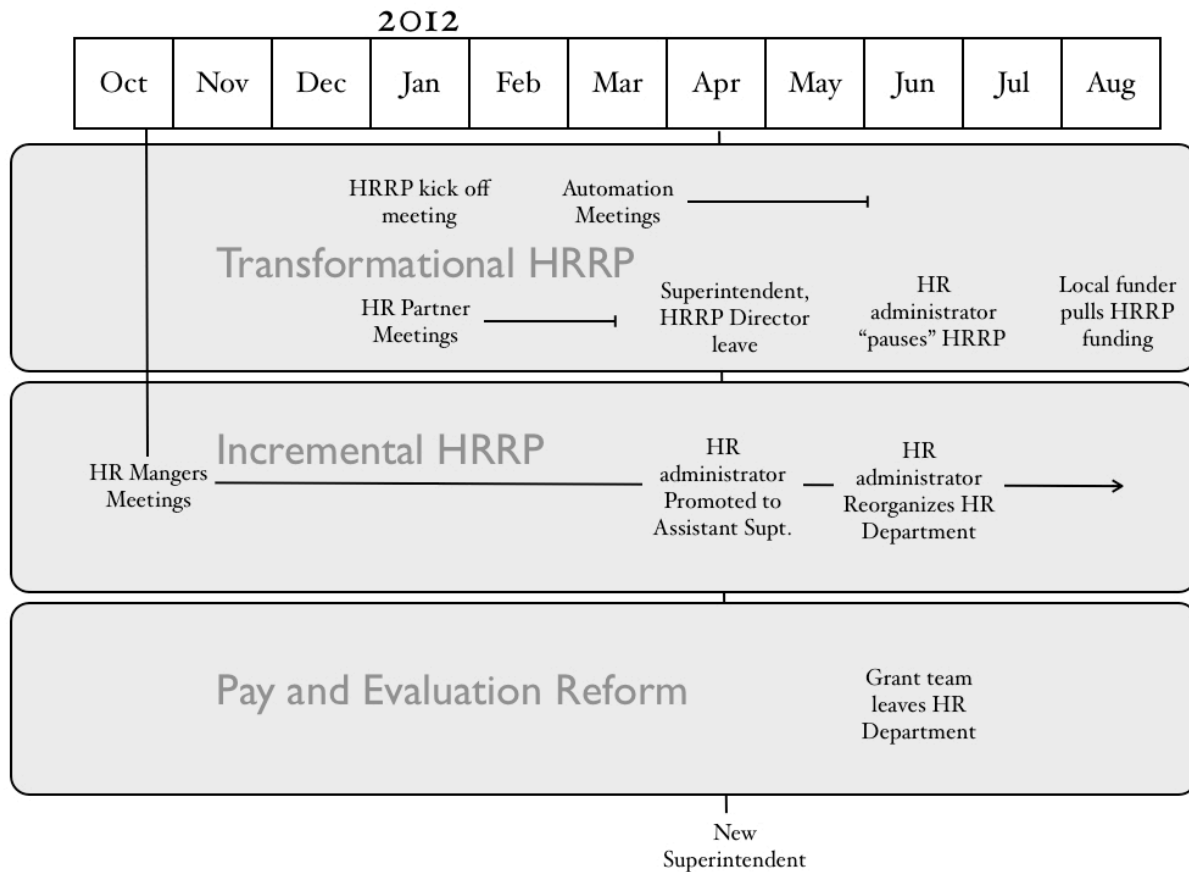
-In June, the HR department administrator announced that he was pausing the Track 1 HRRP work and would be reorganizing the HR department according to his own plan that was designed to improve operations oversight.

-In June, the district administrator in charge of the evaluation and pay reform moved her funding and staff out of the HR department and into the district's curriculum and instruction department.

-In August, the HRRP's funder pulled the small seed grant that funded the initiative. For all intents and purposes, comprehensive HR reform in YSD had collapsed.

Figure 3 shows these events on a timeline sorted into the three different tracks of HR improvement. The grey band at the top of the figure shows events associated with the implementation of Track 1 of the HRRP, from the kick off meeting to the eventual collapse of the reform. The second band shows the regular HR meetings, the HR department administrator's promotion, and the reorganization of the department. The third band shows the pay and evaluation team leaving the HR department in June, but does not include any developments in the months leading up to the departure. The arrival of the new superintendent in April is shown at the bottom of the figure.

Figure 3. HRRP Timeline October 2011 to August 2012



By the summer of 2012, comprehensive HR reform had lost traction inside of YSD’s HR department. The HRRP’s ambitious, transformational Track 1 reforms had essentially ended. The staff and some of the funding from the evaluation and pay reform had moved to another department. The HR department was under the leadership of an administrator who was primarily focused on improving the day-to-day operations of the department, priorities that were far from the ambitious visions of the HRRP design team and the evaluation and pay reform.

Figure 3 roughly shows what happened in YSD but it does not explain why events happened the way they did or clarify which events defined the HRRP's implementation. Why did comprehensive HR reform in YSD fail? Figure 3 implies the importance of leadership turnover but the account so far does not suggest how leadership turnover was important. To answer these and other questions about why the HRRP failed, the next three chapters analyze what happened in YSD's central office from a micro-political lens, exploring the conflicts embedded HRRP's implementation, the way people negotiated and resolved those conflicts, and how events were shaped by the broader context where they happened.

As I argue in the next three chapters, several dimensions of the micro-politics of implementation explain why the HRRP's implementation in YSD ended the way it did. Chapter Six focuses on actors and interests and shows that the main sources of conflict between actors during the implementation were differing ideas about the goals and means of HR improvement. I call these competing ideas *logics of HR improvement* (Bacharach & Mundell, 1993) and suggest that the underlying conflicts during the implementation of the HRRP were due in large part to confusion and disagreements about what the district's goals for improving HR were and disagreements about the way the district should accomplish them.

Chapter Seven looks more closely at how these different views of HR improvement were deeply rooted in particular contexts, both organizational and personal. In particular, some HR staff appeared to interpret their interests relative to HR improvement in light of their experiences with prior central office reforms in YSD. Staff also interpreted HR improvement and the HRRP in light of their prior professional

backgrounds. These historical and professional contexts reveal some of the underlying sources of the divergent interests at the heart of the case and resonate with the broader literature reviewed in Chapter Two on the importance of conflicts over meaning, beliefs, ideas, and values.

The main implementation outcome of the case – the failure of the HRRP -- is explained in Chapter Eight. The chapter shows how, at first, conflict over HR improvement remained beneath the surface during implementation, allowing the HRRP implementation to proceed despite the opposition of the HR department administrator. This pattern of latent conflict was a product of the relative balance of power that existed between the advocates and opponents of the HRRP, the passive influence strategies that actors on both sides used to promote and protect their preferred approach to HR improvement, and the leadership context in YSD. Eventually a key change in the implementation context -- the departure of two senior leaders in YSD -- upset the balance of power in the central office and punctuated the latent conflict between the two ideas about HR improvement. Crucially, how actors inside of the central office used their resources and influence strategies to react to this punctuation hastened the HRRP's failure: opponents of the reform responded by exercising their growing authority inside of the central office while advocates continued to rely on passive influence strategies. Power won out over persuasion, and the reform collapsed.

In the end, the story of the HRRP's implementation reinforces long-standing advice about the importance of maintaining leadership stability during far-reaching change initiatives. But it also suggests that reformers cannot ignore the need to build political support during implementation. More broadly, it reveals a pattern of micro-

politics that can undermine ambitious reforms efforts: a long period of latent organizational conflict during which reforms can seemingly make headway, followed by a short period of overt conflict and power plays that favor those with authority.

Although there is clearly a point at which ambitious reforms can produce too much conflict, reformers who shy away from conflict may ultimately find that their preferred policies struggling to survive.

Chapter 6: Actors, Interests, and Competing Logics of HR Improvement

This chapter examines the main actors in YSD's central office and their interests relative to each other and the reform to better understand the sources of conflict that emerged during the HRRP's implementation. Again, because I interviewed participants with an assurance of confidentiality, I sacrifice some precision in my presentation of findings and consistently identify quoted sources with generic titles. Generally speaking, the main actors charged with planning and carrying out the HRRP were central office administrators who had formal decision-making power in the cabinet and HR department, central office staff and managers who participated in the HRRP work teams and regular HR meetings, and the district's university-based external partners. Although the superintendent set the transformation of YSD's HR system in motion by launching the HRRP design process, she was mostly uninvolved in its implementation. Indeed, throughout the study, the superintendent rarely surfaced as a topic of conversation (except when people identified her impending departure as a source of uncertainty - a topic I turn to in Chapter Seven).

As the main implementers in YSD grappled with the implications of the HRRP and its two tracks of improvement, they all agreed that YSD's HR department needed to improve. And yet, when they discussed HR improvement in meetings and interviews, they consistently invoked different ideas about *how* HR should improve. Table 6 sums up these different ideas. As I noted earlier, I call these two sets of ideas competing logics of HR improvement. I call them logics of improvement because each stipulated fundamentally different goals for HR improvement and different means for achieving them (Bacharach & Mundell, 1993). Table 6 shows the logics' underlying goals and

means, scope of improvement, and the general positions of actors who consistently invoked each logic during meetings and study interviews.

Table 6. Two Logics of HR Improvement

	<i>Reform logic of HR improvement</i>	<i>Status-Quo logic of HR improvement</i>
<i>Goals</i>	Improving teacher and principal quality	Accuracy and consistency in HR procedures
<i>Means</i>	Coordination and strategic alignment	Cleaning up existing HR procedures, increasing standardization
<i>Scope</i>	Systems change and redesign	Process improvement, small tangible wins
<i>Actors</i>	HRRP Director, Some CO Administrators, Some HR Managers, External Partners	HR Administrator, Senior HR Managers

The substance of Table 6 is clearly similar to Table 5 in Chapter Five, with one exception. Rather than three separate initiatives, actors' views of HR improvement in practice settled into two underlying logics: a reform logic of HR improvement that was aligned with the more ambitious visions of the HRRP and the evaluation and pay reforms, and a status quo logic of HR improvement that was aligned with the incremental reforms of the HRRP's second track. As I described in Chapter Five, the original HRRP design planned called for incremental improvements as part of its second track, so the seeds of the status-quo logic of HR improvement were obviously part of the reform from the beginning. And yet, as implementation unfolded, actors who identified

with the status quo logic of HR improvement spoke about the work of incremental improvement not as a short run, instrumental tactic to support a grander vision of HR transformation (as articulated in the HRRP design), but rather as the *primary* goal of HR improvement. The rest of this chapter illustrates how key actors invoked these two underlying logics during implementation and how the logics began to manifest themselves within the central office during implementation.

The Reform Logic of Improvement

Throughout the implementation of the HRRP, the HRRP director, the evaluation and pay reform administrator, the external partners, and some HR managers consistently spoke about HR improvement in terms that affirmed HRRP's ambitious vision for HR. These actors repeatedly told HR staff that improving HR would require major changes in YSD's central office. HR improvement, they said, would require staff to engage in fundamentally new types of professional practice, such as providing on-going strategic supports to schools, rather than perfunctory administrative support. In an email to the HR department about the HR case manager position, for example, one of the external partners wrote that the case management function would be "quite different from your long-standing analysts and other HR positions in the past." Likewise, the HRRP's demand that the HR department take on a new strategic mission would require major changes: "We [the HR department] currently don't even have a strategy or a plan," noted one central office administrator.

Echoing the themes of comprehensive HR reform, the actors who invoked the reform logic of HR improvement consistently expressed the idea that YSD needed to build a more coordinated and strategically aligned HR system if it wanted to improve

teacher effectiveness and teaching and learning quality across the district. For example, when the HRRP director explained the HRRP at the kick-off meeting in January, he described the reform to staff this way,

The basic gist [of the HRRP] is that we want to move toward a...[HR case manager position]...where we had a team of individuals connected to principals and proactive in trying to predict and help them [principals] meet their needs, from new hires, openings, performance management, the whole range...We need principals who are instructional leaders in their buildings...[and] they need an HR system that backs them up.

In this excerpt, the HRRP director explicitly framed the HRRP in terms of supporting instructional leadership and teacher quality. Later in the same meeting, he described how the rest of the HR department would need to change to support the reform and the new HR case managers.

We [the HRRP design team] talked about a support system to support that...[HR case manager]. There is a whole range of services...Maybe there's work we've got to stop doing. That's something we're, in part, looking toward automation, and are there systems we might automate to make life easier and take work off your plate so you can focus on strategy? We talked about improving our performance management capacity, to

have data tools to help principals see where they are and where they are going, and we talked about a project management function to monitor how we are doing.

The HRRP director and other actors who advocated for the reform logic of HR improvement sent the same messages about the HRRP in smaller meetings and in their interviews with me. During a regular leadership meeting in the winter, for example, one central office administrator who consistently invoked the reform logic of HR improvement said the reforms would demand new levels of cooperation within the central office, echoing comprehensive HR reform's familiar theme of coordination and collaboration,

Everyone needs to understand where we're [the central office] collaborating...The intent is to break down silos so people, systems, and departments are working together to ensure quality teachers and principals in all schools.

The lead university-based external partner also consistently invoked the reform logic of HR improvement in the HRRP work team meetings. She repeatedly framed the goal of the HRRP as improved teaching and learning and the means to that goal as the transformation of professional practice in the central office to support collaborative and strategic relationships with schools. In the following excerpt from a HR case manager work team meeting the external partner explained how the professional practice associated with HR consultation was different from providing schools with traditional HR services.

The...[HR case manager]...is different [from traditional HR services]. So it is rethinking different services to principals...the service is pro-active, strategic work around how do you staff a school and how do you manage staff so you're improving the quality of teaching, to move beyond what we have now...One way to define that [is], it's really about fitting the right people to the right buildings...It might not just be addressing staffing needs; it's staffing needs relevant to the school's improvement goals.

In all of the subsequent work team meetings, the external partner described the HR case manager position in this way -- as providing new support to principals to improve teaching -- and framed the HRRP as a fundamental change to the way the HR department did its work.

The similarity in logic between the HRRP and the evaluation and pay reforms suggested in Tables 5 and 6 was illustrated by a central office administrator who participated in both initiatives during an interview. Describing the HRRP, the central office administrator explained,

...the intent of the...[HRRP]...is to transform HR from being about compliance and paperwork and processing -- just the management -- to the vision of building up a teaching and principal core that's amazing. You need...[the curriculum and instruction department]...to support you in that, but they can't

own that...you can't do that [improve the teaching and principal core] without an HR that complements that strategy.

She used similar language when she described the evaluation and pay reforms in the same interview:

So, the...[evaluation and pay reforms are]...meant to be a complete redesign of human resources around a human capital development strategy that has nothing to do with processing paperwork or just the day-to-day. [The evaluation and pay reforms are]...all about talent management....

A few of the central office managers in the HR department consistently invoked the reform logic of HR improvement in meetings and interviews, echoing the more ambitious visions of the HRRP and evaluation and pay reform. One central office manager's remarks during an interview in the spring were a typical expression of the reform logic of HR improvement,

So to me, the overarching goal of the...[HRRP]...is that we have a [HR] department that's focused on teaching and learning first and foremost, that's focused on supporting principals who are focused on supporting teaching and learning.

The emphasis on improving teaching and learning illustrated by this excerpt was not shared by everyone in the HR department who was working on HR improvement.

In particular, senior HR managers and the HR department administrator rarely invoked the HRRP's ambitious vision of HR improvement during meetings and interviews. Instead, they invoked what I call a status quo logic of HR improvement, a logic that emphasized the incremental improvement of existing procedures and practice and sought to reinforce, rather than transform, a traditional, compliance and regulatory approach to HR.

The Status Quo Logic of HR Improvement

Throughout the implementation of the HRRP, the HR department administrator and most of his senior HR managers invoked the status quo logic of HR improvement in meetings and interviews. The status quo logic of HR improvement framed the goal of HR improvement in terms of the improved accuracy and consistency of HR records, rather than improved teaching and learning. It framed the means for improving accuracy and consistency as formalizing and standardizing procedures within the HR department, rather than coordinating or aligning HR functions. For the actors who invoked the status-quo logic of HR improvement, improving HR essentially meant cleaning up HR activities that had been ad hoc or low quality for many years in the district. Although the HRRP endorsed incremental improvement as part of its second track of reform, the actors who invoked the status quo logic of HR improvement never described the incremental improvements as part of the broader HRRP reform agenda. Instead, they discussed incremental, status-quo improvements as the department's *primary* goal.

The need to clean up the department was a constant refrain in the HR department administrator's weekly meetings with his managers. In these meetings, the

HR department administrator repeatedly told his managers that they needed to increase oversight in their units to ensure that all HR transactions were accurate and consistent. Speaking to his managers in the fall, for example, the HR department administrator struck a theme he returned to again and again in subsequent meetings,

I need you [managers] to help me by establishing checks and balances to make sure work under you is getting done and ways to check. It's not micromanaging. But it does mean checking to verify work is getting done...You have a responsibility to make sure work gets done and gets taken care of.

The following week, the HR department administrator returned to this oversight theme by again reminding his managers that they needed to ensure the accuracy of HR reports and procedures. "It's little things that get us in trouble," the HR department administrator said, "A date. A signature." Indeed, in every subsequent HR manager meeting that I observed, the HR department administrator and his managers talked about cleaning up reports and procedures to improve record-keeping accuracy and compliance. In the following typical exchange, for example, the management team discussed how they needed to improve the department's record system.

SENIOR HR MANAGER: We need comprehensive record indexing. A system for records, not for personnel files. For example, labor relations.

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: You're talking about a system of identifiers?

SENIOR HR MANAGER: Just knowing where to find things, having things indexed. There's lots of files and employment files; for example, if I had to find out something about classification, I needed to go find...[says name of another manager].

As this exchange suggests, the department did not have a centralized filing system or protocols for sharing and accessing files. For the HR department administrator and his management team, the lack of a centralized filing system was a compliance problem, rather than a problem of not having the information they needed to make strategic staffing decisions. Rather than discuss how a new filing system might help HR build new kinds of data to inform strategic decisions (e.g., data on teacher turnover rates or the size of different schools' teacher applicant pools), the HR department administrator and his managers in this and other meetings talked about the filing system in terms of improving internal controls and accounting to avoid embarrassment. "It's the stuff that's going to get us in trouble," said one manager.

A meeting in early 2012 provides another typical example of the type of issues that concerned the HR department administrator and his managers' HR improvement efforts. During the meeting, the HR department administrator told his managers that he was concerned about the district's approach to overseeing school-based hourly employees. He explained that schools throughout the district were hiring hourly

employees without notifying the central office; in some cases, this decentralized process meant that schools were hiring people with backgrounds that should have disqualified them from employment. “It’s just not acceptable,” the HR department administrator said, “and frankly, it should never have been handled at the building. Anyone paid hourly should be handed through our office.” The HR department needed to regain control over hiring procedures throughout the district, he continued. “There should be one HR department. That’s us,” the HR department administrator said.

After several weeks of meetings where the HR department administrator and his managers discussed a range of clean up projects -- the file room, school-based hourly hires, and more -- the HR department administrator told his managers he wanted to create an HR Handbook that would codify and standardize every task and procedure in HR. In the following meeting excerpt, the HR department administrator and a senior HR manager clarified that the goal of the handbook was to document basic procedures in HR.

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: So now, the big one.

I want us to create an HR Handbook. Here’s what I want:

think about your department and think about it, someone

comes in, brand new, walks into your job, what do they need to

know and what do all of you do? The most basic elements. I

want it done by June 30.

SENIOR HR MANAGER: You’re talking procedures.

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: Procedures. Here's the vision. We have to walk through it [procedures]. You'd have a front page to your department...a summary sheet, something that you'll have [on] the hiring process...[for example].

The HR department administrator also emphasized the importance of procedures and rules when he and his managers talked about the support principals needed from HR. During a managers meeting after the HRRP kick off, for example, the HR department administrator described what he wanted to accomplish during the district's August meetings with principals to prepare for the coming school year.

I requested a full day [in the summer meetings] with principals and a list of things and training we need. I'll consult with you to make sure we have everything covered: from CPS [child protection services] to bullying to harassment, and I could go on. Some of the things that have buried us, it has been because we haven't been providing supervisors and administrators with adequate training.

As with the various clean up projects, the HR department administrator's main goal for the principal meeting was to ensure proper reporting procedures and protocols. He and his managers never discussed the idea that HR might use the summer meetings to train or support principals on how to identify, develop, and keep effective teachers or introduce the idea of the case management position.

“Tightening Nuts-and-Bolts versus Building a Solar Ship”¹⁷

As Chapter 5 made clear, the HRRP’s change strategy purposefully set two logics of action into motion at the start of the reform. These two logics embodied different goals and means for improvement in the HR department. During implementation, different sets of actors invoked these two logics of HR improvement, though rarely in the same meeting. Despite the fact that the two views mostly surfaced in different meetings, several subjects indicated in interviews that the HR department had two improvement agendas that were not working together. One central office administrator alluded to the two logics when she reflected on her participation in the weekly managers meetings. She said,

The...[regular]...meetings are down in the weeds usually. If it were talking about...a vision or redesign or where are we going or let’s map this out for the next three years, then I would definitely want to be a part of it, right? But the nuts and bolts of which subs [substitute teachers] get paid how much money?..[It is]...very traditional, sort of the nuts and bolts of HR, paperwork stuff.

During the early months of the implementation of the HRRP, the central question raised by this excerpt had yet to be answered: Was HR improvement about a new vision for HR in YSD, or was it about tightening the existing nuts and bolts?

¹⁷ An HR Manager used these terms to compare the two approaches to HR improvement in YSD during an interview.

Another HR manager alluded to the two ways of thinking about HR improvement this way:

[The HR department administrator's]...role is to make sure that we [the HR department] execute on really, really tangible things that we haven't defined yet [i.e., that have been ad hoc]...So it's a matter of keeping the ship running and plugging the leaks in the ship, while we're also turning the ship from a wind powered system to an electrical engine or solar power... [with the HRRP]. You noticed in our conversations [in regular HR meetings]...we never once talked about student achievement. We never once talked about linking things to teacher effects and...[the] quality of our employees. We're still very much focused on how do we get the processes that need to happen done faster.

The reform logic of HR improvement and the status quo logic of HR improvement were not just abstract ideas or metaphors for how to improve HR. As implementation unfolded, the two logics of HR improvement started to become visible in proposals for reorganizing the HR department and in decisions about people's day-to-day work to improve the HR system. In other words, the two logics of action began to manifest themselves in specific actions inside of the organization (Bacharach & Mundell, 1993, p. 427).

Manifestations of the Competing Logics of HR Improvement

As staff in YSD's HR department worked to tighten the nuts-and-bolts of the existing system and simultaneously transform it, the two competing logics of HR improvement manifested themselves in discussions about the department's organizational structure and staff work practices. As I show in Chapter Eight, these manifestations did not immediately create conflict during implementation; however, created fault lines that slipped and widened over time and, eventually, swallowed the HRRP.

The Two Logics and the Reorganization of the HR Department

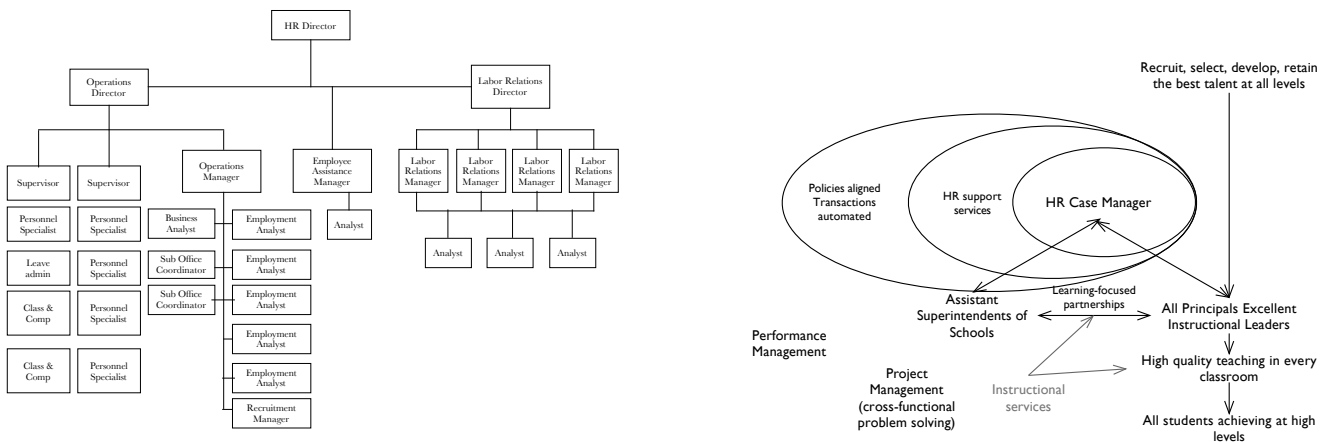
The HRRP design team had originally framed the incremental improvements in Track 2 of the HRRP as necessary to ensure that the district was in legal compliance and to make some short-term improvements to the system. But in practice, the incremental improvements of Track 2 and their underlying logic began manifesting as a broader agenda for reorganizing the HR department. Beginning as early as the winter of 2012, the HR department administrator told his management team that he intended to work not just on cleaning up HR activities but also on reorganizing the HR department to improve its oversight capacity.

When the HR department administrator presented his reorganization plan in a meeting later in the spring, he handed out a traditional organizational chart that showed individual positions and their reporting relationships within the HR Department (an adapted version of the chart is shown in Panel A of Figure 4, names removed). The chart looked nothing like the picture of a re-organized HR department that was included

in the original HRRP design document; that reform-minded structure had the new HR case manager position at its center surrounded by a series of HR support systems depicted as a series of overlapping ovals (an adapted version of the HRRP reorganization is shown in Panel B of Figure 4). As Figure 4 shows, two organizational models presented fundamentally different visions of the reorganization of the HR department.

Figure 4. Two Visions for Reorganizing HR

A. HR under Status-Quo Reorganization B. HR under HRRP



The Status-Quo Reorganization. The vision of HR embodied in the HR department administrator's reorganization (Panel A of Figure 4) essentially reinforced the status quo and did not call for any major structural changes in the department. Indeed, when the HR department administrator told his managers in June that he planned to unveil a new organizational chart, he said, "We're about ready to roll out a draft to the managers on our [new] org chart, which really isn't all that different than it is now. It has a couple of moves in it." The HR department administrator justified the moves in his organizational chart in terms of providing better oversight and management capacity in HR -- goals that reflected the status-quo logic of HR improvement and its concern for compliance and accuracy.

As one central office manager explained in an interview after the HR department administrator announced the restructuring, "I think it's [the re-org] a good thing because there's a lot of responsibility and...we didn't have a [senior administrator] for a year. So it's [the reorganization] just a capacity issue." Even the HRRP director understood the rationale behind restructuring and the need to build more oversight capacity in the department. During a closed-door meeting with the external partner, the HRRP director explained that the status-quo reorganization in HR would help with the day-to-day management of the department and the Track 1 reforms.

Right now we have...[the HR department administrator]...and the next tier down here [*waves his hand down low*]. This [the HR department administrator's re-organization] will bring in a middle range to help with oversight. The challenge...[the HR department administrator]...has had is every crisis of the day

goes to him. Part of that is there is no one in between. He doesn't have anyone who is organized or set up or empowered to make difficult decisions.

This capacity-building rationale notwithstanding, some advocates for the HRRP worried that the HR department administrator's proposed reorganization would reinforce and solidify the status quo aspects of HR that the HRRP sought to change. For example, one district administrator described the status-quo nature of the HR department administrator's organizational chart this way in an interview shortly after it was announced,

His new org chart is essentially the same operations-based org chart. There is no leadership development...nobody is thinking about performance-based compensation and mentor principals or career ladders...evaluation is only compliance driven. Did they [evaluations] get in on time? Did they not get in on time? They [HR staff] are not paying attention to the ratings, the composition of teachers. Do we have more basic [rated] teachers in some schools than others? Is there grade inflation [in teacher ratings]? Is everyone in our lowest performing school rated proficient? That's the strategy part that HR is not going to own.

Another central office manager described the HR department administrator's reorganization this way: "It's old school," she said, and it would do little to support the transformation of HR.

The Reform Reorganization. During HRRP meetings in the winter and early spring, HR staff and the external partner elaborated the HRRP vision of HR's organizational structure (Panel B of Figure 4) by talking about the nature of the HR case manager position and its implications for the HR system as a whole. As the HR case manager work team developed the HR case manager's roles and responsibilities throughout the spring, it became clear that the new position implied major changes in the overall organization and work of the HR department -- the ovals in Panel B of Figure 4. For example, in the following excerpt from an HR case manager work team meeting in March (after the team had been meeting for three months), HR managers and an external partner talked about whether or not the district should pilot the new position or adopt it across the board. During the discussion, one of the HR managers suggested a pilot would be problematic because it would allow other HR staff to ignore the broader implications of HR case managers and treat the HRRP as a peripheral program, rather than a core shift in the department's direction.

HR MANAGER 1: We need to develop a vision of what the other positions look like that support these roles [HR case manager positions]...is there an analyst that does these other things or do we make recruitment a bigger unit and take on these roles?...I think a pilot lets everyone else be absorbed by

what's not in the pilot. You don't figure out how to go forward with the work that's left undone.

HR MANAGER 2: There's also the matter that people don't know what to do when they're in a pilot role...Having a system in place can help guide the work.

EXTERNAL PARTNER: So, you're not in support of a pilot.

HR MANAGER 1: It [not having a pilot] would force us to identify the other roles and to see if we have the funding to support the work. If we pick 1 or 2 [i.e., have a pilot], we absorb the cost at the expense of everyone else in the unit.

This excerpt illustrates a subtle recognition that the HR case manager position would not simply be a change on the margin but would have implications for the entire department. As with their comments about HR improvement in general, actors who subscribed to the two logics of HR improvement talked about the status-quo and the reform reorganization proposals in different meetings. Some actors discussed the reform model of reorganization in the HRRP work team meetings; other actors discussed the status quo model of reorganization in the weekly manager's meetings.¹⁸ None of the actors in the central office openly discussed the disjuncture between the two models until it was, perhaps, too late (See Chapter Eight).

¹⁸ Although the HR department administrator was ostensibly part of the HR case manager work team, he never attended the meetings

The Two Logics and the Day-to-Day Work of Improvement

A second way that the two logics of HR improvement manifested themselves during implementation was in debates about how staff should spend their time supporting HR improvement. The clearest illustration of this manifestation of the logics of HR improvement was the way in which a central office administrator and the HR department administrator struggled over setting the day-to-day work priorities of a central office manager. The situation was complicated because the manager was paid by the central office administrator's budget but was supervised by the HR department administrator. For the purposes of this illustration I refer to the former administrator as the funding administrator.

According to the funding administrator, the manager in question was assigned to support the ambitious evaluation and pay reforms in HR. And yet, in practice, the manager was constantly being told to work on improving routine HR tasks by the HR department administrator. As the manager explained,

...I'm doing HR day-to-day work. I'm managing these processes, I'm doing what my supervisor thinks is more important. I'm not doing strategic work.

Data from both interviews and observations confirmed that the manager spent most days making marginal improvements to existing systems instead of working on strategic HR issues, such as tracking teacher quality across schools. That the manager's work focused on incremental tasks was evident during meetings when the manager reported out to colleagues about her work. The following report out was typical. In it,

the manager told colleagues in HR that she was cleaning up the district's system for conducting background checks on coaches.

I send a weekly update [on whether coaches have background checks], you know, here's the next steps and making sure all our volunteer coaches apply to their positions, conducting reference checks for staffing positions, hiring in...[the district's computer system].

Responding to a question in an interview about what advice she would give to others to successfully implement HR reforms, the manager alluded to the problem she was having with the HR department administrator when she said,

...[My advice is]...get a handle on your direct supervisor and whether or not they understand what you're trying to accomplish...you have to have an explicit conversation with your boss and say okay, is this really what I'll be doing? If so, these are the things that I need. These are the stakes that you have to put in the ground to ensure that I don't do this, or I don't do this [distracting work], because this is what I'm focusing on and I need your backup. I need your support. I need your credibility when I invariably encounter a brick wall. Are you there?

This excerpt captures how the micro-alignment and misalignment of interests create potential sources of conflict during implementation. When the manager spoke

about what she needed from her supervisor, she revealed how big ideas about reform manifest themselves in day-to-day exchanges at work: Does your supervisor buffer you from work that is unrelated to reform? Does your supervisor support you when you encounter problems or resistance in the organization? In the case of YSD, struggle around these very issues existed just beneath the surface and were inextricably tied to the disjuncture between the two logics of HR improvement. Before considering why these differences existed (Chapter Seven) and how they were ultimately negotiated and resolved (Chapter Eight), I turn to the possibility that people's assumptions about HR improvement were not the only source of potential conflict in the case. Perhaps the real problem was something more straightforward: the threat the HRRP posed to some actors' jobs within the HR Department.

A Hypothetical Fear of Job Losses

By now it should be clear that the HRRP design team called for a complete transformation of HR that would affect both the department's organization and how people did their work. What if the reform created conflict simply because HR staff saw it as a threat to their jobs, rather than because they had different ideas about HR improvement? I explored this alternative hypothesis using my full database. As I argue in this section, I concluded that fear about job loss was not a major flashpoint during implementation. Conflicts over jobs never manifested themselves the way that the underlying logics of HR improvement did in discussions about re-organizing the department or daily work priorities.

This is not to say, however, that job loss was a non-issue during implementation. A thorough review of meeting observations and interview transcripts revealed some

evidence that people perceived the HRRP would make some people worse off by eliminating jobs. During interviews, for example, a majority of subjects (59%) indicated that they thought people working in the HR department were fearful that the HRRP would mean job losses. For the most part, interview subjects made these assertions in straightforward statements about other people being afraid of losing their jobs under the reform.

For example, in response to a question about how people in the HR department were responding to the HRRP in February, a central office administrator said, “I think that some people are scared because it [the HRRP] means for them, ‘Maybe I won’t have my job.’ It’s a scary place for people.” A central office manager gave a similar response in an interview, saying, “I think people are just afraid of losing their jobs.” Another central office manager expressed a similar sentiment when she said in an interview,

[HR staff] are thinking, how are they [district leaders] going to afford to pay for these jobs [case managers]? They [district leadership] said it’s going to be revenue neutral or something, and then that means they [HR staff] are afraid that they are going to lose their jobs.

Evidence from meeting observations suggests that the HR department administrator, the HRRP director, and the external partner were aware of and concerned about staff fears about job loss. In 20 percent of all of the meetings I observed, the meeting facilitator (either the HR department director, HRRP director, or an external partner) reassured staff that the HRRP would not mean any job loss or staff

reductions. The common refrain from leaders in these meetings was that, yes, HR work would change, but people would not lose their jobs. During a leadership meeting in April 2012, for example, the HRRP director, HR department administrator, and an external partner talked about the need to reassure HR staff that the HRRP would not mean job losses. In the following short exchange, the HRRP director and the HR department administrator agreed on the need to reassure staff that there would be no firings to ensure cooperation with the reform.

HRRP DIRECTOR: If they [HR staff] know this [HRRP] isn't about eliminating employment, they will help us engage.

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: If they think it's about reducing their position, they won't [engage].

The HR department administrator was also concerned that job losses would hurt morale in his department. In the same meeting he said,

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: I want to be thoughtful about the next step. I care a great deal about keeping the staff motivated and working in the right direction. I just want to be thoughtful about the next step, clearly moving forward.

HRRP DIRECTOR: Part of the messaging I want to convey is, no one loses their job...We have to begin to engage staff early on. They are the experts.

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: They help make the decisions.

Later during the same meeting, the HRRP director and the external partner returned to the topic of job loss and again said that they wanted to reassure staff no one would lose their jobs under the reform -- at least not initially.

EXTERNAL PARTNER: One thing we could do with staff is, we need to staff up these things [HR functions] new. We need to figure out who has pieces of those roles and start. If we get people to stop thinking about 'me' and where 'I' move and instead, 'here's the stuff I do' -- everyone's keeping a job.

HRRP DIRECTOR: If we come out of the gate saying that, people's blood pressure drops. That doesn't mean if we reshuffle and people have a job they can't perform, then we address that as performance and fit. But I'd like to come out of the gate saying, "You all still have a job. Your job's going to change." But I hope we can say that.

These leaders delivered the same message to the HRRP meetings and regular HR managers meetings. For example, in the initial kick-off meeting for the implementation of the HRRP, the external partner said,

One source of stress I've heard is, "Oh, you're going to take the work away, then what am I going to do?" I'm here to assure

you [*pauses*] there's a ton of work to get done [*group laughs*].

The image isn't work is taken away, but work is going to change.

The HR department administrator made similar reassurances in his regular managers meetings. In a typical statement during a manager's meeting in early January, the HR department administrator reassured his management team that the HRRP would not eliminate any jobs. He told them,

I know the...[HR case manager]...piece continues. We're still going forward with the...work and we're getting one to two on board by September. I don't know what it'll look like or who, but there's some chance, [*pauses*] I said I won't do dismissal. I don't want people to lose their jobs. I stand behind that.¹⁹

Together, these excerpts suggest that the HR department administrator and the HRRP director believed the HRRP might create conflict and resistance if staff perceived it as a threat to employment, and so they consistently communicated to staff that the reform did not threaten jobs. As I noted earlier, when central office personnel spoke about the fear of job loss in interviews they only spoke about *other* people's fear.

¹⁹ In this excerpt the HR department administrator indicated that the district would hire two HR case managers in September. However, at this point in the process the HR case manager work team had not proposed a specific number or process for rolling out the position. Later, the HR case manager group would conclude that the district should not run a pilot but implement the positions across the district.

Indeed, I found no direct evidence in the data of HR staff indicating first hand that they were worried about losing their own jobs. Across all the data (excluding documents that over-represented reform-coded excerpts) I coded only 18 excerpts “conflict/tension--fear of job loss,” compared to hundreds of excerpts related to “HR improvement goals--teaching improvement,” “HR improvement goals--compliance” and “HR means--collaboration” and “HR means--standardization.” Perhaps the leaders’ reassurances had the desired effect.

Taken together, the data suggests that while central office staff may have understandably had concerns about the HRRP’s impact on jobs, a fear of job loss was not the overriding issue or source of conflict in the case. If anything, the reform leaders sought to mitigate resistance to the reform based on fear of job loss by reassuring staff that the HRRP would not mean job cuts. On balance, job loss may have been an issue leaders worried about, but it did not appear to be the main lens through which people appeared to interpret and respond to HR reform. The data suggest it did not become a main source of conflict during implementation.²⁰

Summary

The account in Chapter Five provided a general sense of what happened to the HRRP in YSD, but only a vague sense of why it happened. In this chapter I have elaborated that account by analyzing the main actors involved in implementation and

²⁰ It is also somewhat difficult to disentangle concerns about job loss related to HRRP from concerns about job loss related to other events occurring at the same time, such as the weak economy and fiscal crisis.

their interests relative to the reform. This analysis of actors and interests is the first step in understanding the possible sources of conflict during implementation that may have contributed to the reform's collapse. I argued that the main underlying source of potential conflict during implementation was the disjuncture between two different logics of HR improvement. Moreover, these competing ideas -- one focused on promoting reform, the other on the status quo -- manifested themselves in different agendas for the HR department's organizational structure and in different expectations about the day-to-day work of central office staff. Following the conceptual framework presented in Chapter Three, I next examine how an analysis of the context of reform in YSD helps reveal the root sources of the two logics of HR improvement. In the chapter after that (Chapter Eight), I examine how the resources and strategies that different actors used kept these conflicts beneath the surface during the first few months of implementation and then consider how and why the conflict between the two logics of HR improvement eventually shifted and brought about the HRRP's collapse.

Chapter 7: Context and Competing Logics of HR Improvement

In the previous chapter I argued that actors within the central office invoked different ideas about improving HR during the implementation of the HRRP and that these differences expressed themselves in different plans for reorganizing the department's organizational structure and in different expectations about the day-to-day work of staff. Before discussing how these conflicts played out (in Chapter Eight), I argue in this chapter that the root sources of the competing logics of HR improvement were in large part grounded in the contexts in which implementation took place, particularly the historical context of HR reform in YSD and the contexts associated with individual actor's professional backgrounds. The contextual nature of conflict in YSD suggests both the situated nature of implementation and the ways in which micro-politics can speak to disagreements embedded in deep-seated experiences and beliefs.

Historical Context of HR Reform in YSD

The HRRP was not the first time YSD had launched a major initiative to improve HR. During my study, HR staff often used a previous attempt to reorganize HR into cross-functional teams as a reference point for understanding the HRRP and its demands. Like the rhetoric surrounding the HRRP, this previous cross-functional reform emphasized the need to coordinate HR activities and provide better services to schools. Unfortunately, every person who worked in department at the time of the previous cross-functional reform described it as an unmitigated failure. Staff were confused about their roles and responsibilities in the cross-functional teams; members of the cross-functional teams received no training; and to make matters worse, the district shifted its payroll system at the same time as it moved to the cross-functional

teams, putting further demands on HR staff. One central office manager described the chaotic atmosphere in HR under the previous reform as she and her colleagues tried to manage the demands of the payroll transition and the new cross-functional teams,

Literally, I cried at my desk at least once a week, maybe more. Everybody ended up doing payroll...All I did for the first few months was frantically try to solve payroll issues for people who hadn't been paid...And then all of a sudden something would come out of the managers meeting...the [former] HR administrator had said okay, I want everybody to turn in all their purple sheets for whatever month it was, even if you're not done, and we're going to have somebody go through and triage them all...I can still remember, it was sort of like...You're not getting my purple sheets. You'll have to pry my cold, dead fingers off of them because I had so much invested in them. It was just horrible.

Other staff who worked in the department at the time affirmed that the cross-functional reform created a high-stress environment in the central office. As central office staff recounted their experiences under the cross-functional reform, they sometimes spoke about the HRRP as the latest round of similar reforms that were doomed to fail, in part because they were too focused on the big picture and neglected the nuts-and-bolts of HR management. My first interview with one senior HR manager began with the manager placing several, large black three-ring binders on the table where we were sitting. Pointing to the stack of binders, she explained,

I brought examples of the different re-orgs in recent history. There's been one for every new director, every new superintendent. Whenever senior leadership changes, our direction veers wherever their vision takes us. All of the change, it's kind of the norm.

This quote illustrates the common view that ambitious HR improvement efforts -- from the cross-functional reform to the HRRP -- were a par for the course in YSD, especially when the HR department or district's leadership turned over. As another central office manager summed up, "With the changes [in senior leadership] had usually come a different philosophy of how HR should work and what we should be doing...so many of them [leaders] have been charged with 'HR's broken; you go fix it.' So they come in with that notion."

Given this history of failed reform, it is unsurprising that some central office staff viewed the HRRP as more of the same. Responding to a question about how she thought HR staff were receiving the HRRP early on, a central office manager said she thought staff were worried that HRRP's HR case manager function would be similar to the cross-functional reform.

They're [HR staff] frightened because either they may find themselves in a nightmare scenario like we went through [under the cross-functional team reform], or they are cynical. Nobody can really wrap their mind around the conceptual framework, except the piece that says we're going to have a...

[HR case manager]...So for most people who just are cynical anyway, they're not going to do the hard mental work. They're going to say, "Oh yeah, more of the same, we're going back to teams, we know it."

This excerpt notwithstanding, the external partner took special pains to distinguish the HR case manager position from the cross-functional reforms that sought to provide traditional services more efficiently (Chapter 6). As the external partner often explained in the HRRP work team meetings, the HR case manager position was different from the cross-functional reform because it sought to provide fundamentally different services to principals. Nevertheless, staff sometimes talked about the HR case manager position as if it were the same as the previous cross-functional reform. For example, in the following interview, a central office manager used the HR case manager position to explain the older cross-functional team reform to me during an interview.

And it [cross-functional teams] was a structure that's similar to what we're talking about now with the...[HR case manager]...model. The problem is that it [cross-functional teams] wasn't well thought out, there was no training...It didn't take into account people's particular gifts or knowledge base, and they were led by managers who were not necessarily generalists.

The district's past reform initiatives were such as a powerful reference point that even actors who I generally associated with the reform logic of HR improvement would

sometimes conflate the cross-functional reform with the HR case manager function. For example, during an interview a central office administrator who I considered an advocate of the reform logic of HR improvement described the previous cross-functional reform as if it was the same as the case manager reform. She said that under the previous reform,

...we went to a case manager function. They [the district leaders] were like, now your HR person's going to be your case manager. You're going to have a budget analyst attached to you, you're going to have an HR person attached to you, and they're going to be supporting your school...But nothing changed. We still went to the people that know what they're talking about, and you just go around the person that doesn't know what they're talking about.

Actors also conflated other aspects of the HRRP with prior reforms. For example, one of the underlying premises of the HRRP was that the department needed to automate HR transactions to free up staff so they could provide more strategic HR support for schools. For some HR staff, automating HR transactions seemed similar to prior business process redesign initiatives in the department. To be sure, in some sense the HRRP's automation agenda was similar to business process redesign; for example, both reforms sought to automate HR transactions to improve efficiency. But the HRRP justified this efficiency in terms of freeing up resources for strategic HR work in ways that the prior effort did not. The bigger problem for the HRRP advocates, however, was that staff associated the similarity between the two efforts not only on content but also

on their odds of succeeding. In the following interview excerpt, a central office manager began by describing the prior business process redesign reform and then likened it to the HRRP.

Well, I can't really explain it [the prior business process redesign reform], but we had these themes that I think anybody would agree are good ones: empowered staff, empowered customers, fiscal responsibility, sound business practice, and HR systems infrastructure...And I sense it's coming one more time.

When I asked this manager what she believed the goal of the prior business process redesign effort was, she said,

I think the goal always is to improve customer service. Each time we've made these changes it's been how can we better serve the needs of the people that we support. Sometimes the focus has been on we've got to serve the public when they come in, we've got to serve schools; lately, it's you've got to serve those principals and assistant principals.

Again, this quote suggests that the manager viewed aspects of the HRRP -- in this case the emphasis on serving principals -- as a rehash of prior reforms that were about customer service, rather than providing new strategic supports to principals as the HRRP intended.

In addition to associating different aspects of HR redesign with prior reforms, some staff saw the HR case manager position as similar to the work that people were currently doing in the HR Department, suggesting they misunderstood the amount of change the HRRP vision required. Again, the external partner took special pains to distinguish the new HR case manager position from the types of administrative and technical support the HR department provided principals. And yet staff often spoke as if the two types of services were essentially the same. For example, in an interview, a central office manager said she did not see the distinction between the HRRP and current practice in HR.

A lot of that [the HR case manager work] the employment analysts do today, trying to partner with the principals and helping them plan their budgets and helping them to elect the staff that they need. I think things that I've heard are that they [district leaders] don't have any budget for professional development in HR. I think that they [district leaders] are looking for a [higher] level of professionalism [among employment analysts], so they are redefining their job.

For some staff, HR already seemed to be doing HR case manager work. During the first case management work team meeting, for example, one participant explained that she wanted to be part of the work team because "This [HR case management] matches what I do [in my current role]." In the same meeting, another participant said, "In [my sub-unit], we are...case managers for selected schools." Still another manager

explained, “I’m interested in this [HR case manager] group. It’s work we’re doing now, in a less focused way.”

As the HR case manager work team continued to meet to define and redefine what the position would do, some HR staff struggled to understand how the work was different from what they already did. In the following excerpt from a work team meeting, for example, HR staff spent several minutes discussing the current work of staff in analyst positions. After the long description, the external partner asked the group how the current work was different from the case manager.

EXTERNAL PARTNER: Alright. How would you compare this [the analyst work] to what we’ve [the HRRP work team] been talking about what we [HR case managers] do?

HR MANAGER 1: Is it different? Didn’t we talk about this person [HR case manager] doing that [the analyst work]?

EXTERNAL PARTNER: We talked about this [HR case manager] as the work of recruitment, selection...

HR MANAGER 2: This won’t mean anything to most people, they [current analysts] do the organizational management; they create positions in the...system that drive pay and everything else; they confirm there’s budgeted FTE with the right job code; their jobs include a lot more technical aspects than I’ve seen here [in the HR case manager meetings]. We’re

assuming someone else [besides the HR case manager] does lots of the technical stuff.

EXTERNAL PARTNER: So the...[HR case manager]...are in schools working with principals. They're not the main liaison for all employees; they are the principal's main partner in working strategically with the staff.

HR MANAGER 2: I would see that [the analyst's technical work] would be a hard thing to take away, even if you are in schools and are more visible, if you're, as their analyst, if whoever is the...[HR case manager]...they'll [principals] have the same expectation that that they'll guide them [principals] especially now that there's a visible presence. How do you separate those two?

This meeting excerpt illustrates the difficulty that staff had understanding how the case manager function was different from the current analyst function. More subtly, the exchange illustrates a recurring theme among HR staff responses to the HRRP: the HRRP seemed to be overlooking the core work of HR: transactions and compliance. To many actors in the HR department, the *real* work of HR was made up of tasks like completing I-9 forms, processing position control requests, and creating positions in the district's personnel database. One of the most senior HR managers articulated this view in an interview when she described the ever-shifting improvement agenda in HR and compared it to the fundamental work in HR that never changes,

We have activities that we maintain through whatever direction we're being led. So the work continues. Whatever re-org project we're engaged in, there's a set of duties that we need to get done, no matter how it's [reform] being debated.

For this manger, the real work of HR existed apart from ambitious reform efforts. Another manager made a similar point during an interview when she explained that she and other staff had to focus on getting the work done, despite the on-going churn in departmental leadership and HR improvement agendas. She said,

People [in HR] have undergone change after change after change. What I see in this department is a dedication from people who really struggle to get the work done. There's a core group, I think, that just kind of stick it out. There are others who come and go. They come and they say oh, this is too difficult, and they go. Unfortunately, we have...a lot of turnover, but that really is a turnover in upper management in this organization.

As she continued, the manager said, "We don't know if we're going to this new model, but we know we've got to get the work done." Again speaking about the prior cross-functional reform, another central office manager suggested that the real work of HR boiled down to ensuring people are paid and schools are staffed. "The lesson we learned from...[the cross-functional reform]," she said, "is that labor and employee

relations functions are always going to be trumped by getting people staffed and getting them paid. Always.”

Another example of the idea that HR staff would carry-on with their current work and wait out the ambitious reform came from an exchange in a work team meeting as staff discussed people’s reactions to the HRRP.

HR MANAGER 1: ...[People] who have been here a while and see different change efforts maybe, at this moment, [they think] “Here it comes again so I don’t need to think about it strategically.”

HR ANALYST: So we drop out.

HR MANAGER 1: Right.

EXTERNAL PARTNER:...If you have lots of, if this is happening several times, it is detrimental to how you feel generally about projects like this.

IT MANAGER: Security.

EXTERNAL PARTNER: Yeah. Yeah

HR MANAGER 2: It increases cynicism.

HR ANALYST: Cynicism.

Another central office administrator summed up the concern that people would just wait out the reform when she said during an interview,

I think my biggest worry is it'll just be business as usual, and that it'll [HRRP] be a lot of meetings, a lot of time, and a lot of effort and nothing changes. Because that's what we do...we've been doing it for years and years and years. How many reforms have we been through? How many re-designs have we been through? How many grants? I mean nothing changes.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think that is?

Well, I think it does have to do with the change in leadership, turnover at the superintendency. I think it has a lot to do with it, because every two years we're getting a new leader with a new vision who puts a new stake in the ground. So that thing that got started gets pulled back. I think that has a lot to do with it. And so people know that if they just can ride out the wave of the leadership, somebody else is going to come in and it'll be something new.

Near the end of the study, but before the HRRP collapsed, I asked a long-time central office manager what the HRRP had accomplished so far. She said dryly, "Another report that sits on the shelf." Her response seemed to fulfill some people's worry that nothing had changed. She continued,

There's dozens of reports that sit on the shelf about changes that need to be made in central administration so it works more effectively either in HR or finance or instructional services. When I came to the district 21 years ago, for example, everybody was hyped up about a report that came from the state about changes that needed to be made in the administration of the school district.

Near the end of the study, another relatively senior central office manager summed up a common sentiment in the department when she said, "We're always reorganizing. That's not a new – this [HRRP] is like, one more thing. It's constant in our world. And so I think it is hard to gain the momentum or the, 'This is it,' because everything is 'it.' Every new person who comes has something." Five months earlier, the same manager responded to a question about what worried her about the implementation of the HRRP by saying that she worried that the effort would not be sustained.

The preceding excerpts show how the ways in which central office actors responded to the HRRP were shaped by their prior experiences with ambitious central office reform. In particular, those actors who talked about the HRRP as part of a cycle of failed reforms were more apt to invoke the status quo logic of HR improvement. To them, the HRRP was unaligned with their idea of what the department should accomplish and the methods it should use to get there in part because of their prior experiences with reform. As I argue in the next section, actors' understanding of HR

reform and its alignment with their interests was also a product of individual actors' professional backgrounds.

Professional Backgrounds

A second factor that appeared to shape how people understand HR improvement were individual's professional backgrounds, a finding consistent with prior research on district central offices (Burch & Spillane, 2005; Kennedy, 1982). In multiple interviews, for example, managers and administrators said that they believed that HR department administrator's commitment to the status quo logic of HR improvement was due in part to his professional background as a principal and district leader. Three different subjects said that the HR department administrator's professional background made it hard for him to understand the reform logic of HR improvement. For example, one central office manager attributed the HR department administrator's prioritization of status quo improvements to his background this way,

[The HR department administrator sets his priorities]...based on his previous experiences in other districts. So he was an Assistant Sup [superintendent] in...[another district]...and prior to that, he was a principal. His definition of what a principal is or his experience as a principal are probably not the same as what the district views as a principal now....[The HR department administrator]...thinks the HR function is all about processing things that need to be processed and mitigating risk.

Similarly, another central office administrator said that the HR department administrator did not understand the HRRP because he was not from, “the new generation that understands the whole idea of human capital development, talent management.” In response to a question about the HR department administrator’s improvement priorities, another central office administrator claimed that the HR department administrator may not have understood the ideas associated with the reform logic of HR improvement:

I don't think...[the HR department administrator]...even knows that...I think he's very traditional, sort of the nuts and bolts of HR...So I don't see a vision of where we're going.

In this excerpt, the administrator defined the HR department administrator’s lack of engagement with the reform logic of HR improvement as a lack of understanding rooted in his traditionalism (the nuts and bolts). Likewise, a different central office administrator framed the HR department administrator’s misalignment with the premises of the HRRP as a lack of understanding. Again, in response to a question about the HR department administrator’s priorities for HR improvement, the central office administrator said,

I don't think he understands...[HRRP and the evaluation and pay reforms]...and the whole human capital piece...I'm not sure that he's ever really listening to that [reform conversation]...I really always see him down in the weeds of

what's going on and not up at that level where we're really thinking about the possibilities of what this can be.

Describing a meeting she had with the HR department administrator to talk about the district's evaluation and pay reforms, this central office administrator said "He [the HR department administrator] didn't want to hear about the...[evaluation and pay reform]...He just wanted to know could I make sure that we got all the evaluations in by the end of the year, and that he could say that we had 100% of them in...that's really all he wanted me to be able to say."

Other people saw evidence that the HR department administrator's professional background colored his plan for reorganizing the department. For example, when the HR department administrator talked about hiring new director positions for his re-organization of HR, he required candidates to have a principal's certificate (he eventually hired two principals to fill the positions with whom he had worked previously in a different district). One central office manager speculated that these hiring priorities stemmed from the HR department administrator's preference for working with people like himself.

[The HR department administrator's]...idea is that he needs people with more management authority and I think, credibility by being admin...So it's sort of a buck stops here mentality...like he can trust those types of people to make decisions better than someone [with no experience as a principal].

In an interview another central office manager attributed the HR department administrator's preference for former principals to his familiarity with the principalship. She said,

[The HR department administrator]...has always had it in his mind that we were gonna have two directors reporting to him, and that they needed to be his team, and he's really comfortable with administrators...

The managers in these two excerpts seem, at best, ambivalent about the HR department administrator's traditional background and its influence on his leadership of the HR department. By contrast, other staff saw the HR department administrator's prior experience as a resource for improving the department and, in particular, increasing its status within the district. For example, a senior central office manager recounted the parade of leaders that have been through the department over the past decade during an interview and then explained how the current HR department administrator was different,

And then [after so much turnover] we get a leader like...[the HR department administrator]...who gets it. He's been in a school system. That's not always what we've looked for. We've looked for -- I don't know where we got some of our crazy people.

What made the HR department administrator successful in this HR manager's eyes, at least in part, was not only that he understood how to improve the *real* work of

HR but also that he knew how to build support for the department within the central office -- as she said, he “gets it.” She continued,

Depending on your [department’s] leadership, you’re either supporting someone you respect and want to look good, or you’re trying to maintain your portion of the organization while doing battle with that leader who is working against your whole organization.

INTERVIEWER: Well, it sounds like you’re in the former situation now.

We feel great. We feel like...[the HR department administrator]...has the respect of, it’s so important that whether you like that person or not, that they’re respected and supported by others. It’s such a political place.

The HR department administrator also used his prior experiences to frame problems and solutions during meetings with his managers. For example, when the HR department administrator said that he was surprised that the district did not have a file room, he referred to the file room that existed in his prior district. Similarly, in the following meeting excerpt the HR department administrator told his managers that he could provide them with a template from his prior district for YSD’s HR Handbook.

HR MANAGER 1: In the past, we’ve been given a template, so we have standardization.

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: I can do that.

HR MANAGER 1: We have links to the...[refers to documents from a prior process redesign effort].

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: We're looking at something simple. I have examples, so we don't have lots of effort off base.

HR MANAGER 2: Yes. Thank you. Do you have examples from your past districts? That would be helpful.

[HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR *nods "yes"*]

HR MANAGER 3: So we look at the department and what we do and if we don't have a procedure written down, we need to get it written down.

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: [*Nodding*] Good. We're finding out we don't really [have procedures written down]. You will work on this as you're building it. Put it down for June 30. That's a done deal. Put it as a priority please.

Advocates of the reform logic of HR improvement also seemed to respond to the HRRP in part based on their professional backgrounds. For example, when a central office manager described problems in YSD's HR system in interviews he compared the problems to the HR system in the organization where he worked prior to joining the

district. He said that YSD's process was essentially, "making arbitrary decisions about who to put into our principal pool based on a process that was ill-defined...that was put together two days before we started interviews." He noted that this ad hoc approach was different than the process in the organization where he used to work, which he said included "a predictive model score. So everyone who applies...ends up on a predictive model...[applicants] either lie below the model, in which case they're rejected, or above the model, in which case they're accepted...and a borderline candidate is checked."

On more than one occasion this central office manager introduced ideas from his prior experience into discussions about improving HR in YSD. For example, in response to a question about modifying the district's teaching application so that it included more information about where applicants came from and why they applied, the manager attributed the idea to his prior organization,

So the way that we [in the prior organization] tracked our effectiveness was very data focused and so we'd say, hey, we had 3,000 applicants. Where did they come from? Why did they apply? Why didn't they apply? Did we lose them in the cycle? What attracted them to this? What's their ethnic background? What was their background in terms of income? Are we attracting more diverse people?

So, I came in with that lens when we were hiring people last summer [in YSD] and I said, "I can't get this data. What's preventing me from doing this?" Then I realized a lot of it was

in the way that we processed and built our applications up. So I said let's change that.

In this excerpt the manager not only draws on his prior experience to understand how to improve HR processes in YSD, he also hints that his experience gave him a perspective that was somewhat unique within the HR department. He went on to explain that some of his colleagues saw his willingness to take initiative as a problem.

What surprised me was that the things that I think are my strengths-- going in, finding a problem, and saying "Okay, I'm going to work on this," I mean these are the things that I love to do...Here, it's like "What are you doing?" ...In fact, that was articulated yesterday to me. A colleague said "I'd love to do that!" and she was told "No," because, "You're going to set a precedent and what if you're out and somebody has to cover for you and they're unable to do that?"

Despite the central office manager's ability to draw on his prior experiences to spark new thinking among some HR staff, others in the department resisted it. Again, the point for a political analysis of implementation is that the underlying conflicts over the logics of HR improvement discussed in Chapter Six were heavily conditioned by departmental and individual history and context. How actors responded to and interpreted HR improvement under the HRRP -- and the resulting alignments and misalignments -- were shaped by the nested contexts in the central office, both personal and organizational. So far I have explored ideas that were potential sources of conflict

and some of the origins of those ideas. As the conceptual framework in Chapter Three suggests, to understand how actors negotiated and resolved conflicts it is necessary to examine how resources and influence strategies shaped the political drama that ultimately ended the HRRP in YSD, a topic I turn to in the next chapter.

Summary

In this chapter I extended the argument that the underlying conflict in the HRRP was grounded in actors' different logics of HR improvement by showing that the root source of these logics was a function of context in two ways. First, the district's history of failed HR reform meant that the HRRP faced an up-hill battle to convince HR staff that the initiative's agenda was aligned with their understanding of HR's core purposes and what it needed to do to improve. Actor's past experiences with reform conditioned them to view the real work of HR reform as processes and procedures, which, experience told them, would always outlast ambitious reform initiatives. Second, actors' professional backgrounds conditioned the degree to which they interpreted HRRP as aligned with their vision and understanding of HR improvement. Some actors' backgrounds conditioned them to view HR as a compliance and regulatory function; others had experiences outside of traditional school districts that conditioned them view HR improvement as a far more radical proposition. In the next chapter, I show how the resources, strategies, and context in the case eventually pushed the potential conflict between the competing logics of HR improvement to the surface.

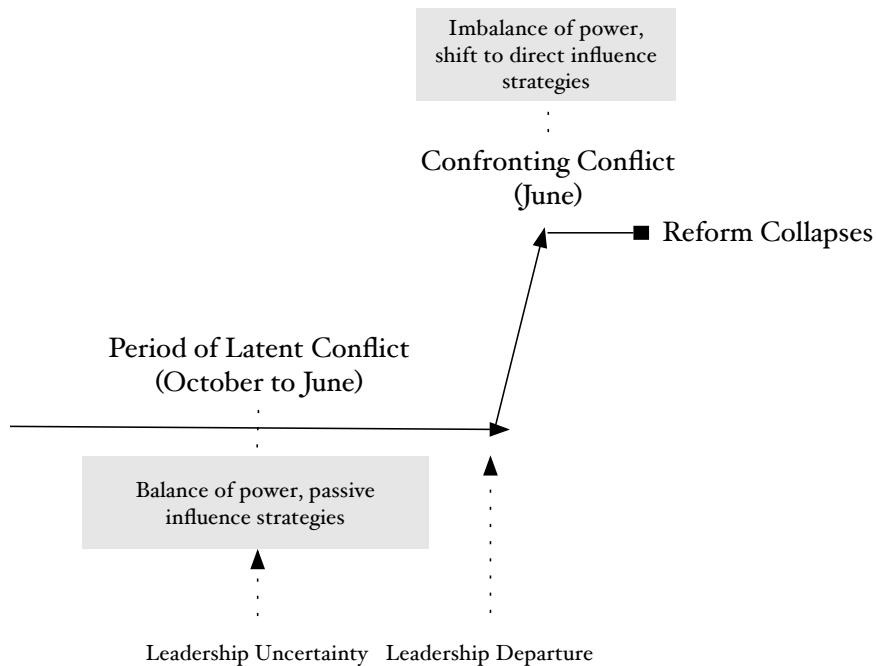
Chapter 8: Resources, Strategies, and the Negotiation and Resolution of Conflict

This chapter examines how actors negotiated and resolved the underlying conflict between the two logics of HR improvement identified in the prior chapters and how these negotiations were shaped by the broader context in which they took place. The chapter begins by showing why the underlying conflicts in HRRP remained latent during much of the initiative's implementation and how the latency of conflict during this period allowed the HRRP implementation to proceed even without strong support from the HR departmental administrator. In addition, this chapter shows how the departure of two senior leaders in YSD eventually upset the balance of power in the central office and punctuated the latent conflict between the two logics of HR improvement. Crucially, the way that actors inside of the central office responded to this punctuation helps explain the fate of the HRPP: advocates of the status quo logic of HR improvement responded by exercising the authority and resources they had amassed within the central office during the early months of implementation while advocates of the reform logic of HR improvement continued to rely on passive influence strategies. In the end, the status-quo advocates' power play won out over the reform advocates' persuasion.

An integrated view of the political dynamics in the case shows that implementation followed a pattern that included an initial stage of latent conflict followed by a short period of overt conflict and power plays. I refer to this pattern of micro-politics as a slow burn (Figure 5). The rest of this chapter elaborates the

annotations in Figure 5 and describes how and why this pattern put an end to the HRRP in YSD.

Figure 5. The Slow Burn and Punctuated Conflict



Period of Latent Conflict (Oct to June)

From October to June, the disjunctures between the two logics of HR improvement remained mostly below the surface in the central office. Three factors help explain the absence of overt conflict early on in the HRRP implementation: first, advocates of the two competing views had relatively balanced resources within the central office in the form of relatively powerful champions; second, both sides utilized mostly passive influence strategies that generally avoided confrontation and discussion of the differences between the two agendas for HR improvement; and third, the leadership context in YSD created high levels of uncertainty that encouraged a wait-and-

see stance toward reform among all central office staff. To illustrate these claims I explain how the balance of power and influence strategies helped keep conflict beneath the surface across the two manifestations of the logics of HR improvement described earlier: the competing agendas for HR's organizational structure and the competing expectations about the day-to-day work of the manager highlighted in Chapter Six.

Balance of Power and Reorganizing the Department

Throughout most of the implementation of the HRRP both of the models of reorganizing HR described in Figure 4 in Chapter Six had an advocate with positional authority inside the central office. The organizational model associated with the reform logic of HR improvement had a champion in the HRRP director, who sat on the superintendent's cabinet. The organizational model associated with the status quo logic of HR improvement had a champion in the HR department administrator. Even though the HR department administrator was ostensibly charged with supporting the HRRP's implementation, he was actively developing his alternative re-organization model as early as January in the managers' meetings he presided over, telling his staff that he wanted to hire new directors and reshuffle staff within the department. Both actors' authority was an important resource for keeping their respective reorganization agendas active throughout the implementation period. But over time, the resources associated with the status-quo vision of reorganization increased.

Resources for the Reform-Minded Reorganization. The HRRP director's position on the cabinet was a deliberate decision by the HRRP design team to promote the ambitious vision HRRP had for the HR department. During the HRRP kick off meeting, the external partner said that the HRRP director's position was specifically

designed to ensure the HRRP's success. "How do we make sure that you're not designing a system you can't implement?" she asked the group rhetorically during the meeting, "Part of that is...[the HRRP director]...is involved. This is a cabinet level activity. That's a big part of it." The importance of the HRRP director's position was an explicit component of the HRRP plan that the design team had developed in the summer of 2011. The design team's original description of the HRRP said that the HRRP director would help coordinate and oversee the project from the highest levels of authority in the district by adding "a standing item to his weekly Operations Cabinet meetings related to resolving cross-unit issues [tied to the HRRP]." In practice, HR staff appeared to see the HRRP director as a strong advocate for HRRP's vision for reorganizing HR and moving the project forward. As one senior central office manager said during an interview, "I mean,...[the HRRP leaders]...are doing it right. It has to have commitment from the top. It has to have buy-in...[The HRRP director]...has to be doing it and...[the HR department administrator]...has to be doing it. It can't be just... [the external partner]. So it has to have that buy-in, that force."

For some actors, the HRRP director's authority was the main reason that the HR department administrator accommodated the HRRP work teams within the department, even though the teams were potentially at odds with his emerging plans for a status-quo-minded re-organization of HR. As one central office manager said during an interview,

Well, you have to understand positional power. When you're...
[the HRRP director]...and you say this is the direction that
we're going and...[the HR department administrator]...reports

to you, then you do what you're asked, whether you believe in it or not. So at least with...[the HRRP department administrator]...driving that,...[the HR department administrator]...has to do what...[the HRRP director]...wants. That's positional power.

The HRRP director's authority was also a resource HRRP advocates said they could marshal to compel cooperation from other central office departments. As the external partner explained to HR staff during a work team meeting, "one lesson we're trying to build on, I talked to...[a former district administrator]...he kept running into technology as the main barrier to what he was trying to get done. He kept bumping up against tech staff and he didn't have any access to cabinet to get the broader systems to move. We're taking care of that by having...[the HRRP director]...run this process...[The superintendent]...said, 'Just tell me what you need.' She is behind this [the HRRP]." By writing emails to the department that summarized the HRRP's progress, presiding over all-staff meetings about the HRRP, and meeting with the HR department administrator and the external partner, the HRRP director associated his positional authority with the reform and showed that the HRRP was a priority of the district's top leaders.

In addition to his link to the HRRP, the HRRP director was also responsible for overseeing the evaluation and pay reforms. This additional responsibility tied all of the district's major HR reforms to his office. During an interview, one central office administrator said, "[The HRRP director]...really does oversee this [evaluation and pay reform]. He knows much more about it than...[the HR department administrator]." As long as the HRRP director was with the district, the HRRP work teams continued to

meet and engage central office staff in developing the case manager job description, discussing how to implement the position across the district, and setting priorities for the automation work. The HRRP director showed that the official policy of the district was that the HRRP would transform the HR department by fundamentally reorganizing its work to support the case management position that would, in turn, provide strategic HR support to principals.

Resources for the Status Quo Reorganization. Like the HRRP director, the HR department administrator used his positional authority as a resource to keep the status quo model for reorganizing the HR department on the central office's agenda. Although the HRRP director ostensibly supervised the HR department administrator, when the HR department administrator was running his manager's meetings his authority was uncontested. For example, in the managers' meetings he used his prerogative as chair to remind his managers that he was planning on reorganizing the department to improve its oversight and management capacity and also to question the credibility of the HRRP model of reorganization (as I show later). Perhaps more striking was the way in which the HR department administrator took steps to amass additional resources inside of the central office in the months prior to the HRRP's eventual collapse. By the time the period of conflict suppression was punctuated by external events, the HR department administrator had was in a strong position to use his authority to resolve the question of the department's re-organization in his favor.

In particular, the HR department administrator did three things to amass power inside of the central office in the months leading up to the HRRP's collapse. First, the HR department administrator repeatedly defined the problem of HR improvement in

HR managers meetings in a way that set him and the department up for short-term success. The major outlines of the HR department administrator's definition of HR's problem have already been suggested by the status quo logic of HR improvement: the problem with the HR department was its failure to perform compliance and regulatory functions well (the reform logic of HR improvement would, by contrast, see the problem as the department's exclusive focus on compliance and regulation). As a senior district administrator said, the HR department administrator had defined himself to external actors as someone who would clean up compliance problems in HR in relatively short order. "I mean, he sold himself on the finger printing – the – what would be the above the fold stuff in [the local newspaper]," she said.

When the HR department administrator talked with his managers about addressing HR's problems associated with procedures and processes, he emphasized the need to make tangible improvements that would show the department's efforts were succeeding. A meeting in the winter of 2012 provides a typical example of the HR department administrator telling his team to work on problems with realistic, short-term solutions, a theme he often struck during many subsequent managers meetings. During the meeting he said,

So here's what I want to do, just talk about a little bit about where I see this group is headed...I want to make sure that we keep HR at the forefront for the rest of this year, not just for our work, and to say "We did these things," but more importantly, if someone comes in, new, that any one of us...can step up and say, "These are the things we started, the things

we finished, and the things we're continuing to work on next year." That's Important...As you know, in our personal and professional lives, if you put too much out, it doesn't all get done or done well. I'm less concerned about completing a mountain of work than completing things that mean something to us, that we think are important...I don't want to think about next year...I want you to think about what you would walk away with in June [2012].

The second way the HR department administrator built power within the central office was to ingratiate himself to formal authorities by paying close attention to his relationship with his superiors. The HR department administrator appeared to be primarily concerned with the school board's expectations, rather than the superintendent's or the HRRP director's expectations, especially in the spring when there was considerable uncertainty about who would be the district's next superintendent (I discuss this important leadership context later). For now, the main point is that the HR department administrator built his status in the department by shaping and meeting the school board's expectations for HR improvement.

The HR department administrator regularly met with school board members during the study period to gauge their expectations for HR improvement and report the results back to his management team. As he frequently reported to his management team, his meetings with school board members convinced him that the school board's key interest in HR improvement was the need to improve the accuracy and standardization of HR procedures and transactions. The HR department administrator

repeatedly told his managers during meetings that the school board wanted HR to focus on executing basic HR operations and transactions. For example, in a managers meeting in November, the HR department administrator told his management team that the school board had “beat him up” in a recent meeting about inaccuracies in an HR report. “They are looking at everything we do,” he said. While preparing for an oversight hearing with the board during the spring, the HR department administrator told his managers what he thought the school board wanted to hear during the hearing. He said,

And before I go further, let me tell you some board members commented, number one, what’s nice is they say they’re recognizing that, you know, the amount of steps we’ve taken forward...they recognize that we moved forward and that, in a general sense, things are getting better. What they did say to me...they want to hear from me: Are we managing, moving through, the basic functions of HR? Are they being done?...They want to know what are we doing about basic functions and how we check to make sure they’re completed.

During the oversight hearing the following week, school board members asked the HR department administrator questions about compliance and the nuts and bolts of HR. In the following exchange between the HR department administrator and a school board member the HR department administrator described how HR was communicating to staff about basic district policies and the school board member

followed up with a question about how the department ensured that people were complying with those policies.

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: So these are the policies and procedures that guide our work [*refers to PowerPoint slide*]...the new adopted board policies are very important to the work we do...

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER: Questions or comments on this? [*Long pause*]. You know, the only thing I would say on this one, at some point, not here, but at some point we need to have a conversation: now that you have policies, how do you know that the work is compliant with those policies? How do you create linkages?

Later during the oversight hearing a different board member pressed the HR department administrator on how quickly the department was sending job candidates to schools.

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER: ...the specific thing I would like to know is when you say you are increasing efficiency, you're trying to make processes more efficient. How long does it [*hiring*] take now and what's the target? Does it take your staff, say, 30 days to send it [*a job candidate to a school*] out or does it take 60? And then what's the goal, to make it more specific?

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: Well, of course, our staff does a good job getting people to principals right away. We have a heavy hiring season in the spring and summer. They get that out within a couple of days within that request. Usually we can put together a list within a couple of days and get it to the building.

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER: So from when a position is posted to where an applicant is in front of a principal, how long is that?

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: That can take maybe 3 to 4 days.

In this excerpt the school board member and HR department administrator discussed the efficiency and timing of hiring, rather than the degree to which hiring may have resulted in good matches between candidates and schools or the degree to which hiring sent principals a pool of high quality applicants, both major themes of the HRRP initiative. Throughout the oversight session, the school board's questions focused on HR's efforts to clean up and solidify the basics in HR. By the session's end, the school board members expressed satisfaction with what they had heard from the HR department administrator. One board member told the HR department administrator at the end of the hearing,

I would just like to close by echoing the thanks [from other board members] and this is markedly improved from where

we were a year ago. Thank you all for the confidence that this [HR improvement] can be done.

This board member's closing comment illustrates the HR department administrator's success in meeting the school board's expectations about improving the foundation of HR. The HR department administrator's success in pleasing the school board was noted by other staff as well. In response to an interview question about the school board's priorities, for example, a central office administrator said that the HR department administrator was closely aligned with the school board's priorities, "Well, one thing is they [the school board] want evaluations done and done in a timely manner now. They want the compliance stuff." Speaking in an interview in the late spring about the HR department administrator's leadership, a senior central office manager described the HR department administrator's standing in the district,

HR MANAGER: I think we're all kinda watching him [the HR department administrator]. We'll take his direction. He's just – he's gotten support of this organization, which usually only lasts for the honeymoon period of any director.

INTERVIEWER: When you say "this organization," what do you mean?

HR MANAGER: Senior leadership.

INTERVIEWER: Senior leadership. Like the operations cabinet?

HR MANAGER: Yep. And the school board.

The HR department administrator's good standing with the school board was a significant improvement over the department's longstanding status as a failure in the district central office. In the following quote a different central office manager said that the HR department administrator's strong standing with the school board was something new for HR.

INTERVIEWER: Who holds him [the HR department administrator] accountable?

HR MANAGER: The board...Absolutely. The board. It's interesting, because...[the HR department administrator]...out of all of the HR Directors that we've had, from my understanding of the history, has more political capital than anyone.

The HR department administrator's success with the board was also mentioned by other central office administrators, who, in response to an interview question about who supported the HR department administrator's approach to HR improvement, said "Well, I think the board thinks he's doing a good job, because it's quiet and principals and their complaints have calmed down. So that's their [the board's] data point."

Three months after the oversight hearing, the HR department administrator reiterated that the board's priorities were to improve the basic functionality of the

department. After meeting with school board members earlier in the day, he told his HR managers in May,

One thing we know, and the board's focus on is making sure we have the basic functions of HR very thoroughly thought through and organized in writing, from employment services to recruitment to hiring to fingerprinting. I also told them we're also cleaning up some mistakes.

Across the entire study period, the HR department administrator made similar comments, telling his managers that the school board members said that the department needed to focus on fixing basics -- in essence, it needed to pursue the status quo logic of HR improvement. Even actors who supported the reform logic of HR improvement recognized that the HR department administrator had met these expectations and had successfully raised the status of the department within the district. For example, as one central office manager reflected during a spring interview, "The things that...[the HR department administrator]...is really great at are assuaging people who could be burning down the door right now. People feel good and when he talks to the board, the board feels good."

The final way that the HR department administrator built resources within the central office was to acquire financial resources for the department. Since the fiscal crisis of 2008, YSD had made severe cuts in its central office in general and the HR department in particular. As one central office said, "Every spring we go through huge budget cuts...year after year." State budget documents show that inflation adjusted

expenditures in YDS's HR Department and central office declined every year between 2008 and 2011. By 2011, the HR department's expenditures were 18% lower than they were in 2008 in constant dollars. By April 2012, a month after his successful oversight hearing with the board, however, the HR department administrator reported to his team during a regular manager's meeting that the HR department would get a budget increase.

They [the school board] didn't reduce our budget this year.

We didn't lose anybody. Other departments got a big hit. In fact, we also had some [budget] enhancement. Now, you have to keep in mind you lost 4 positions last year. So we're not back to where we were, but we're coming back some. We're the only department in the district that got any enhancements of any kind.

State budget documents confirm that the HR department's yearly expenditures in real dollars increased by 5% between 2011 and 2012, supporting the HR department administrator's claim that HR saw a slightly higher rate of budget increase compared to the central office overall. The same documents show that expenditures in the central office overall decreased by 5% between 2011 and 2012. In sum, while the balance of power between advocates of the two logics of HR improvement was, in some sense, roughly equal during the months of latent conflict, the advocates of the status quo were building resources for influence in a way that the reformers were not.

Passive Influence Strategies and Reorganizing the Department

The conflict between the two logics of action over reorganizing remained latent not only because of the rough balance of power between advocates of the two logics but also because of the strategies actors on both sides used to promote and protect their view of HR improvement. The main influence strategy used by actors who favored the status quo reorganization of HR was to provide only token support to the HRRP. The main influence strategy used by actors who favored the reform reorganization of HR was staff engagement and persuasion. Neither strategy forced YSD's central office to address the disjunctures between the two models of reorganization or work out how the two views might complement one another.

Tokenism. During the period when the HR department administrator was amassing power inside of the central office his main strategy for promoting the incremental improvement of HR was to provide only token support for the more ambitious parts of the HRRP. As one central office administrator who was involved in the HRRP work team meetings summed up, "He [the HR department administrator] just keeps on doing the same thing the same way: I mean, just telling everyone yes, yes, yes [the HRRP will continue], shows up at meetings, yes, yes, yes -- but nothing changes." The HR department administrator's strategy of tokenism helped keep the conflict between the two visions of re-organizing HR beneath the surface during most of the winter and spring because the strategy allowed both groups to proceed on parallel tracks while never asking how the central office would reconcile the two models of reorganizing the department.

As the HRRP work teams continued to meet during the winter and spring, the HR department administrator often distanced himself from the work teams and the broader aims of the HRRP in his regular manager's meetings. When he did talk about the HRRP, he consistently referred to it as the external partner's work (not the HRRP director's work). The few times when his managers tried to draw a connection between the ambitious Track 1 HRRP agenda with the incremental, Track 2 agenda, the HR department administrator said that the more ambitious Track 1 agenda was separate from what his management team was trying to accomplish. For example, in the following meeting excerpt from January, the HR department administrator and his managers talked about the HR department administrator's HR Handbook initiative and one of the managers suggested the more ambitious parts of the HRRP might be relevant as the department started to documenting its work.

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: I'm talking about an HR guide/handbook that you'll help build so that the functions you're responsible for...are clarified for anyone that asks.

HR MANGER 1: Can we do that with...[the external partner]?
She had great ideas. She'd have ideas about our areas.

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: That's more of a case manager thing, but we're not thinking about case mangers until in the fall —

HR MANAGER 1: But the handbook is more than just case mangers. It's other functions. Employment --

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: [Interrupting] It will, but we're not far enough along with that [case management]. I just don't see that in place with...[the external partner]...to be honest...Moving forward, I hope we're moving with...[the external partner]...but don't count on her.

HR MANAGER 2: But whatever we put in the handbook can support that [the HRRP]?

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: Maybe. A HR "guide" I would call it. I see what you mean. Perfect.

This excerpt was typical of the mixed messages about the HRRP that the HR department administrator gave his managers during manager meetings. The HR department administrator told his team that the external partner should not be involved in the Handbook, but then he said he hoped the district moved forward with the external partner, before finally telling the group not to count on the external partner.

The HR department administrator's lack of active engagement in the HRRP project did not go unnoticed. By the late spring, for example, staff that attended the HRRP work team meetings started questioning the HR department administrator's commitment to the reform. In the following excerpt from a HRRP work team meeting a central office manager asked the external partner who was facilitating the meeting whether or not the HR department administrator was engaged in the redesign effort.

CENTRAL OFFICE MANAGER: Is...[the HR department administrator]...engaged in this? Is...[the other external partner]...meeting with him? Is someone reporting to him on this?

EXTERNAL PARTNER: So he's invited to all these meetings. Often he says he's going to come. We try to be disciplined to document what we talked about and...[the other external partner]...is meeting regularly with him. And I think...[the other external partner]...is prepared that, when you come up with the recommendation for him, it is a "Your staff has come up with this. What are you going to do?" That's about all we can do...

In a subsequent interview, one of the external partners indicated that the HR department administrator's lack of engagement in the process was unusual in her experience working with school districts.

So, typically, we would be meeting directly with their [a district's] leadership team...We're trying to both prepare the leadership team for, "This is what's coming." Help them think about how to respond to it. Help frame decisions for them and have them involved in making some of those key decisions. With...[the HR department administrator]...you know, we attempted some of that early on, but he was just so busy, I

guess. So, we had one kind of successful meeting with him...But after that, he just triple booked every meeting and really wasn't engaged.

The HR department administrator's token engagement with the HRRP work was especially clear during an all staff meeting in the late spring when the entire HR department gathered to hear a report from HR staff who had been working in the HRRP meetings. A central office manager who was at the meeting described what happened,

And just as...[one of the external partners]...started to talk about it [the HRRP]...[the HR department administrator]...left the meeting. And then he came back and sent his administrative assistant to come and get...[another manager]... out in the meeting. And I thought, I know that, I know that they had some phone conversation that was critical, but the timing seemed so bad because it kind of gave the impression that he didn't feel that it [the HRRP] was that important after all, that they left.

The external partner who was presenting at the meeting described the scene this way in an interview afterwards.

The other thing that was kind of difficult, I think, during the staff meeting, was when just before the group started sharing... [the HR department administrator]...had to leave. I think he got called into something urgent, so he had to leave the

meeting. I think it felt awkward to folks after his big opening with, you know, “We’re all in this together.” So, I think it was noticeable that he left. And then during one of our updates [at the same meeting]...somebody opened the door to the room and said, “We need you [to the presenter]. You have to come out and help us with something.” And so, in the middle of her speaking, she had to get called out for some urgent issue. So, I think both of those things kind of felt a little awkward for the group, that we’re all in this department-like meeting, but there are other things that are taking priority for other folks. Is this really a priority for the rest of us?

As HR staff continued to meet with the external partners to work on the HRRP throughout the spring, the HR department administrator did not do anything to block their work, but he did little to engage in or support it either. The HR department administrator’s token support for the HRRP allowed the implementation of the HRRP to progress to the point where the HRRP case manager work team accomplished their goal of developing a job description for the case manager position and started discussions about the best way to move forward to introduce the new role into the district. But it also compartmentalized the HRRP and kept in out of discussions among management team about HR improvement and the HR department administrator’s plans for departmental reorganization.

Staff Engagement. As noted earlier, the actors who supported the HRRP’s reform model of re-organization deliberately linked their reform agenda with the

cabinet-level HRRP director who had formal positional authority over the HR department administrator. The HRRP director used this positional power to keep the HRRP reform on the department's agenda and to compel the cooperation of the HR department administrator (albeit token cooperation). In addition to the HRRP department administrator's authority, actors who supported the HRRP vision of reorganization relied on staff engagement as their prime strategy for promoting the HRRP. From the beginning, the actors who supported the reform logic of HR improvement tried to actively engage HR staff in discussions about the HRRP and its ideas and invited staff to co-construct the details of the reform during the HRRP work team meetings.

The HRRP's emphasis on engagement and co-construction was a deliberate move by the HRRP design team. The design team justified the engagement strategy as a response to the failure of prior top-down reforms in YSD's HR department, including the reforms described in Chapter Seven. In the design team's words,

Even the best ideas about how to improve HR...[in YSD]...have suffered from lack of well- developed implementation plans, little staff engagement and no associated professional development plans. For example, when the department was reorganized into service teams, district leadership imposed the model on staff without first obtaining their support or building their understanding of the changes. During implementation, staff did not receive professional development to help them work well in the new model. Many changes, like the services

teams, called for collaboration among staff, but did not help staff break down the silos that prevented them from collaborating. Predictably, the model quickly faltered as staff performed poorly in their new roles (Identifying Document 2011, p. 3).

During the HRRP kick off meeting the HRRP director restated his intent to include HR staff as central participants in the HRRP initiative. “This is very much, as we tried to emphasize, not my project or...[the external partner’s]...or the superintendent’s. It’s our project. We want to make this something we’re all a part of to be a success, we have to all feel good about it.” A senior central office manager said she thought the HRRP implementation had lived up to the HRRP director’s promise. “The HR department is very much involved...[in the HRRP],” she said.

By the late spring, participants in one of the HRRP work team meetings reflected on the role staff engagement had played in the HRRP and how it influenced their views toward the reform. In the following excerpt, work team participants talk about the benefits of the HRRP’s engagement strategy as they contemplate working with district leaders, including the HR department administrator and a new superintendent.

EXTERNAL PARTNER 1: Well what would you like to ask of them [district leaders]?

HR MANAGER 1: We want them to give us an opportunity to finish what we started, or at least get to, at least one phase to what we’re doing and then make an assessment for the future.

I think we really need to implore them to allow us to finish, because we've started so many things and not implemented or finished them.

HR MANAGER 2: Yeah I think your [the external partner's] point about staff-driven work, it's a real organic process; nothing was imposed on us. This came out of our experience with the processes and design that we do every day.

HR MANAGER 3: This one [the HRRP] I'm actually excited about. I just feel like we're going to get to the end and finish something. I just want them to know how disappointed [I'd be if this stopped]; how important this is to me personally.

EXTERNAL PARTNER 1: So maybe at this point your optimistic, and you'd like to continue that?

HR MANAGER 3: It's exciting.

EXTERNAL PARTNER 2: What would you highlight to me, what makes you excited?

HR MANAGER 3: That we're engaged as a group and, the workers that do the job daily, and we're actually, it's not coming down [from above] "This is how you have to do it" and they've [higher ups] never done the work.

HR MANAGER 2: Yeah. People [HR staff] are in the room.

HR MANAGER 1: We've volunteered to do this. There are times, even today, I said to...[a colleague]...“We're so overburdened I really can't, I don't have time to spend 2 hours” [in a HRRP meeting]. But then the conversation was, “We made a commitment and this is important for us to be involved in and to at least share our thoughts and be a part of the project.” So you just say “Okay” [I'll go]. That other stuff will have to wait a few more hours.

HR MANAGER 3: The hope is this process is going to free up all that workload.

EXTERNAL PARTNER: [*Joking*] I was going to say, you have too much work to do even if you don't come to the meeting!

HR MANAGER 2: I'm hopeful that, we don't expect the work is going to disappear, but I'm hopeful that our work is going to be done more efficiently, that we'll have access to accurate information, and very quickly. That's why we're sticking it out.

HR ANALYST: We continue to come and participate.

This long excerpt illustrates the good will and energy that the HRRP leaders' engagement strategy produced among HR staff who had self-selected into the HRRP work teams. In a different HRRP work team meeting, other staff discussed how they

wanted to continue this engagement strategy moving forward. The excerpt begins with the group acknowledging that the HRRP work teams had no formal decision-making authority in the district.

EXTERNAL PARTNER: When I send out notes [to the rest of the department summarizing the work team's progress]...I'm going to frame it around we're not coming up with a decision, but we're developing an initial draft for another process. That's one point, so people don't think we're making the decision.

HR MANAGER 1: Who are the deciders?

EXTERNAL PARTNER: The superintendent. We recommend to the cabinet...I made a note of [the need to think about] how we bring this back and when...I'll put it on my list of things to think about at the end of the next meeting. Should our strategy be more than just an email, or should we take time in our team meetings?

CENTRAL OFFICE ADMINISTRATOR: You mean bring people together?

EXTERNAL PARTNER: I mean your own staff.

HR MANAGER 2: I like the idea to get together as a whole HR group, plus participants from...[the principal and teachers'

unions]. That feels more genuine than just our smaller groups. Various groups aren't even represented here...I think that felt really positive the last time in the all staff meeting. It [engagement] feels like the way to go...

Just as the HR department administrator's strategy of tokenism allowed the two logics of HR improvement to peacefully co-exist, the HRRP advocates' strategy of staff engagement allowed staff who did not self-select into the HRRP work teams to remain mostly disengaged with the reform and its implications for their work. Interestingly, among HR staff who attended the HRRP meetings, actors' impressions of the HRRP and their interests relative to the reform appeared to shift as a result of the engagement strategy. Some managers who attended the HRRP work team meetings were skeptical at first but then became more enthusiastic about the HRRP as the implementation continued. This seemingly productive engagement and co-construction strategy reached a sub-set of the department's staff. Across the 14 HRRP meetings I observed, for example, only eight HR staff attended more than four meetings, which represented about a quarter of the department's total staff. For the rest of the department, the reform advocate's engagement strategy was largely limited to email updates and all-staff meetings, rather than working the deep work they did in the work team meetings to understand and co-construct the HRRP with support from the external partners.

Balance of Power and Expectations about Day-to-Day Work

Throughout most of the implementation of the HRRP, the actors who struggled over the second manifestation of the logics of HR improvement discussed in earlier –

the definition of the day-to-day work of the central office manager in Chapter Six – had access to a range of resources that resulted in a rough balance of power. The funding administrator, who expected the manager to engage in more reform-minded work, had both financial resources related to the evaluation and pay grant as well as the threat that the district could be out of compliance with the grant. The HR department administrator, who expected the manager to engage in more incremental improvement work, was the manager's direct supervisor and the indirect supervisor of the funding administrator. Both actors' resources were important for keeping their respective agendas for the manager's work on the agenda throughout the study.

Resources for Reform-focused Work. The funding administrator who had reform-focused expectations for the manager's work held no positional authority over the manager. So rather than relying on positional authority as a resource to influence the manager's work priorities, she relied on the the district's accountability to the grant and the financial weight of the grant as a resource for influencing the supervising administrator. In the following interview excerpt, for example, the funding administrator described both her lack of positional authority in the district and how she used the district's compliance with the grant to argue that the HR department should align its priorities with the grant.

I have a vision for HR of what I would like it to be...but I'm not in charge of HR. I can try to influence it, but I'm not in charge.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think are your biggest levers for influencing HR?

Well I just keep saying, “Well, that's a core element of the grant. We need to really pay attention. We're going to be measured on that.” You know: “there's a measurement in the...[grant]...around this.”

In the managers' meetings, the funding administrator made a point of saying that some of the manager's day-to-day assignments were putting the district at risk of being out of compliance with the grant. She told the HR department administrator in subsequent managers meetings that the grant would be unable to pay for the manager's position if his work continued to focus on the day-to-day operations of the department. As the funding administrator said in an interview, “I have read the grant over and over and over and the deal we – I am held directly responsible and accountable to the... [funding agency]...who is like a laser-like focus on every part of this grant and you have to prove that you're implementing the grant. You can't just say. They want proof. They want people's work plans.”

Resources for Status Quo-focused Work. Throughout the implementation of the HRRP the HR department administrator used his positional authority to direct staff to focus on incremental improvements in HR. In particular, the HR department administrator used his authority to dictate the managers' work priorities so that they aligned with the status quo logic of HR improvement. As one central office administrator said during an interview about the manager highlighted in Chapter Six, “[The HR department administrator]...buried...[the manager]...in the day-to-day monotony of just processing the entire hiring, for like, the day-to-day of...[personnel

software]...the day-to-day, so he...was doing no strategy.” Another central office manager agreed,

[The HR department administrator]...moved him...[the manager]...from the vision...I think was intended, to a more operational [position]. I mean, we drew him into our void and said, “There’s no more visioning; there’s no more spreadsheets. It’s just working everyday to get the work done.” I think we took him off his tasks significantly, just to fill our void.

The manager in question was clear about the HR department administrator’s influence on his work. During an interview she said, “If...[The HR department administrator]...asks me, then that’s priority, just because he’s my boss. So it’s usually those types of priorities first.” Other staff expressed the same deference to the HR department administrator’s positional authority, suggesting that they would basically do whatever their immediate supervisor within the district hierarchy told them to do. As one said, “We adapt to whatever vision senior leadership has.” Speaking about the current HR department administrator, she went on to say, “he’s got that type of leadership that I think compels you to do whatever’s needed, and they [HR staff] see that.”

In some ways, the competing ideas about the manager’s daily work were more out in the open and visible within the department than the competing models of reorganization. After all they were both focused on the same person. And yet, the HR

department administrator and the funding administrator handled the conflict of the manager's daily work with a strategy that temporarily suppressed it, just as the HR department administrator and the HRRP team had kept the conflict over reorganizing HR beneath the surface.

Influence Strategies and Expectations about Day-to-Day Work

Since the manager's day-to-day work was unaligned with the intent of the grant that funded the evaluation and pay reforms, the funding administrator and the HR department administrator eventually agreed to split-fund the position, with the grant funding .5 of the manager's FTE to focus on strategic work and the HR department funding .5 of his FTE to focus on the day-to-day work of HR. As part of the deal, the manager was to remain the HR department administrator's direct report.

Just as the conflict over the two organizational visions remained beneath the surface by the fact that they were never discussed in the same meeting and because both sides used relatively passive strategies (tokenism and engagement), conflicts over the manager's work were temporarily pushed underground after the funding compromise. When the funding administrator explained the compromise in an interview, she said she was glad that she had addressed her concerns about grant compliance, but she worried that the compromise would dampen the manager's influence on HR improvement.

[The HR department administrator]...was having him do a lot of nuts and bolts things that had nothing to do with the...grant or recruiting. So we were out of compliance...So now...[the manager]...is only paid half-time out of the grant, and half-

time out of HR...which was the right thing to do. But it also took the steam out of the grant really being involved with that [HR improvement].

In summary, the early negotiation of conflict between the two logics of HR improvement around both the competing models of reorganization and competing expectations about day-to-day work followed a pattern of latent conflict because of the resources and strategies used by actors on both sides. In both cases, actors advocating for the two logics had a relatively balanced set of organizational resources. The HRRP director and the HR department administrator both had positional authority to promote their preferred reorganization model. Regarding the priorities for the manager's day-to-day work, the HR department administrator also had positional authority while the funding administrator could draw on the compliance demands of the grant and its financial resources to advocate for her expectations regarding the manager's work. Also in both cases, actors used relatively passive strategies or compromise to advocate for their preferred position. The HR department administrator provided only token support to the reform reorganization and the HRRP team relied on a strategy of staff engagement to promote the HRRP's vision of reform. Regarding the conflicting priorities for the manager's day-to-day work, the HR department administrator and the funding administrator agreed to a compromise that split-funded the manager's work as a solution to the dueling demands on his time. The larger point is that these resources and strategies enabled people to avoid making a decision about which logic would guide either area of HR improvement into the future. As I argue in the next section, the

strategies actors used to suppress conflict were also shaped by the broader leadership context in the district.

Leadership Context and Latent Conflict

The latent conflict that characterized the HRRP implementation did not happen in a vacuum. In this section I show how the strategies actors used to avoid conflict were shaped in large part by the leadership context in YSD. Specifically, the avoidance of conflict during the first phase of the HRRP implementation seemed to be, in part, a reaction to the superintendent's planned departure at the end of the school year. Recall from Chapter Five that the superintendent announced her departure from the district in the winter. The gap between her announcement and departure meant that she was essentially a lame duck leader for much of the spring. For HR staff and others in the central office, the superintendent's impending departure created lots of uncertainty that was well suited to the passive strategies and conflict avoidance I just described.

Advocates who supported both logics of HR improvement acknowledged that the superintendent's impending departure would shift the district's priorities for HR improvement in the near future. The HR department administrator mentioned the possibility of shifting priorities regularly during his manager's meetings in the late spring as the school board searched for a new superintendent. For example, in June he told his team during a manager's meeting that ultimately the new superintendent would dictate the department's direction,

So, not knowing what the next superintendent is going to do,
there's some conversation about really thinking about...what is

our role, with the new superintendent...He might say, do what you're doing, but whatever it is, he's going to define it for us.

Consistent with the way the HR department administrator talked about the HRRP throughout the spring, the HR department administrator gave mixed messages to his team about HRRP's prospects and importance when he talked about the impending change in leadership. For example, after talking about the potentially high cost of the case manager position during a manager's meeting in the late spring, and implying that he hoped the district will move forward with the position, the HR department administrator said the fate of the reform would depend on new superintendent.

...our new superintendent can say, "You know what, I don't care what it costs bring me a plan; this [HRRP's case management] is a priority." So that's the politics of some of this: my gut feeling tells me we'll be supported, but we really need to know. Does this job description [case manager] require a different pay step? If it does, we could have a lot of people interested in these jobs. Would we open it internally only or externally?...I'm meeting with...[the new superintendent]...next week. I'm going to have a conversation with...[another central office administrator]...and see what he's thinking. He...[the new superintendent]...met with...[the external partner]. I didn't know what came out of that. I want to talk to him and see where he is.

According to one central office administrator, a consequences of all of the uncertainty surrounding the district's leadership was that people in the central office were reluctant to collaborate with one another or commit to any new approaches to their work – or confront the competing agendas in the department. She said,

I also think as a system, not just HR, but as a system, people are pulling back their turf and sort of the silos and the walls are going back up in the whole system, because people are worried about what's going to happen [with the district's senior leadership], and it makes it less likely for people to collaborate when there's nobody in charge.

Later in the same interview, the same central office administrator linked the leadership turnover in the district (and the HR department) to the tendency for people in YSD's central office to focus on the nuts and bolts of HR, rather than embrace the longer-run strategic work associated with the HRRP.

The superintendent changes, the leader of this department changes. So that's why we're always in reactive mode, and nuts and bolts, talking about paperwork. But I've heard nothing about a vision -- heard nothing about vision come out of those...meetings since I've been here.

Likewise, another central office manager linked the ad hoc nature of HR procedures and practices in YSD to the district and department's history of turnover. She said, "The reason there are work-arounds [in HR] is because we're not clear, with

different superintendents there are different ideas about what the principal should be [and what this implies for HR].”

Another senior central office manager expressed the common concern that the shift would threaten the HRRP’s implementation this way,

I think you're going to see right now we're going to have another major leadership change...That can change everything. Sometimes when the superintendent changes, that next person cleans house. And that means your assistant superintendent is gone, your chief academic officer is gone. They may not like the directors or the organization of everything. Everything can change...My worry is, does it [the HRRP] continue with the leadership change? So we never quite have that feeling that whatever effort we do will be sustained.

Leadership uncertainty made it challenging for HR staff to feel confident about the future of the HRRP and created a context in which, rather than selecting one avenue for HR improvement, actors put off decisions about improvement by keeping the conflicts embedded within them beneath the surface. But as I argue in the next section, the actual departure of the superintendent upset the balance of power in the central office in ways that punctuated the uneasy truce between the two logics of HR improvement, leading to the spike in conflict shown in Figure 5 and the eventual collapse of the HRRP.

Confronting Conflict (June)

The superintendent's impending departure was public knowledge in the central office throughout the spring, but the HRRP director's future with YSD was unclear. The HRRP director told HR staff that the district would continue pursuing the HRRP after the superintendent left and that hopefully YSD he would be able to sustain the reform under a new superintendent. However, when the superintendent finally left the district in the spring, the HRRP director soon announced that he was leaving as well. For reasons that I was never able to uncover, the HRRP director and superintendent handed the leadership of both tracks of HRRP to the HR department administrator upon their departure. As the HRRP director told the HR staff in his farewell email, "As I transition out...[the HR department administrator]...is assuming the leadership of the transformation work and will work closely with the...[the external partner]...and...[the new deputy superintendent]. The project will remain a priority for the cabinet, which [will] help ensure continuity after I leave."

The appointment of the HR department administrator to lead the HRRP initiative caused concern among HR staff in favor the reform, again suggesting the importance of the HRRP director's role. To be sure, some staff found the HRRP director's email reassuring -- a long-time central office staffer said, "I was excited to get the email from...[the HRRP director]...and to know that we can move forward [with the HRRP]" -- but more often people said they were worried that the change in leadership threatened the reform.

A senior central office manager sounded deflated when she talked in an interview about the HRRP director's departure: "We're getting into a kind of groove with...[the

HRRP director]...and everything with...[the external partner]...and then it's like,...[the HRRP director]...leaves...[shakes head, does not finish sentence].” Another HR Manager said, “[The HRRP director's]...departure was a big hit because he's so gifted and was just wonderful, a wonderful guy.” Responding to a question about how the HRRP was affected by the HRRP director's departure, another HR manager said, “It's [the HRRP] not quite as formalized and certainly not as thoroughly presented as when... [the HRRP director]...was here. He [the HRRP director] was behind that [HRRP] and had the ability to put it together in writing and whatever.” Another central office administrator was openly skeptical about the HR department administrator's commitment to the HRRP. “Well” she said, “I think that...[the HRRP director]...had been the face of whatever the redesign work was and I don't think...[the HR department administrator]...was. He [the HR department administrator] may go through the motions, but I'm not sure you'll see behaviors that go with the motions, if it moves forward.”

The HR department administrator took over as the leader of the HRRP from a strong position, thanks to the work he had done amassing resources in the months prior to the HRRP director's departure. More than one manager noted that the HR department administrator had strong allies among the remaining members of the cabinet as he stepped up to take over the HRRP. As the next section shows, the HR department administrator soon shifted from a strategy of token engagement with the HRRP to a more direct strategy of exerting his authority to bring an end to the reform. Meanwhile, advocates of the reform continued to rely on rational persuasion and engagement as their primary influence strategies.

Post-Leadership Turnover Influence Strategies

As the HR department administrator assumed his new position in charge of the reform, the external partners and HR staff in the HRRP work teams continued to rely on an influence strategy that relied primarily on persuasion and engagement. In the following excerpt from an HRRP work team meeting, for example, one of the external partners and some central office managers talked again about how the work team should respond to the new superintendent now that it was clear that their champion in the district's cabinet would be leaving. The external partner who was facilitating the meeting began the conversation by asking how the team should mitigate some of the challenges associated with the leadership turnover. One of the managers responded by saying "new ideas" and the external partner asked her to clarify what she meant.

EXTERNAL PARTNER: Can you expand?

IT MANAGER: We're talking about a change of leadership. New leaders have new ideas. I would say to welcome them in the context of what has been.

EXTERNAL PARTNER: Welcoming new leaders into our framework.

HR ANALYST 1: Having some influence.

HR MANAGER 1: So I think that goes along with our having an opportunity to be able to explain what we're doing and

show some excitement and enthusiasm about where we are and what we've accomplished so far.

EXTERNAL PARTNER: Great one. I like that a lot. So sharing what we're doing.

HR MANAGER 2: Hopefully creating a partnership with these new leaders.

Later in the same discussion a central office analyst said the group could influence the new leaders by “really being able to communicate what we are doing, to get our objectives clarified and get organized and perhaps influence the direction we go.” A central office manager added that the group needed to tell the new leader that the HRRP was “important to us.” For the members of the work team, the main to influence the district after the HRRP director's departure was to communicate what they had been doing to the district's senior leaders and express how much they valued the HRRP.

In another HRRP meeting the group talked about how the shift in leadership created a host of challenges for the initiative and again returned to the importance of the strategy of engagement. First, on the challenges, a central office manager said, “The risks are the momentum. You lose momentum. Lose Focus. Priorities shift,” and then one of her colleagues elaborated the challenges of leadership turnover this way,

I think there are people in the organization who sort of bide their time, okay? [They say] change happens above me, so I just do what I do. “Here comes another consultant. I'm still

doing what I'm doing." In a leadership transition time you can continue to foster that behavior. That's what I mean. Those of us involved, I think of HR as a department where they think, we, is the time we're investing now worth the time we're investing?

After talking about these challenges in the meeting, the external partner asked the group how they, as advocates for reform, could mitigate them. In the following exchange the group concluded again that the best way for the HRRP work teams to influence the new superintendent was to tell him about the work that they have been doing.

HR MANAGER 1: I'd like to expand on what we're doing, part of that...is really being intentional about how we enunciate the work to people [leaders] coming in, with the new superintendent and cabinet. Our goal is to have a product that's compelling, that says this is compelling...

HR MANAGER 2: A new person or new people may have some ideas that would enhance what we're doing; [maybe] they have some experiences that would be supportive of what we're doing.

EXTERNAL PARTNER: Yup. And maybe by doing this we can help shape their view of what we're doing. We can clearly

describe what we're doing and why it's exciting and important and we might invite them to add their ideas.

In stark contrast to the HRRP's strategy of engagement, the HR department administrator took a direct approach to influencing the future of HR improvement after the leadership turnover. Less than a month into his oversight of both tracks of the HRRP, the HR department administrator announced at a manager's meeting that he was stopping the Track 1 work of the HRRP initiative. He began his announcement by once again providing mixed messages about the future of reform.

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: The other thing I want to talk about is where we're going with...[the external partner]. We have a meeting on the 28th.

HR MANAGER 1: We? Who, the department?

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: Yea. The 28th. It's on the schedule. There's been a lot of rumors: "I think the work will go away." Some people care, some don't care. Here's the real true story: We're going forward, just as we have been. But I call this a pause button.

The HR department administrator continued to send mixed messages about the reform as the meeting continued. But midway into the meeting, he and his managers confronted the underlying disjunctures surrounding the HRRP vision for HR and, for

the first time, the HR department administrator openly voiced his reluctance to support the reform.

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: We're going to talk about this on the 28th. You can talk about it with anyone. As we move forward, the case manager piece is huge. It's huge because I want us to go back as a group: is the job description the right one? Is the title the right one? Are the requirements a certificate or no certificate? How would we initiate it? How would we fill the positions? What I'm not willing to do is to ask people to re-apply for their own positions...If we're not doing that, how are we going to do it and be humane and still move forward?...this has to have input from everyone. Everyone has to know and weigh in on the job description. What happens is, we have those [HRRP] meetings and not everyone can be there. Part of what we want to think about, even if we're not starting in January, we need to think about it right now, so let's get it all in place and this summer have time to plan it out. It has to be everybody' involved...

HR MANAGER 1: Question: the case manger team came up with a job description. Are you talking about changing it? The process did help, the, everyone was involved. Are we rehashing?

In the above comment HR Manager 1 raised the point that the HRRP work team process was something that the interim-superintendent, the HRRP director, and the HR department administrator had agreed to. But before he could finish his sentence, the HR department administrator interrupted.

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: [*Interrupting*] My position is it's too important to leave it up to a committee, even though others can't be there. Does it need a rehash? I think it needs to be looked at again...Let's just say the position required a teacher or administrator credential. That's a financial impact on this district. I want to make sure, before we move forward, that the money is in place. The other part is, we can't expect this to be at the same pay rate as what we have currently. When I think of a case manager, I'm thinking of five of the most significant positions in this department. When I say rehash, I mean talk much deeper than that. It impacts everybody in the department...I'm not saying we're going to throw it out. I'm saying we need more time to look at it. It involves a completely, not necessarily a different role, in a sense it's like hiring 5 new people.

HR MANAGER 2: [*Agreeing*] You are. You are. The work that analysts do hasn't gone with that. It's five additional positions.

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: Right. But I don't think that's what...[the external partner]...is thinking, that we'll add 5 FTE. I think there's a sense that this will replace, [something] in some sense.

HR MANAGER 3: So it could eliminate some positions?

HR MANAGER 4: We're not eliminating that work, but it —

HR MANAGER 2: But it hasn't been explained where it [the work currently] goes.

HR MANAGER 1: The work would have to change. That's why we have the data and automation work group [to identify transactions that can be automated to free up staff to do strategic HR work].

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: And we could reduce the time we spend on those things.

HR MANAGER 1: That's where it would go. The question is, with five of those positions, how do we get the work done that still needs to get done while getting the systems to support the case manager. The goal is to empower the HR function and have one go-to person or, the people, they know they can count on, that's the goal for that position. So I think that the structures that we're talking about were, the structures have to

be defined for these people to come in as new people. We're talking about a reorganization of the whole system. It's not five in addition. It's changing.

HR DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR: But that's a huge message [emphasizes the word "huge"]. It can't be done in isolation because, who attended those meetings?...we're talking about a culture shift that is, I think, number one, case managers are important and we need them, but we can't be, what you do has to be not just integrated into our system, but to the people we have here...

HR MANAGER 2: I like your idea of first things first.

This long excerpt captures the HR department administrator's most direct criticism of the HRRP effort that I observed during the entire study. The HR department administrator makes several arguments against the HRRP during this meeting: not enough people were involved; the case manager positions will be too expensive; the reform will be too disruptive to staff. Manager #1 argued that the work teams had already invested a lot of work thinking about the case manager's role and reiterated the point that the case manager was part of a broader change for the department. The HR department administrator essentially discounted the staff engagement associated with the HRRP and said that the HRRP was a huge message that he was not prepared to deliver to the department. Manager #2 sums up the status quo logic of HR improvement when she describes the HR department administrator's

agenda as “first things first” at the end of the excerpt. The HR department administrator’s positional power trumped the resources the reformers had built up through staff engagement and he essentially tabled the case management idea.

It is significant that at the same time that the HR department administrator was arguing that the HRRP case manager positions were too expensive, he had successfully secured extra funds to fill the two positions that were part of his planned re-organization of the department. One central office manager asserted that the HR department administrator was able to secure extra funding for his reorganization because of his close relationship with the district’s finance department.

HR MANAGER: [The HR department administrator]...is joined at the hip with...[a finance administrator]...so that we get additional monies, as we need it. Contingency basis. We’re getting a ton. We’ve got staff we’ve never had, hourly and temporary staff.

INTERVIEWER: How is he able to get that money?

HR MANAGER: Because...[the finance administrator]...just looks the other way and we keep them [extra staff] onboard...in the long run, he’s [the HR department administrator] done some great things for this department. And it’s larger; the department itself is getting staff back so that we’re becoming able to do some of the work that needs to be done.

For the majority of the study, the HR department administrator's tokenism and the reform advocates' emphasis on engagement meant that the HRRP never reached a point where people outside of the work teams had to deal with its far-reaching implications for organizing and staffing the department or the underlying conflict between the two logics of HR improvement. But once the HRRP director and superintendent left the district, the HR department administrator, who had amassed power within the central office in the winter and spring, exercised his authority to halt the ambitious pieces of the HRRP. As I show next, the conflict over the day-to-day work of the manager from Chapter Six followed a similar pattern.

As with the struggle over re-organizing the department, the strategies actors used in the struggle over the manager's work shifted as the superintendent left the district. Around the time that the superintendent and the HRRP director were preparing to leave the district, the HR department administrator told the evaluation and funding administrator that he wanted the grant to pay for part of one of the new director positions in his re-organization plan for the department. The funding administrator said during an interview that the "[The HR department administrator]...believed that we owed him that other half [of a position] so he was going to hire somebody else." The funding administrator argued that funding a position in the HR department administrator's re-organization was not the intent of the grant and she refused to pay. In an interview she recounted what she told the HR department administrator,

It's not a good use of public money. I'm not going to pay for somebody that's at the same level of director. I'm not going to

pay for somebody that's in charge of all of HR operations/
recruitments as part of what they do.

She continued, "My strategy at that point was, I'm not going to let...[the manager]...get buried in the day-to-day monotony of HR. He's too smart. He's too valuable to the grant and the strategy." The struggle between the funding administrator and the HR department administrator over the manager's work did not go unnoticed by staff in HR. Some staff talked about the struggle as a personality conflict, rather than a conflict about HR improvement. For example, responding to a question about the struggle over the manager's work, a central office manager said, "It's personality conflicts, for one thing. I'm not gonna lie. I'm gonna tell the truth." Another colleague chalked up the conflict to the fact that funding administrator and the HR department administrator did not have a "strong working relationship." Soon, events outside of the HR department provided an opportunity for the funding administrator to address her concerns with more decisive action.

As the district readied itself for the new superintendent, leaders in central office departments started to leave the district. Importantly for the funding administrator, YSD's director of curriculum and instruction left the district and was replaced by an internal hire. This shift in leadership was important because the funding administrator had a good working relationship with the incoming curriculum and instruction director. In short order, the funding administrator and the HR department administrator agreed that the funding administrator's team, including the manager who they had been struggling over, would no longer be part of HR and instead would move to the district's

curriculum and instruction department under its new leader. Discussing the move during an interview one central office manager said,

That [the move] was done very intentionally because...[the funding administrator]...politically aligned herself with...[the curriculum and instruction director]...It was not just a done deal easily....I think it's gonna be much more effective. And that takes her away from here [HR] and puts her more strategically, puts the grant more strategically with teaching and learning – a smart move.

During an interview earlier in the study, the funding administrator explained the complexity of negotiating all of the different actors suggested in the above quote, including prior turf struggles with curriculum and instruction over who was in charge of principal professional development in YSD. The funding administrator said, “So...[the grant]...is tricky, needs a lot of politics: To make good with...[the HR department administrator]...to make good with...[the HRRP director]...to make sure that...[other departments]...don't feel like I'm on their territory.”

Once she moved the grant staff to the curriculum and instruction department, the funding administrator said she thought she had found a good ally within the central office:

She'll advocate for the work. She'll allow us to come to cabinet and present. She's already asked me to present to the Ops Cabinet. So that's a big one.

INTERVIEWER: Is that different than in the past with HR?

Mm-hmm, we were never asked to come talk to anybody about anything.

She continued, “I’m fine being in...[curriculum and instruction]...because I report to...[the director]...I can work with her. She is supportive. She collaborates. We’re moving. But, it saddens me that it’s no longer about helping HR become the progressive HR that it could be.”

As for the HR department administrator, when he announced the departure of the funding administrator and her team to his managers in late June he continued to send mixed messages about HR improvement, even suggesting for a moment that he might not allow some staff of the funding administrator’s staff to leave the department,

[The funding administrator]...will report to...[curriculum and instruction director]....So, I’m not positive...[manager #1]...is leaving — he doesn’t know that! I think he’s leaving and I’m not going to put a roadblock up. I’d rather have him in HR...The first thing is whoever goes to...[curriculum and instruction]...needs to go first. I’ll let them go at their convenience. I hope it’s by July 1.

In the end, the entire grant team left HR and the manager whose work was an object of struggle within HR began working with the district’s research and evaluation team to analyze data on the district’s teachers and principals. The HR department,

meanwhile, was left under the uncontested leadership of the HR department administrator and his status quo priorities for HR improvement.

Summary

From a certain perspective the HR department had improved a great deal under the HR department administrator's leadership: its status within the district was better than it had been in a decade; its budget was larger, having grown more than other departments' budgets; and procedures that had long been ad hoc and disorganized -- fingerprinting and filing -- were more organized and formal. But the vision of a more coordinated and strategic HR function that focused on improving teaching and learning was, for the moment, off the agenda. Indeed, a few short months after the HR department administrator said he was pausing the case manager initiative the HRRP's local funder pulled all support for the reform and the Track and and Track 2 improvement efforts stopped completely.

This chapter showed that the negotiation of conflict that led to the abandonment of the HRRP followed a distinct pattern: a period of latent conflict followed by a short period of more overt conflict and power plays. The underlying conflicts described in Chapters Six and Seven were latent during much of the HRRP's implementation because of the balance of power that existed between advocates of both logics of HR improvement as well as the passive influence strategies and compromises they used to promote and protect their preferred ideas. These strategies, in turn, were shaped by the leadership context in YSD, specifically the uncertainty created by the superintendent's departure. When the superintendent and HRRP director finally left the district, actors responded to the departure in ways that had important consequences for the HRPP: the

HR department administrator responded by exercising the authority and resources he had amassed to put an end to the HRRP while HRRP advocates continued to rely on passive influence strategies; the funding administrator responded by joining forces with an ally in a different department. In the end, power won out over persuasion, and comprehensive HR reform in YSD collapsed.

Chapter 9: Summary and Implications

As school districts seek to ensure that all students have effective teachers, they are increasingly looking to transform their HR systems to help them achieve this goal. Like YSD, many districts are taking an all-encompassing approach to transforming their HR systems. Rather than rethinking outdated pay and evaluation practices in isolation, districts are pursuing comprehensive HR reforms that seek to realign all of their HR activities -- everything from teacher recruitment and selection to hiring, development, and rewards -- to form a coherent and strategic system of supports that focuses relentlessly on developing and retaining effective teachers and supporting school improvement.

Existing accounts of comprehensive HR reforms show that when school districts try to transform HR into a coherent and strategic system, they introduce profound changes inside of their central offices that upend long-standing organizational structures and work practices. Existing accounts also suggest that the changes associated with comprehensive HR reform can spark organizational conflict and tension inside of central offices. But the literature on comprehensive HR reform currently provides little guidance to policymakers about why these reforms spark organizational conflict or how implementers might negotiate or manage it in ways that support implementation. My study addresses this problem by examining the sources of potential conflict that emerge during the implementation of comprehensive HR reform and the ways in which central office staff negotiate and resolve conflict. YSD provided a strategic case to examine these issues because the district was on the cusp of launching a comprehensive HR reform initiative when I began my dissertation and the research site

allowed me to observe, in real time, central office staff grappling with the difficult task of translating an new vision of HR into reality. In this final chapter I provide a brief summary of the study findings and discuss what they imply for research and practice.

Summary

I found that the implementation of comprehensive HR reform was marked by conflict over the meaning of HR improvement. Actors in the central office invoked two competing logics of HR improvement during implementation, which had different assumptions about both the goals and means of reform. This finding suggests how ambitious bureaucratic reforms may create conflict and struggle by tapping into deep disagreements about the premises that guide how bureaucracy works. When districts ask central office bureaucracies to work in ways that they were never designed to, the potential for difference, goal diversity, and conflict is high. I also found that actors' different interpretations of HR improvement in YSD had their root causes in the central office's historical context and individuals' professional backgrounds, a finding consistent with prior research on implementation in central offices (e.g., Burch & Spillane, 2005).

Though actors in YSD had different understandings of HR improvement, I found that conflict between the two logics of HR improvement was latent for much of the implementation period in YSD. That is, although actors perceived the differences between the two logics of HR improvement, these differences remained mostly dormant and hidden as people carried on with their daily work in the central office. I argued that conflict over HR in YSD remained latent for three main reasons. First, the balance of power that existed between the two logics of HR improvement inside the central office

helped keep the conflict latent. Both sides had enough authority to keep their respective ideas about HR improvement in front of different segments of the central office staff. Second, actors on both sides of HR improvement avoided open conflict by relying on passive and compromise strategies that actively avoided the question of whether the district should prioritize one approach over the other or reconcile them in some way. A strategy of tokenism from the HR department administrator, for example, allowed HRRP advocates space to develop the HR case manager job description and begin discussions about automation without confronting what these changes implied for the HR department administrator's status-quo reorganization agenda that he discussed in the regular managers meetings. Third, the superintendent's lame duck status created a backdrop of uncertainty that left all actors, regardless of their views, reluctant to take a forceful posture on HR improvement one way or the other. Who knew which direction the next superintendent would take?

Ultimately, the latent conflict in YSD over HR improvement was punctuated by the final departure of the initiative's top leaders. The way actors responded to this departure created a pattern of micro-politics that I call the slow burn. The punctuation point in the slow burn was YSD's leadership transition, which created a situation that benefited actors who had amassed resources in the central office during the period of latent conflict and disadvantaged those who mostly ignored the politics of implementation and believed in the power of ideas and engagement. In the months leading up to the leadership departure, the main advocate for the status quo logic of HR improvement had increased his power and stature inside the central office by framing the problem of HR improvement in ways that set him up for success, by ingratiating

himself to his superiors, and by obtaining financial resources for his department. By contrast, the HRRP advocates spent the period of latent conflict working hard to engage a sub-set of the HR department in co-constructing the HRRP implementation agenda. Even after it was clear that YSD would experience leadership turnover, the HRRP advocates did not appear to cultivate additional bases of support within the district's top leaders. When the leadership transition finally occurred, actors opposed to the HRRP responded with a power play that went unmatched by reform advocates, and so the reform collapsed. Conflict during implementation was not a binary phenomenon, but rather a complex condition that played out differently over time. These findings confirm the importance of studying the micro-politics of implementation and the questions it raises. As Stone and his colleagues (2001) argue, this focus on politics is important because too often education reformers,

...assume that policy making is a matter of selecting good, professionally sound techniques, and they often believe that, if information about good practice is widely disseminated, change will follow (p. 19).

But as the case of YSD shows, well designed policies can be undercut by the micro-politics of central offices. To be sure, by choosing a political perspective on implementation I have attended to particular aspects of the case and not others. This analysis did not, for example, consider how actors' responses to the HRRP were shaped by the incentive or information structures associated with the reform and the central office; it also did not look at the degree which implementation was shaped by dynamics related to social capital or cognition among the district cabinet or within the

department. These other perspectives could surely provide a useful elaboration of the case. And yet, I believe a political perspective on implementation is particularly useful in explaining the case of YSD and, as I argue next, has important implications for both research and practice.

Implications for Research

This study's findings have several implications for how researchers seek to understand the micro-politics of reform in district central offices. First, the study's finding that logics of HR improvement were an object of struggle during implementation suggests the importance of combining political and sense-making perspectives in efforts to understand the implementation of ambitious bureaucratic reforms. Political perspectives are useful for understanding the implementation of bureaucratic reform because, as this study suggests, these reforms often require profound changes in policy and practice that raise issues that are difficult to resolve through rational discourse or consensus. The complex, iterative, and uncertain process of transforming HR in school district central offices presents a host of problems that political perspectives are well situated to explore.

But my finding that logics of HR improvement were a key object of struggle in YSD suggests that political perspectives on implementation might be strengthened if researchers combine them with sense-making perspectives on implementation (Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006). Sense-making perspectives on implementation emphasize how implementation outcomes are influenced by people's understandings and interpretations of policy and its demands (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Sense-making perspectives suggest that implementers' interpretations of reform depend

on a host of factors related to what they already understand and know, as well as the social contexts in which they work (Spillane et al, 2006). For a political analysis, these insights suggest the potential of conceptualizing interests *in terms of understandings*. Future conceptualizations of ambitious bureaucratic reform might use a sense-making perspective to reveal how implementing agents understand the demands of reform and its implications for their work and a micro-political perspective to reveal how implementing agents negotiate and resolve the alignments and discontinuities among those understandings. The added value of a sense-making perspective for political analyses is that it provides a sharper framework for conceptualizing understanding -- and so interests -- than the one I have used in this study. For example, sense-making perspectives specify how implementers are likely to misinterpret policy messages, by focusing on the superficial features of policy rather than deeper relationships, or by being biased toward interpretations that resonate with their prior beliefs or values (Spillane et al, 2002). A sense-making perspective also provides political analysts a way of conceptualizing interests as malleable and evolving, rather than static; if researchers think about interests in terms of interpretations and understanding, they might reveal how interests change during implementation and ways in which leaders might take misalignments between interests and realign them not just through bargaining and logrolling, but through leadership moves related to framing and learning (Honig et al., 2010). Researchers who combine these two perspectives would go deeper than the current study in examining the roots of different ideas about HR improvement but also provide more insight into political strategies and conflict than is typical in sense-making accounts of implementation. This combined conceptualization of implementation

resonates with the definition of micro-politics suggested by Bacharach and Mundell (1993) who suggested that micro-politics are essentially “a struggle among various interests to establish unity around a particular logic of action, whether this unity is established by consensus or domination” (p. 429).

Second, the study suggests, in part through its shortcomings, the importance of conceptualizing the micro-politics of implementation as a multi-level phenomenon within school districts. The study’s findings show that the implementation of the HRRP was shaped by events beyond the inner-workings of the HR Department. The HR departmental administrator’s efforts to build his stock within the central office, for example, were shaped by how he managed his relationship with the district’s school board. Likewise, the interactions between actors within the HR Department were shaped by the uncertainty that stemmed from the leadership of the superintendent and cabinet. One of the limitations of the study is that I failed to deeply explore the influence of actors beyond the HR department, not just the school board but also the funders who initially supported the HRRP. Actors outside of the HR department -- the superintendent, the school board, funders -- clearly shaped the micro-politics inside the HR department, both directly and indirectly. Future research on the micro-politics of implementation inside the central office might develop a conceptualization of implementation that combines micro-political and macro-political perspectives to capture how political dynamics at both the micro and macro levels of the system influence and are influenced by one another.

This study also has broad implications for how researchers interpret and integrate the core constructs of political analysis discussed in Chapter Three: actors,

interests, resources, strategies, and context. As I suggested in Chapter Three, the dominant approach to integrating these core concepts in implementation research has been to link them together into political patterns or dynamics that form recognizable games (Bardach, 1979; Malen, 2006). Bardach's (1979) classic game metaphor has been a powerful and durable organizing device in research on the politics of implementation for decades. It usefully draws analysts' attention to the players (actors) involved in implementation and intuitively frames political exchanges as part of a contest or battle in which the two sides play off of each other. The game metaphor highlights the moves that actors make, draws attention to the rules that condition how they play, and suggests that implementation games represent recurring themes that have predictable outcomes (Malen, 2006).

Despite the utility of the game metaphor, it seems ill-suited to the pattern of micro-politics illustrated in this study. To begin with, not all of the actors in YSD appeared to recognize that they were playing an implementation game defined by micro-political dynamics. The HRRP advocates, for example, did not appear to engage in strategic political behavior during the period of latent conflict or even during the overt conflict at the end of the slow burn. Even if these actors realized they were in a game or contest, it is far from clear that they knew what they needed to do to score. Second, even actors who seemed to behave in more overtly political ways, such as the HR department administrator, appeared to vacillate between intentionally playing politics and simply coping with events as they unfolded. Rather than conceptualize patterns of micro-politics like the slow burn as an implementation game, it may be more apt to conceptualize them as an implementation trajectory. Trajectories are paths

joined by different points. Depending on which point the analyst considers the end, the politics and relevant game may be quite different.

Thinking about implementation trajectories rather than games has three major implications for studying implementation. First, like the game metaphor, conceptualizing implementation in terms of trajectories suggests the importance of conceptualizing patterns of micro-politics as they unfold over time and, eventually, contribute to some implementation outcome. Second, as implementation trajectories unfold, any one of the forces that shape them -- including those associated with external shocks -- can create an inflection point that shifts the trajectory. For political analysis, this suggests the importance of identifying inflection points and their implications for implementation. In the case of YSD, for example, the departure of the superintendent and HRRP director was an inflection point that profoundly shifted the HRRP's trajectory. Finally, unlike the game metaphor, an implementation trajectory does not make strong assumptions about the intentionality of actors or the coherence or predictability of events over time. Instead, it suggests that political dynamics in implementation follow a path that is the cumulative result of forces associated with political behavior (actors, interests, resources, strategies, and context), both calculated and unintentional.

Instead of looking for identifiable games, conceptualizing the micro-politics of implementation in terms of trajectories orients researchers toward inductively identifying the trajectory of conflict negotiation and resolution during implementation, and then paying particular attention to the events and processes that altered the trajectory in ways that increase conflict, reduce it, or perhaps allow implementers to use

it productively to support implementation. By identifying important inflection points and how actors respond to them, researchers might provide practical guidance to practitioners that is more flexible and adaptable than the advice derived from identifying political games, which may seem evident only in the postmortem conducted after an implementation failure or success.

In conceiving of implementation as a trajectory, this study reinforces the importance of using methods that allow for the study of the micro-politics of implementation as they unfold over time. My engagement with the research site for over half a year was critical to understanding the micro-political dynamics associated with implementing the HRRP and their impact on implementation outcomes. Had I stopped collecting data two months earlier, for example, I would have concluded that, although the HR department administrator was not directly involved in the HRRP work, the reform had accomplished much of its stated goals and was moving forward. I might have concluded that the latent conflict between the two logics of HR improvement was likely to remain latent for the foreseeable future. Likewise, if I had only studied the design of the reform the preceding summer and observed its initial launch, I might have concluded that the reform's implementation was likely to succeed because its designers had taken so much care to heed lessons from YSD's prior reforms. In the same way, if I had interviewed participants in the summer after the HRRP collapsed, I would have not understood how the HR department administrator had developed power within the central office over time or how the implementation trajectory was shaped by the influence strategies advocates used on both sides used to promote their views.

Finally, the study confirms the importance of collecting data through observations and interviews to understand the micro-politics of implementation. My meeting observations allowed me to see instances of the competing logics of HR improvement in people's day-to-day work and to follow developments in real-time as they unfolded in ways that were impossible with interviews. But my interviews allowed me to examine the roots of people's perspectives on HR improvement and, importantly, hear unvarnished accounts about the competing ideas that seemed to operate below the surface in the many meetings I observed. Both data collection methods suggest the importance of getting deep inside of the central office to study the micro-politics of implementation. The importance of *being there* suggests that, in addition to conducting studies similar to this one, researchers might embrace design-based research and other applied and collaborative approaches to knowledge-building to develop rich and grounded accounts of the complexities of implementation that can build knowledge about supporting ambitious efforts to improve school district central offices.

Implications for Practice

The findings have several implications for practitioners who want to fundamentally transform their district's HR system and, more generally, their central offices. Above all, the findings suggest the importance of attending to fundamental reform in central offices as both a learning problem (because transforming central offices requires staff to learn how to work in fundamentally different ways) *and* a political problem (because transforming central offices can create conflict and struggle). The reformers in YSD invested a great deal of energy engaging central office staff in the co-construction of the reform to help them learn how a transformed HR system would

work. In meeting after meeting, the external partners worked with staff to help them learn for themselves how HR under the HRRP would be fundamentally different from the status quo HR. This engagement strategy resulted in some staff feeling more hopeful and invested in the reform than they had been in the past. The reformer's focus on learning and winning the hearts and minds of staff was clearly important, given that this was exactly the terrain that ultimately became an object of struggle in the case.

And yet the study's findings suggests that engagement is not enough.

Practitioners who want to fundamentally change the way central offices do business also need to recognize that reform is a micro-political problem. The political nature of changing the central office means that reformers cannot ignore the need to build a coalition of supporters or the need to build organizational power. The *design* of the HRRP project recognized this point, and so it designated the HRRP director as the main champion of the reform in the district. But during the initiative's implementation, HRRP advocates did not appear to focus on maintaining or building support among the district's top leaders. And when it became clear that the HRRP director's future was, at best, uncertain, the reformers continued to rely on persuasion and engagement strategies, rather than taking more pro-active steps to cultivate support among the remaining cabinet members, school board, or external interest groups. Practitioners who want to fundamentally transform their central office must concentrate not only on helping people understand; they must also think carefully about who supports the reform within the district's power structure (and who opposes it). Just as researchers might combine sense-making and political perspectives to understand the micro-politics of implementation, practitioners might support implementation by simultaneously

tending to the cognitive and political demands of organizational change. The case suggests that the political demands of organizational change may be especially pressing under conditions of uncertainty or ambiguity. Honig and her colleagues (2010) recently suggested that system leaders can combat uncertainty and ambiguity by continually developing the reform's theory of action, constantly communicating about the work and its theory of action throughout the organization, and brokering resources and relationships to support the reform and its implementation. District leaders in YSD did not do these things consistently, and the resulting uncertainty created an environment that was ripe for politics.

On a narrower note, this study points to the importance of paying attention to tokenism as a threat to ambitious reform. The hallmark of tokenism is allowing a policy to move forward with no real support. This case suggests that reformers should be particularly wary of token support and look not just for superficial encouragement but also for whether or not top leaders are engaged in the reform and advocating for it and taking it on as a cause within the organization. Throughout the study, several reform-minded staff said they were never able to address the cabinet or the school board about their work related to HRRP. In retrospect this was a red flag that the reform was on unstable ground. Ironically, although the HRRP was the official policy of the district, the HR department administrator was able to keep it mostly confined to the work team meetings by offering the reform no more than minimal support.

The HR department administrator's cultivation of support among the school board and the remaining cabinet members brings into relief the importance of attending to the multi-level nature of the micro-politics of implementation. Just as this study

suggests the importance of attending to the learning *and* political demands of reform, it also suggests the importance of attending to these two demands among staff *and* leadership. In his meetings with staff, cabinet, and the school board, the HR department administrator framed the problem of HR improvement in ways that reflected the status quo logic of HR improvement and worked to enlist support and backing for his position. The advocates of HRRP reform, by contrast, focused primarily on framing the reform logic of HR improvement for a sub-set of HR staff after the initial engagement with top leaders during the design phase. The implication for practitioners is that not only do they need to attend to the learning and political dimensions of reform but they need to do so at multiple levels of the organization. In the same way that Honig and her colleagues (2010) suggest that leaders support reform by continually talking about and developing the reform's theory of action, so too might reform leaders at other levels of the organization support implementation by constantly framing the reform's logic of action for leaders and staff alike.

Finally, the pattern of the slow burn in this case raises an important question for practitioners: is there such a thing as too little conflict? Clearly, there is such a thing as too much. For, example, when firebrand Michelle Rhee took over as the chancellor of public schools in Washington D.C., her policies and personality created so much conflict that she had to leave the district when her political patron lost his re-election bid. Controversy in New York City and Chicago over school closures is another example of conflicts that burn so bright as to threaten the implementation of reform. But this study suggests that there may also be such a thing as too little conflict (or, perhaps, too much denial of conflict). In the first few months of implementation, very few people in the

central office were forced to make sense of and reconcile the two logics of HR improvement set in motion by the HRRP. In my observations, only one person was actively engaged in meetings in which both sets of logic were routinely expressed. During this period of latent conflict, the opponents of reform were building their power base within the central office and able to lay the groundwork for the status-quo reorganization of the department in part because they did not have to confront the ways in which their plans did or did not align with the HRRP-envisioned reorganization.

Making fundamental change within organizations that touch on underlying organizational policies and objectives, arguably requires coming to terms with conflict in a more open and honest way than was the case in YSD. Fundamental changes in organizations and behavior often require that people confront the underlying assumptions they have towards both past practice and changed practice. As Argyris (1977) notes, "...double loop learning [fundamental change] always requires an opposition of ideas for comparison" (124). In the case of YSD, district leaders never created an opportunity for staff to consider the two logics of HR improvement together or how they might be staged or integrated during implementation in a way that was more productive than allowing them both to develop in isolation. In the end, if districts want to fundamentally shift what they are doing, some conflict may not be a bad thing. Hill and his colleagues (2013) made this point recently in their work on portfolio district reforms. As these authors note,

Conflict is proof neither of the failure nor the success of a school reform strategy. Conflict only means that issues once considered settled are up again for discussion. (p. 87)

The key point is that conflict suggests that issues are up for discussion. In YSD, that discussion never fully materialized during the implementation of the HRRP. If it had, district leaders would have had to ask themselves, How can we manage the disjunction between the two logics of HR improvement so it is productive and not destructive? As of today, educational research provides very little guidance to help practitioners answer this difficult and vital question. To answer it, future research might begin by examining conflict dynamics that are closer to the surface than the ones in this study and closely analyzing how leaders manage them successfully. In short, future research might explore how implementers can use politics to *support* reform, rather than undermine it. In the end, the failure of the HRRP's implementation in YSD may have had less to do with the actions of central office administrators and managers, or their external partners, and more to do with the failure of YSD's school board and superintendent to understand, prioritize, and lead the district's comprehensive HR reform -- to call for profound change and deal with the conflicts it produced -- instead of allowing conflict to remain latent and suppressed. In the end, the pattern of the slow burn set up the central office to keep doing business in the same way it always had, rather than transform itself into a lever for improving teacher effectiveness for all students.

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