



SPOTLIGHT

Clarifying Roles and Responsibilities:

A No-Cost, High-Impact Lever for Raising Student Achievement

by John J-H Kim, Nathan Levenson, and Danielle Glazer

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School districts are feeling more pressure to further improve student performance despite having fewer resources. As healthcare and pension costs continue to compete for K-12 funds, school districts will likely see even less support from federal, state, and local sources, just when initiatives like ARRA and Race to the Top are waning. As the economic environment around K-12 education continues to deteriorate, districts must find cost-neutral ways to strengthen student performance. The challenge is obvious, but one part of the solution is often overlooked: you can supercharge your leadership team's effectiveness by establishing clear roles and responsibilities and providing meaningful rewards and consequences.

Even the largest, most complex organizations can greatly influence their overall results by changing who does what, and especially who makes what decisions. Ford Motor Company is one such example. In three different eras, Ford shifted responsibility for designing their new cars; each shift greatly impacted production, sales, and profits. Initially, senior engineers were responsible for car design. As you might imagine, engineers focused on designing new car parts, not just new models. Because many of these parts were hard to manufacture, Ford ended up producing lower-quality cars; as a result, sales and profits declined. →

Ford then shifted the responsibility for designing new cars to the production team. They streamlined and simplified production, and made simple, safe cars, but they were slow to introduce new car models. While the product quality increased, the production team overproduced in an effort to keep their factories humming and introduced few new models; profits continued to suffer.

Finally, the sales department was given the authority to decide on new car designs, with formal input from the engineering and production teams. With the sales department in charge, Ford started producing more desirable models tailored to meet the various needs of global markets, and the company increased production efficiency as well. As a result, quality and profits increased; in fact, Ford was the only major American car company not to go bankrupt in the last recession.

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Just by changing decision-making authority, Ford experienced dramatically different results. None of these changes required Ford to increase its spending or hire new staff or leaders. Schools don't make cars, but they do decide curriculum, set budget priorities, and hire and promote many staff members. Who makes these decisions can affect student learning as much as who designs the cars at Ford affected the company's success.

The four “flavors” of unclear roles and responsibilities

In order to clarify roles and responsibilities most effectively, one must understand *why* they are unclear. There are four common problems: roles and responsibilities can be blurry; they can overlap; there can be a gap in responsibilities; or staff can have different formal and informal roles (Exhibit 1).

BLURRY ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Roles and responsibilities are blurry when it is unclear who has the final decision-making rights. Often, this blurriness occurs when people from multiple departments are assigned the same task. For example, many principals think that they are responsible for raising student achievement in their building. At the same time, district curriculum directors believe they are responsible for ensuring that all students learn; a district's math director may feel charged with making sure that all students across the district master mathematics. But both of these leaders cannot have final decision-making authority on how math is taught. Neither may feel completely empowered, or both may think they have the final say in making decisions that affect the math curriculum. As a result, inaction or conflict can emerge.

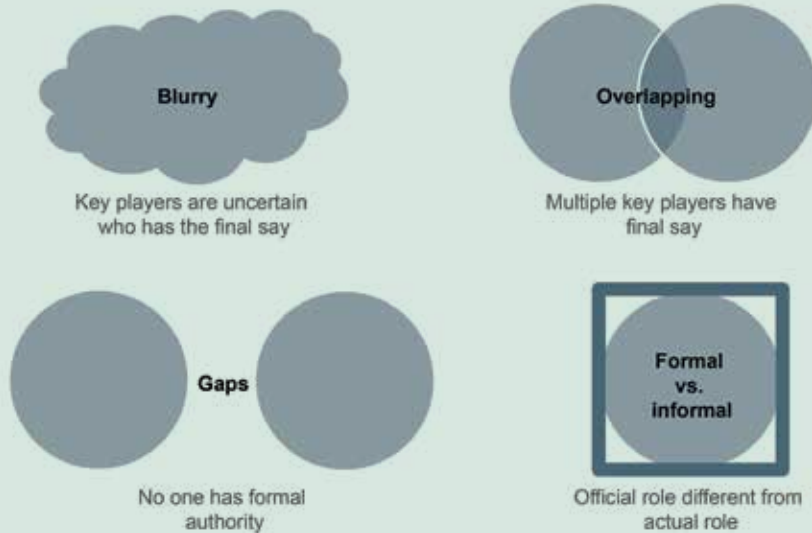
OVERLAPPING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Leaders have overlapping roles and responsibilities when multiple people have the final say. This occurs most often in one of three situations:

1. Staff are supported by multiple funding streams.
2. Staff work in multiple buildings.
3. Staff have multiple supervisors.

Consider the case of a Title I teacher working in two schools. Both principals and the Title I director assume that this teacher should take direction from them. Each may expect the teacher to attend their professional development or meetings. How do these conflicts get resolved?

The Four “Flavors” of Unclear Roles and Responsibilities



Source: DMC

GAPS IN ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Instead of having multiple people with the same responsibilities, sometimes no one has responsibility for key decisions. The following are examples of gaps in roles and responsibilities that The District Management Council has identified:

- In many districts, special education paraprofessionals have no supervisor, manager, or director.
- In many districts, no one is responsible for managing Medicaid reimbursements.
- Reading curriculum is often left up to each individual teacher.
- Eligibility for honors and AP courses may be undocumented and/or erratic.

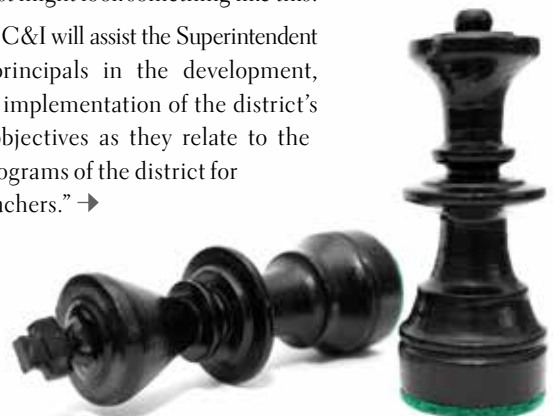
In all of these cases, staff have no formal oversight.

FORMAL VERSUS INFORMAL ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Sometimes, a person's official (formal) role and responsibilities are very different from his or her actual (informal) ones. This difference is often greatly affected by a person's prior professional experience.

Formal roles are likely to be based on official job descriptions. Imagine that you are interested in hiring a director of curriculum and instruction (C&I) for your district. Most districts would describe the job using similar language; the job description you post might look something like this:

“The Director of C&I will assist the Superintendent and building principals in the development, promotion, and implementation of the district's priorities and objectives as they relate to the instructional programs of the district for students and teachers.” →



This outlines the staff member's formal roles and responsibilities.

However, based on the previous work experience of the person who fills the role, his or her unofficial role may differ greatly from what is outlined in the official job description. For example, if the newly hired C&I director was promoted from being a high school principal, she might maintain a focus on secondary education. Instead of working on elementary school reading, she might delegate most decisions about core reading in K-2 to the elementary school principals.

On the other hand, imagine that your new C&I director is from outside the district and has an elementary school background. Unlike the former high school principal, this director may take an outsider's view toward the district's programs and thoroughly review all existing initiatives, with more focus on elementary programs.

While both of these hypothetical directors would have the same official job description, they might have quite different informal roles.

The only way to be certain that decision-making rights are well-defined and understood is to ask!

How to Clarify Your District's Roles and Responsibilities

District and building leaders often assume that roles and responsibilities in their district are clear. Regardless of industry, most managers make this same assumption; after all, no one purposely builds a system of ambiguity. And carefully crafted organization charts and detailed job descriptions should provide adequate definition of roles and responsibilities. However, in large, complex organizations such as school districts, these are often not sufficient. The only way to be certain that decision-making rights are well-defined and understood is to ask!

If the roles and responsibilities are clear in your district, then your central office staff and principals should be able to answer the following five questions easily and consistently:

1. What decisions can I make?
2. When do I have meaningful input?
3. How do I interact with other leaders?
4. What results am I ultimately responsible for?
5. How will I be evaluated?

If staff members have clear roles and responsibilities, they will provide answers that meet two criteria: first, they should be able to provide clear answers to all five questions. Second, their responses should be consistent, describing the same structure of roles and responsibilities regardless of who is answering. For example, elementary school principals and the director of C&I should not report that they are each responsible for determining the curriculum in fifth-grade reading.

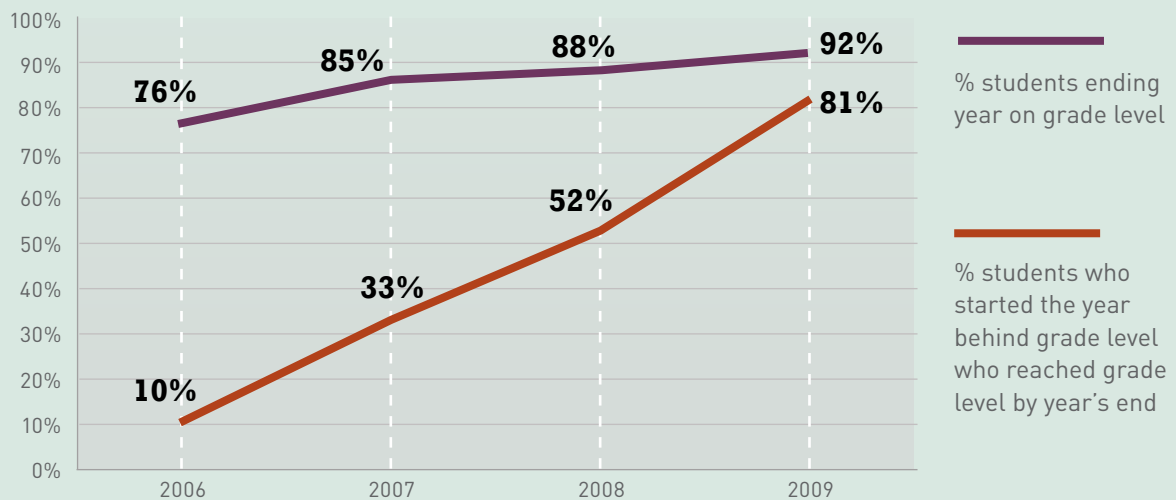
While asking these questions will help you better understand the roles and responsibilities of staff in your district, sometimes asking a →

CASE STUDY: Blurry Roles Are Addressed in Arlington Public Schools (MA)

In 2005, 16 different people were in charge of the Arlington Public Schools' efforts to improve students' proficiency in reading. Each elementary school principal claimed ownership, as did the reading coordinator and the director of curriculum and instruction. Additionally, the Title 1 director, the English Language Learners (ELL) director, and the special education director each felt in charge of "their" reading programs for "their" kids. Different leaders also ran a few grant-funded efforts. No one leader had final authority over what to do in the district. As a result, reading instruction was scattered, materials varied from room to room, data couldn't be compared, and most meetings to improve reading devolved into battles between the 16 leaders over content. In these meetings, they also argued over the location of upcoming professional development sessions and other issues.

The district eliminated this blurriness in its roles and responsibilities by appointing a single director to oversee all of Arlington Public Schools' reading initiatives. After shifting to this clearer structure of decision-making authority, the district saw a dramatic improvement in student performance in just four years. By eliminating blurry roles and responsibilities, the district moved from 76% proficiency in grades K-5 to 92% proficiency. More dramatically, over 80% of students who were behind in reading at the beginning of the year made more than a year's growth, up from about 10% of such students before the district realigned roles and responsibilities. With input from others, a single leader was able to bring coherence, focus, and best practices to the district.

Reading Results



question like this explicitly can be intimidating—both for you as a supervisor and for your staff. A neutral third party can be helpful.

MAKE CONCRETE WHAT DECISIONS YOUR STAFF CAN MAKE

The split between decision-making rights for central office leaders and principals is a common area of complexity. For example, ask central office staff and principals to list what decisions they can make regarding hiring, staffing, budget, and evaluation of staff. Also, try asking them to indicate whether they think they are consulted in making decisions regarding hiring, evaluating, setting curriculum, or planning professional development. Do they feel they have meaningful input or that their input is a mere formality? Perhaps the easiest means of gathering this information is to ask your staff to fill out a simple form indicating their decision-making rights (see DMC Manager's Toolkit, p. 26).

Examine the responses and see how many people feel they are responsible for each decision. Do these results align with who you think is

responsible for each decision? If two people—or the wrong people—think they can make a given decision, then your district likely has unclear roles and responsibilities. Once you have identified responsibilities that lack clarity, you can redefine staff's decision-making rights. It can be as simple as using a copy of the same form, and populating it with your vision of how roles and responsibilities should be assigned.

You can also determine whether your staff have unclear roles and responsibilities by thinking about whether there are any power struggles among the principals or central office staff. During the budget cycle, curriculum planning, or professional development scheduling, do you see principals and central office leaders jostling for power to make a decision?

You can easily identify a power struggle by thinking about the last meeting you held about implementing a new initiative. Did you leave the meeting with concrete next steps, or did the attendees spend most of the time debating and arguing among themselves?



Do you know who is responsible for reading in your district?

At a recent conference, one superintendent emailed his staff with precisely this question. His staff responded, "That's complicated." In just a few minutes, the superintendent had uncovered an area where the roles and responsibilities in his district were ambiguous.

Even if you have been working in your district for many years, your understanding of who is responsible for reading may differ from what central office leaders, principals, or teachers think. Take a minute to email, call, or ask each of these players. If you receive an answer that is longer than the name of a single employee, consider investigating the issue further. "I'm not sure" is not an uncommon response.

In one district, such a power struggle manifested itself in a slightly different way. A grants coordinator and the head of curriculum and instruction were tasked with writing a grant together. The director of C&I drafted most of the material and asked the grants coordinator to review it. Instead of revising the work the C&I director had already written, the grants coordinator rewrote every section. Both leaders believed they had the final say, and as a result, the process took twice as long as it should have and double the effort, with the same end result.

USE DISTRICT NORMS AND ASSESSMENT TOOLS TO MANAGE INTERACTIONS

While asking staff to outline their perceived decision authority on a form is straightforward, managing interactions between leaders is not cut and dry, and cannot be captured as simply on paper. Rather, these interactions are shaped by people's shared vision, values, and norms. There are two observational tools you can use to understand how your central office staff and principals interact with other leaders. First, spend some time reflecting on your district norms. District norms shape how decisions are made and shared, how information is gathered and vetted, and how opinions are voiced and discussed. Do your district norms reflect the types of interactions you would like your leaders to have? For example, is the district norm for people to "play nice," rather than expressing their concerns over a project? As a superintendent, would you prefer that everyone get along, or would you like to change the norm so that people feel more comfortable voicing their opinions?

Second, consider using a formal assessment tool to gain a better understanding of how staff interact. Diagnostic tools such as confidential 360° interviews and focus groups facilitated by a third party can be very effective. To help foster more open and honest feedback, create a safe, confidential space in which your staff can share their honest opinions without fear of consequence. Neutral third parties can help establish this environment.

CREATE RESULTS-BASED MEASURES OF SUCCESS

Two final questions to ask your staff—What results am I responsible for? How will I be evaluated?—deal with how staff performance is measured and monitored. A district should have unambiguous measures of success for every job position. For staff to know how they will be evaluated, they must have a sense of what they are responsible for achieving.

If two people—or the wrong people—think they can make a given decision, then your district likely has unclear roles and responsibilities.

To ensure that staff know their responsibilities, create job descriptions that emphasize specific results. Often, job descriptions are activity-based, not results-based, making it difficult for staff to know how they will be evaluated. Imagine the job description for a district math director: if the description is activity-based, then the director's job will likely focus on managing the math department, hiring math teachers, selecting the curriculum, building and arranging for professional development, and perhaps evaluating some math teachers at a principal's request. As a result, the director will be evaluated based on how well the math department runs, and whether new curriculum or professional development opportunities are implemented smoothly. →

On the other hand, if the math director's job description is results-based, then the director will focus on improving students' mastery of math, rather than establishing a smoothly running department. In this case, the director would be responsible for ensuring that effective instruction occurs in every classroom, and would be evaluated based in part on student growth in math.

If your district creates job descriptions that focus on results, your staff will better understand the basis of their evaluations. If you were evaluating both of these math directors, which would you be able to gather evidence for more easily and with more objectivity? Ultimately, districts want smooth-running departments to help raise student achievement, but the definition of "smooth-running" is in the eye of the beholder. Results-based job descriptions lead to the same result—a focus on student performance—but do so more directly.

Some districts unintentionally undermine their stated values through their unofficial rewards and consequences.

REWARDS AND CONSEQUENCES CAN REINFORCE OR UNDERMINE CLEAR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Once well-defined roles and responsibilities have been established, it is important to ensure that your incentives (rewards and consequences) match your stated values and reinforce the roles and responsibilities you have created. Both formal and

informal rewards can be powerful tools if aligned correctly with stated values (Exhibit 2).

Some districts unintentionally undermine their stated values through their unofficial rewards and consequences. In most districts, leaders say that student achievement matters the most; that their work is guided by their strategic plan; and that they value open dialogue. However, these same values are not always rewarded. For example, instead of acknowledging those who improve student performance, a superintendent might reward an ineffective leader for having a lifetime commitment to working in the district. Similarly, rather than embracing open dialogue and discussion, a district may sometimes reward staff for not rocking the boat and for being nice. Such differences signal that the district's formal values may conflict with the informal rewards and consequences.

Rewards take many forms, from promotions to simply being liked and respected. In one district, despite the bold mission statement valuing student learning, a principal who raised student achievement significantly more than his peers was ostracized. His school consistently showed strong student growth, had high teacher morale, and enjoyed a collaborative atmosphere among staff, but other principals in the district resented him for his success. They perceived his attempts at sharing best practice as boastfulness, and he was disliked both by the central office leadership team and by his colleagues.

In the same district, a long-time assistant principal was promoted to run a high-profile turnaround school. While she was a nice and caring person, she had limited knowledge about curriculum and instruction, felt insecure in her job, and was reluctant to ask for help. If staff view the principalship of a turnaround school as a reward, then the district clearly rewarded an employee for her longevity, not for high student achievement or results. These rewards and consequences strongly communicate what a district really values and in turn influence actions ... either reinforcing the stated roles and

Creating formal and informal rewards and consequences

	REWARDS	CONSEQUENCES
Formal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion • Project leadership • Coaching • Funding for pet projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No further promotion • Lateral shift to a less critical job • Dismissal • Redirect funding based on results • Increased oversight • Written feedback/reprimand • Coaching
Informal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to superintendent • Visibility • Voice in decision-making • Being left alone (freedom) • Public and private praise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of influence • More oversight • Lack of access to leadership • Socially ostracized • Last to know (information can be currency) • Verbal feedback/reprimand

Source: DMC

responsibilities or undermining them. Having clear and aligned rewards can help provide clarity as to what to focus on and what is valued.

How explicit are the rewards and consequences in your district? Can the district and school leaders easily answer these questions?

1. What must an assistant principal do and achieve to become a principal?
2. What defines success for a principal?
3. How is a highly effective principal rewarded?
4. What are the consequences for a smart curriculum director who is difficult to work with and seldom supports principals in a meaningful way?

SUMMARY

In a period of declining resources, creating clear roles and responsibilities is a powerful lever for increasing achievement at no cost. In large, complex organizations like school districts, ambiguity creeps into roles and responsibilities in many ways, and districts' unofficial or unintentional reward systems can further undermine decision-making clarity. But by establishing a thoughtful process and asking a few key questions, districts can manage better, improve teamwork, and raise achievement. A little bit of questioning can go a long way in highlighting what roles and responsibilities are well-defined and which ones need to be clarified. ♦