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Management
Group

CASE STUDY

Organizing Strategically: Boston Public Schools (MA)

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Organizing Strategically: Boston Public Schools

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Taking stock of her past five years as superintendent of Boston Public Schools (MA), Dr. Carol Johnson had accomplished much by 2012. Student performance was continuing to show some gains, especially in the 10th grade. Johnson and her team had managed to lead the school district through one of the most severe budget crises in decades by successfully obtaining more funds and by closing and combining poorer-performing schools to provide better educational opportunities and to improve efficiency. Their implementation of the Weighted Student Funding budgeting system, which allows funds to follow students to whichever school they attend, helped the district to operate within budget, while increasing equity for students.

But despite her accomplishments, Johnson was not satisfied with the gains Boston Public Schools (BPS) was making. The Acceleration Agenda, a strategic plan adopted by the district in 2010, set ambitious performance goals, and Johnson knew from the data that they were not making progress quickly enough. Though BPS had national recognition as a high-performing urban school district, she was unhappy with the persistent performance gaps among students from different racial, linguistic, and

socioeconomic groups. Johnson recalls, “At the start of the school year in 2012, I was concerned that our progress was incremental. We needed more acceleration than our data showed and I felt that the only way to get that was to relook at how central office supported schools.”

The results of a principals’ and headmasters’ survey conducted in the spring of 2012 revealed some confusion and frustration with the complex organizational structures and systems in place at BPS. Johnson noted, “Not everyone was aligned with the larger team effort. Everyone was working extremely hard and diligently, but not always with a consistent framework.” Over the years, BPS had been granting increasing levels of autonomy to traditional public schools: pilot schools, Horace Mann schools, innovation schools, turnaround schools—and the existing charter school models—had varying levels of autonomy in hiring, staffing, scheduling, curriculum, budgeting, and even governance. This plethora of models made it difficult for the BPS central office to serve such differing needs while still providing adequate levels of support and accountability to achieve consistent, sustained performance improvement.

DMC provided consulting services and partnered with the district to design a new organizational structure.

The Path Forward

Fighting the pressure to come up with a quick fix, Johnson vowed to pursue a more systemic, long-lasting solution to these organizational challenges. John McDonough, the CFO during Johnson's tenure as superintendent and now interim superintendent of BPS, reflects on Johnson's decision: "Getting it right rather than getting it done is an important principle to go by. But there is always a time factor that comes into play that requires you to act more urgently than you may have intended."

Johnson recognized that addressing BPS's issues appropriately was about much more than redrawing an organizational chart; restructuring the organization could help support and even drive the improvements in performance she was seeking. She felt that she had the perfect opportunity to work on this approach during an intense weeklong, team-based executive education session at Harvard's Public Education Leadership Project (PELP), a joint initiative of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Harvard Business School.¹

Johnson brought together key central office and school leaders to help draft a district-wide theory of action—an articulation of the core beliefs that drive how one achieves a strategic objective. This would serve as a foundation for

thinking through the issues of organizational coherence and alignment. During their time together, the group worked intensively to answer the following guiding questions:

- What are the major challenges that may hinder BPS's pursuit of its articulated long-term vision?
- What are the root causes of these challenges?
- What can be done to address the root causes?

As a result of these intense and candid conversations, Johnson's team articulated the following theory of action that identified schools as the unit of change:

Improved student learning requires improved instruction. Schools are the units of change for instructional improvement, and principals/headmasters and their school-based teams are the leaders of that change.

While BPS had already been granting greater levels of autonomy to schools, this theory of action represented a bold statement of change. Johnson believed that it could create a shared understanding of roles, and ultimately lead to a strengthened organizational structure that would benefit all students in the district (Exhibit 1). →

EXHIBIT 1: STRENGTHENING ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE



SOURCE: DMC

Organizational Redesign

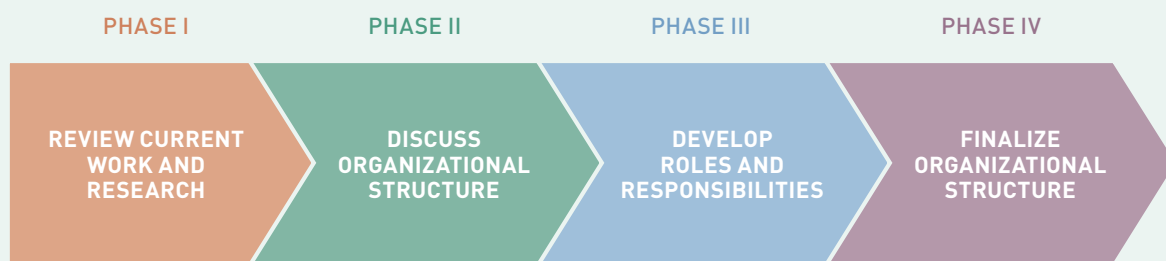
Districts such as Baltimore and New York City have redesigned their organizational models, sometimes with great success. Johnson wanted to take action in Boston, but life as a superintendent left her little time to conceptualize such significant change. Moreover, in such a high-profile urban district, any kind of change would need to be carefully crafted, analyzed, and implemented to achieve wide-reaching support.

Given these obstacles, the BPS central office engaged the District Management Council (DMC) in late summer 2012 to work with the team to create a new organizational structure for the district. Using the theory of action as a foundation, DMC helped outline a process for designing and implementing a new organizational structure that could meet the complex needs of the district. To ensure that a range of opinions were heard and incorporated into the design, DMC helped BPS establish a steering com-

mittee that included school principals and headmasters—two each from elementary, middle, and high schools—in addition to key personnel from the central office. Chief Financial Officer John McDonough, who is now the interim superintendent, chaired this committee.

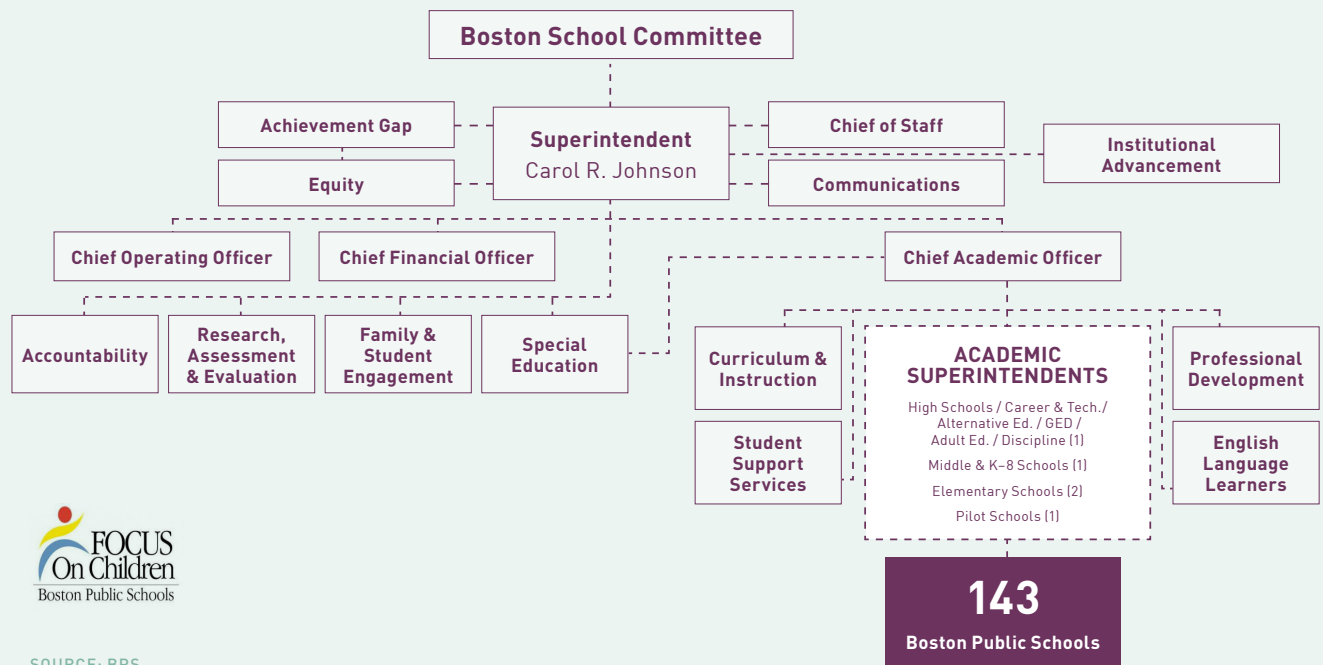
The steering committee was careful to articulate an effective work plan from the beginning (Exhibit 2). First, the committee would review the current organizational structure. Second, they would develop and analyze options for new organizational structures. Third, the team would develop defined roles and responsibilities for the new structure. Lastly, the team would finalize recommendations for organizational restructuring. The steering committee met multiple times over a period of two months to make progress on these four objectives; in between full meetings, the DMC team worked closely with committee members to better facilitate and support their work.

EXHIBIT 2: STEERING COMMITTEE WORK PLAN



SOURCE: DMC

EXHIBIT 3: BPS' FORMER ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE



Phase I: Review Current Work and Research

The committee started by reviewing the current organizational structure and revisiting principals' concerns raised in the survey (Exhibit 3 and Exhibit 4).

In reviewing and evaluating BPS's organizational structure, the committee identified two key issues:

1. The responsibilities of the Academic Superintendents were substantial. Each Academic Superintendent was the key person connecting the work of 30 to 35 building leaders to the resources in the central office. With 30 to 35 schools to manage, it was virtually impossible for an Academic Superintendent to individualize support and attention to

individual schools. The Academic Superintendents were forced into addressing the most immediate concerns as opposed to focusing on the longer-term needs.

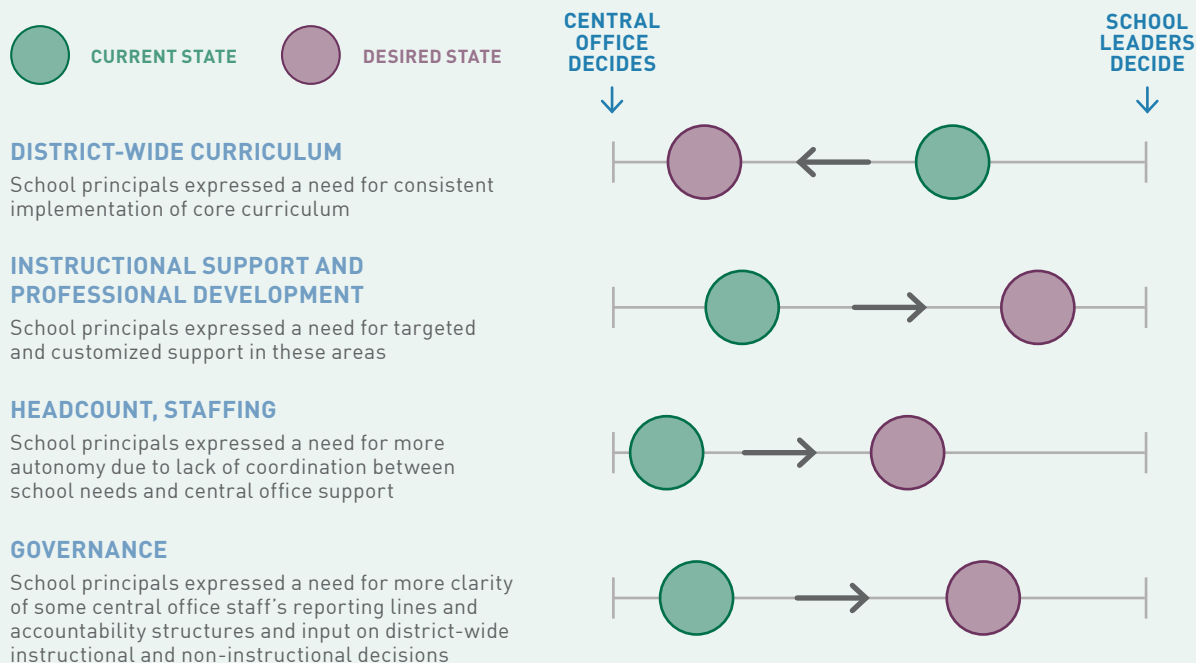
2. Given the breadth of responsibility, there was a great deal of variability in the ways that Academic Superintendents supported schools. As a result, some well-established principals had grown accustomed to reaching out directly to individual central office department heads instead of routing their requests through the Academic Superintendents. The departments, in turn, had various systems for acknowledging, queuing, and responding to school-based requests. This lack of transparency was identified as a significant opportunity to improve service and support. →

A series of interviews with many school leaders highlighted the current challenges:

Many school leaders expressed differing interpretations about their roles and responsibilities vis-à-vis those of their colleagues in the central office. There were varied understandings around which decisions principals could make, and which should be made by central office staff. The large number of school “types” and accompanying autonomies only exacerbated the situation and resulted in increasing levels of frustration,

missed opportunities, and miscommunication between central office, schools, and various stakeholders. Some principals or headmasters felt that the supports offered by central office to schools were either inadequate or not aligned with the needs of their individual schools. Meanwhile, central office personnel felt misunderstood and underappreciated for the incredible amount of work that went into supporting 128 different schools.

EXHIBIT 4: PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW RESULTS



SOURCE:DMC

Phase II: Develop a New Organizational Structure

The committee set out to explore new models that would address some of the shortcomings of the current organizational structure and, in so doing, position the district for long-term success. The committee, with DMC's support, considered three distinct organizational design models:

1. Entrepreneurship Model

An entrepreneurship model is built on the belief that the best route to systemic district improvement is to allow school leaders to be entrepreneurial and autonomous in determining academic and operational strategy and implementation. With this model, fewer resources remain at the central office; many of the services traditionally provided by central office—such as professional development, facilities support, and teacher recruitment—can be “purchased” either from central office or from an outside provider. The central office still plays an important role in setting standards for success and monitoring the progress of schools to ensure that schools perform. In essence, school leaders operate under explicit accountability mechanisms. One could argue that a variant of this type of design and approach was implemented in New York City Public Schools under Chancellor Joel Klein. Perhaps the most extreme version of the entrepreneurship model currently in place is in post-Katrina New Orleans Public Schools, where each public school has received charter status.

2. Network Model

A network model, as the name suggests, organizes the district by assigning schools to groupings or “networks” of approximately 15 to 20 schools. Each network has a Network Superintendent, who is ultimately responsible for the performance of the schools in the network and for providing the supports those schools need. The Network Superintendent is supported by central office “liaisons” dedicated to providing academic and operational support to the schools in the network. By dedicating these liaisons to a manageable number of schools, the network model seeks to provide a more tailored approach and to increase mutual accountability.

This model's key to success lies in establishing the right balance of autonomy and control between school

leaders and the central office. Baltimore City Public Schools is the best example of this approach; under the leadership of Superintendent Andres Alonso, the district developed a network model and provided “bounded autonomy,” wherein principals are granted clearly articulated levels of independence for certain areas of their operations.

3. Connected Alignment Model





























A connected alignment model is based on the notion that the central office should provide consistent strategy and implementation guidance. This approach limits differences among schools and grants school leaders a lower level of autonomy. The objective is to optimize the outcome of the entire system. Smaller districts often employ this approach successfully. Among larger urban districts, Aldine Independent School District in Texas may be considered an example.

The committee set about vetting and assessing the strengths and weaknesses of each model, giving particular attention to how each could support BPS's new theory of action. To help the committee in this process, DMC put forth a rubric outlining key criteria for evaluating the organizational models. Shown in Exhibit 5, the rubric focused on seven criteria specific to the goals and beliefs underpinning the new BPS vision statement.

The network model's potential to fully realize five out of the seven criteria (and to moderately realize the other two) positioned it as the most promising option for BPS. The network model would facilitate a system of mutual accountability where schools are accountable to improve student achievement and central office departments are accountable for providing consistent and customized supports. It was essential to the committee that the model chosen would support a shift in culture from one in which allegiances were to the department to one in which the attention is on the needs of the schools in the network.

Deciding on an organizational structure that aligned with the district's revised vision statement enabled Johnson's team to signal their commitment to the new theory of action while simultaneously removing the institutional barriers to its widespread adoption. →

EXHIBIT 5: RUBRIC FOR EVALUATION OF MODEL STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

CRITERIA TO EVALUATE ORGANIZATIONAL MODELS	CURRENT BPS	ENTREPRENEURSHIP	NETWORK	CONNECTED ALIGNMENT
Aligns with the theory of action that schools are the unit of change in BPS				
Provides tailored supports to schools from the central office				
Provides clear accountability structures and lines of reporting across the district				
Facilitates mutual accountability between departments (e.g. Operations and Academics)				
Provides structure for best practice sharing among school leaders				
Enables central office to set clear district-wide policies				
Transforms the organization in a budget-neutral way	N/A	?		
<div>  LOW  HIGH </div>				

SOURCE:DMC

Phase III: Develop Roles and Responsibilities

The next stage of the work required detailing the new structure and defining staff members' new roles and responsibilities. Even after the decision to move forward with the network model, several key design questions remained:

- How should the networks be organized? The committee needed to tackle important questions such as the tradeoffs inherent in organizing the network geographically or by levels, by types of schools, etc.
- How many networks should BPS form? There were several competing interests that needed to be balanced, including setting a reasonable “span of control” for network leaders and liaisons, determining the amount of support that should be provided to school leaders in each network, and managing the need to remain cost-neutral.
- Who should be in each network, and how many liaisons should there be? Once the number of networks was determined, the committee had to decide how many liaisons would be needed for each network. For example,

did each network require a full-time dedicated human resources liaison, or should these liaisons be shared? Important questions arose about how academic liaisons could provide a greater level of support to schools that were struggling. Meanwhile, other departments did not warrant a liaison. For instance, transportation, while important to all schools, would be much more cost-effective and streamlined if all department resources remained centralized rather than being deployed to individual networks.

- What should be the roles and responsibilities of the liaisons and Network Superintendents? While everyone on the committee understood the general functions of the Network Superintendent and liaisons, the team now had to more specifically articulate the roles and responsibilities of these positions within the specific context of BPS's implementation of the network model.

Phase IV: Finalize the Organizational Structure

The steering committee was divided into three subcommittees to tackle the questions outlined above; and DMC continued to provide research, analysis, and facilitation support to each of the subcommittees. After two months of extensive data and budget analysis, principal interviews, and research of best practices from other network model districts, individual subcommittees put forth the following recommendations:

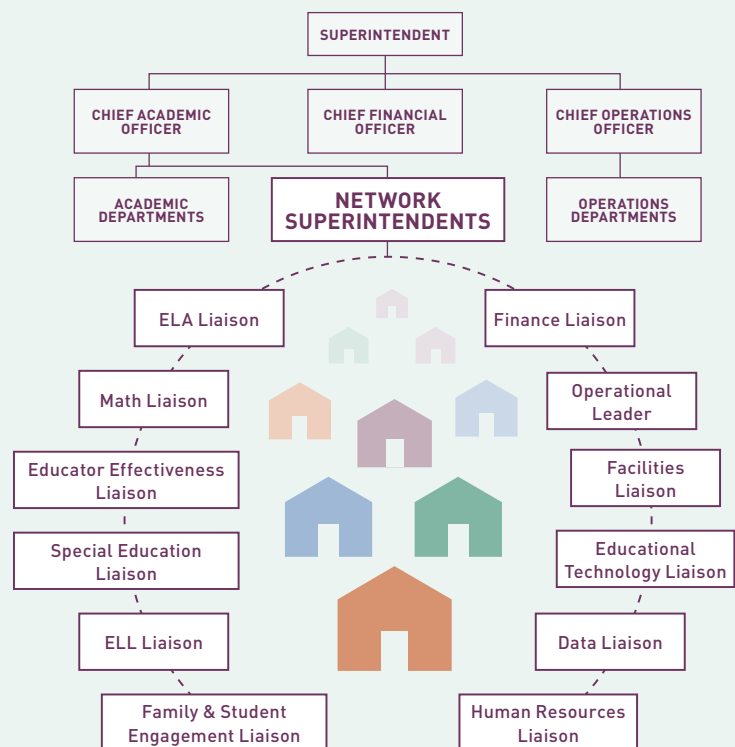
- Create a total of eight networks to support all 128 schools. Six geographically organized networks would support grades Pre K–8 schools, an additional network would be dedicated exclusively to high schools, and another network would support vocational and technical education. A separate network was created for high schools because high school students could attend any school in the city and the committee believed that the needs and challenges of high schools are very different from those of Pre K–8 schools. Additionally, it was felt that staff from schools with similar grade spans would benefit from frequent interactions with each other during network meetings.
- Create the new position of Network Superintendent. The Network Superintendent would be responsible for leading the network's team of liaisons in providing support to principals in the network, and would also be responsible for the performance of the schools in the network. The committee believed both accountability and support responsibilities should be combined in a single individual.
- Assign 11 to 12 liaisons to each network. Each network would have a dedicated liaison from each of the following departments: human resources, finance, ELA, math, special education, ELL, operations, facilities, educational technology, family and student engagement, and data. In some cases, a liaison could be assigned to more than one network based on school needs or availability of FTEs in the individual departments.
- Design liaisons to be generalists in addition to being specialists. The roles and responsibilities of the liaisons would vary based on the department they represent, but in general, liaisons would be

expected to handle basic queries and to redirect queries that require specialized knowledge to relevant personnel at the central office.

One of the more complicated decisions was the reporting structure of the liaisons and principals. In the end, the committee recommended that the liaisons have direct reporting lines to their department heads (e.g., human resources) and a dotted-line relationship to the Network Superintendent. While the Network Superintendent would manage the liaisons and provide input into their evaluations, the department head would ultimately be responsible for their overall evaluation.

The principals would report to the Network Superintendent, who in turn would report to the Chief Academic Officer (CAO). Under the guidance of the CAO, the Network Superintendents would work in close alignment with all principals to enable them to become strong instructional leaders, which would ultimately drive an increase in student performance. Network Superintendents would directly evaluate principals. ➔

EXHIBIT 6: NEW ORGANIZATIONAL HIERARCHY



SOURCE: DMC

EXHIBIT 7: STANDARDS OF NETWORK PERFORMANCE

IN SERVING SCHOOLS	IN SERVING THE DISTRICT	IN WORKING TOGETHER
RESPONSIVENESS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Customer service orientation – 24-hour response time 	DRIVING INSIGHT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Collect and analyze data – Identify and resolve systemic issues 	COLLABORATION <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Frequent communication between liaisons – Collaboration between departments to share best practices/resolve queries jointly
ACCOUNTABILITY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Be proactive and constructive – ‘See it-own it-fix it’ attitude – Frequent communication with schools – Spend time in schools 	CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Supporting department improvement 	CONTINUOUS LEARNING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Liaisons learn each others’ work – Schools and departments learn each others’ work – Central office identifies and communicates best practices
CAPACITY BUILDING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – No gofers for schools – Help schools build systems and sustained capacity 	INNOVATION <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Devise innovative methods to improve service for schools – Innovate to improve student performance 	ACCOUNTABILITY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Be proactive and constructive – Responsive to colleagues’ needs

SOURCE: DMC

“All the work of teaching kids and raising achievement happens in schools. Therefore, it is important that the district leaders are oriented toward a service-delivery model for schools.”

– SUPERINTENDENT CAROL JOHNSON

Given the fiscal challenges the district has faced in recent years, one of the inviolate rules of this reorganization was that it must be budget-neutral. In practice, this stipulation meant that individuals currently in place were now being asked to play a different role. In an effort to provide a smooth and effective transition and also align all supports and services from central office, the committee focused a lot of energy on articulating clear standards for network performance in serving schools, the district, and each other (Exhibit 7). These standards would be essential in retraining and staffing these new positions as part of the network model. All staff would be expected to uphold a spirit of collaboration, responsiveness, innovation, continuous learning, and continuous improvement when working together to solve complex challenges. These standards of network performance were to serve as guideposts for all network constituents to measure their performance and effectiveness against what was expected of them. In the words of Superintendent Johnson, “All the work of teaching kids and raising achievement happens in schools. Therefore, it is important that the district leaders are oriented toward a service-delivery model for schools.”

Network Model Implementation

By March 2013, the committee was ready to implement the new network model throughout the district. Implementation would entail appointing a Chief Academic Officer (the position had been vacant for over a year), recruiting Network Superintendents, and identifying liaisons from each department.

Johnson and the committee were now faced with the challenge of “rebuilding the airplane while it was in the air.” Moving to the network model was a significant shift for the BPS organization, and Johnson wanted to ensure that this structure would not be “just another reorganization” that would be diluted in short order. In light of the significant change required, she decided that the network structure would be launched in two phases—an initial rollout in May 2013, and a final phase-in during July. The two-phase plan was intended to give department heads more time to prepare for the impending changes. Johnson explained, “It wasn’t just about the logistics, it was about mindset. Some people got the change in mindset right away, while others needed more support to understand what we were trying to accomplish. It’s normal for people to push back and be defensive while undergoing a change process.” Johnson recognized that the success of this initiative required more than a technical change in title and responsibility—it would require everyone to make a cultural shift.

The Launch

The May 1, 2013, date for the first formal launch was drawing near, but on April 24, Superintendent Johnson announced her resignation. Her husband, who had been ill, passed away in March. Noting that his passing was a “life-altering” event for her, Johnson decided to retire after six years as the superintendent of Boston Public Schools.

There was, of course, concern about launching such a significant undertaking following the announcement of Johnson’s departure. But Johnson was confident that the process the district had followed and the level of engagement by the team of leaders from across the district had created a sufficient momentum and sense of ownership to propel this project forward. She commented, “It was such a collaborative effort—the project did not belong sole-

ly to me. It was bigger than any one individual.” Johnson remained throughout the summer, and helped support the launch and implementation of the reorganization.

McDonough confirms, “The news of Johnson’s resignation was a troubling time. It led to some questioning of whether we move forward or not [with the restructuring process], but the underlying principles that the restructuring was based on ultimately prevailed in leading us to move forward. We aimed to restructure in a way that was meaningful and would meet the intended goals. Johnson took on the role of a nurturing mentor to me [once it was decided that I would be interim superintendent].”

A principal notes, “The Network Superintendent visits my school every week. I wouldn’t see my supervisors for months [under the old model].”

As the launch date neared, Johnson determined that it would be crucial for the Network Superintendents to bond and establish a strong sense of camaraderie in order to be successful in the long term. It was decided that the first week of work would consist of team-building and management exercises (including role-playing potential situations with principals and liaisons), an overview of the BPS central office organization (including presentations from different department heads on their key initiatives), and a deep dive into the roles and responsibilities of the Network Superintendent. Training sessions were led by key central office leaders (including the Chief of Staff, CFO, and the Superintendent) with support from DMC. Given ➔

the looming launch date, this training felt like a “luxury” the district could ill-afford, but the entire design team believed that it would be absolutely necessary in order for the Network Superintendents to be successful. McDonough states, “The training allowed for a team to be formed [among Network Superintendents], and they developed a set of practices and norms that allowed for more consistency among networks than would have otherwise been possible.”

Johnson recognized that the success of this initiative required more than a technical change in title and responsibility—it would require everyone to make a cultural shift.

After a week of training and orientation, the Network Superintendents assumed responsibility for their individual networks. Once in the field, the Network Superintendents began getting deluged with backlogged requests from principals. Requests ranged from concerns with school facilities to student placements. Principals were excited to have a conduit (through the Network Superintendents) to the central office; but while the Network Superintendents could facilitate solutions for some of these requests, others warranted deep involvement from central office departments.

At the time of the initial launch, however, liaisons were in place in only five of the eleven departments. Central office personnel worked diligently to respond to the influx of requests, but had trouble keeping up with them. Johnson was

still confident in the long-term efficacy of the new design, but worried that the time staff members needed to meaningfully respond in the early stages would lead principals to question the efficacy of the new model. As McDonough notes, “We needed to show principals that change was setting in.”

Adding to Johnson’s concerns, the Chief Academic Officer—the position to whom the Network Superintendents would report—was still not in place. Though Network Superintendents reported enthusiasm for the work, Johnson worried that they would burn out soon. From her perspective, however, there was no going back: the old model was no longer an option for BPS.

By July 2013—a little over a year after the launch of this organizational effort—all of the liaisons were finally in place, a new CAO was appointed, the Network Superintendents were in the field, and the network system was fully operational. Though fully staffing the new organizational model marked a major achievement, Johnson knew it was only the first step in the long road to genuine transformation. She recognized that sustainable change would require an ongoing, more open-ended perspective and that “the middle of any long-term transformative change looks messy.” At that same time, John McDonough was appointed as the interim superintendent. Since McDonough had headed the committee overseeing the network model design and implementation, Johnson felt confident that the network model would at least be given a chance.

The Impact

Once the structural elements of the new network model were in place, BPS shifted its focus to examine the flow of information and the interactions between the various players. This review resulted in small but important initiatives, such as instituting weekly check-ins between liaisons and Network Superintendents, liaisons and department heads, and Network Superintendents and department heads. These check-ins were aimed at sharing best practices in serving schools and resolving principal queries, facilitating easy flow of information around key departmental initiatives, and ensuring that network constituents learn and develop from both their own experiences and the experiences of others.

Though time-consuming, careful attention to these support structures is helping to establish high levels of teamwork and accountability. Johnson says, “When you have 150 central office staff collectively serving all schools, the lines of accountability are blurry. But when a Network Superintendent and a dedicated team of liaisons are responsible for only 15 schools, the principals can provide feedback and evaluate levels of service of specific individuals and the team. There is clear and mutual accountability, and the results become evident.”

According to principals and district officials today—almost two years after the initial conceptualization of an organizational overhaul, signs of change have begun to emerge. One network superintendent explains, “The liaisons act like a team—[they] brainstorm ideas together to institute change. A new culture of service to schools is slowly creeping in.” A principal

notes, “The Network Superintendent visits my school every week. I wouldn’t see my supervisors for months [under the old model].” Additionally, McDonough comments, “Principals have been able to structure for themselves professional development on key problems of practice. It provides an opportunity for principals to network and share among themselves.” BPS seems to be achieving its intended goal of enhancing customized supports to schools and strengthening a principal-focused approach in the central office organization.

Perhaps most importantly, the lessons learned from this undertaking (Exhibit 8) have emboldened central office members to take on numerous other change efforts. BPS has now embarked on developing a comprehensive system of accountability for schools and central office departments.

EXHIBIT 8: DR. JOHNSON’S TAKEAWAYS FROM THE NETWORK MODEL ROLLOUT

- 1 Include school leaders early in the process
- 2 Build a coalition of essential supporters to drive the redesign process
- 3 Establish communication channels to allay concerns early on in the process
- 4 Consider engaging an external party to facilitate a dramatic change effort among internal stakeholders
- 5 Think critically about the sequence of implementation and its implications
- 6 Work to create collaboration—not competition—among teams in the organization
- 7 Autonomy and accountability need to go hand in hand

Concluding Thoughts

Though change is never an easy process, district leaders must remain open to evidence suggesting the need for a new path. Five years into her tenure, after having already spearheaded several ambitious new initiatives and navigated one of the most severe budget crises in decades, Johnson rose to the challenge of effecting a dramatic organizational change. BPS was already on a

strategic path of granting greater autonomy to schools, but Johnson refocused and reenergized the district by pausing and clearly articulating a theory of action. The district was then able to focus its efforts, and reorganize and align its organization structure to support the theory of action, and is now better positioned to drive change.

NOTES

1. The Public Education Leadership Project (PELP) is a joint initiative of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Harvard Business School. John J-H Kim is a co-chair of PELP as part of his responsibilities at Harvard Business School; he is also CEO and founder of The District Management Council.