



**Developing Common Instructional Practice
Across a Portfolio of Schools:
The Evolution of School Reform in Milwaukee**

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	i
Introduction	1
Section 1: School Reform in Milwaukee 1990-2004	3
Section 2: A District Instructional Improvement Strategy 2005-2009	15
Section 3: From a Portfolio of Schools to an Instructional Improvement Strategy: Implementation in Practice	31
Section 4: Conclusions and Policy Recommendations	53
Appendix A:	58
Endnotes	59

Developing Common Instructional Practice Across a Portfolio of Schools: The Evolution of School Reform in Milwaukee

Executive Summary

In the latest iteration of school reform, district reformers have tried two primary school improvement strategies. One strategy decentralizes resources and decision-making to school sites—increasingly in conjunction with the creation of charters and other schools of choice. Where choice among a diverse set of options is a strong element, this strategy has recently been referred to as a *portfolio strategy*. This strategy hopes that choice and market-based accountability will drive improvements in schooling.

The second approach calls for strong district oversight of school and classroom practices. Where there is strong guidance and support for teaching, this strategy is often referred to as *managed instruction*. This strategy hopes that strong guidance around “best practices” and support for professional development will lead to improved teaching and learning.

Few districts have attempted to combine the strategies by managing instruction across a portfolio of schools. An important exception is Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), a district known for having had one of the most aggressive school choice plans in the nation for nearly 20 years, offering private school vouchers, charter options, and within-district public school choice. Over the past 5 years, Milwaukee has attempted to build common instructional practice across this diverse portfolio of schools.

The experience of MPS illustrates the challenges that arise when choice-oriented reforms intersect with capacity-building approaches. This report addresses questions raised by MPS district leaders regarding the success of their reform efforts aimed at improving instruction throughout the district.

Research Questions

The study is informed by four overarching research goals:

1. To understand what factors have influenced the district’s attempt to build common instructional practice in its schools;
2. To describe the outcomes of the district’s instructional reform strategy, especially changes in instructional practice intended to create greater instructional coherence around district standards;

3. To understand the strengths and limitations of key structures, tools, and practices used by the district to build common instructional practice; and
4. To recommend policy strategies that build on areas of success and address identified areas of need in implementing an instructional system to improve student outcomes.

We developed a multi-method case study of the district reform initiative based on survey data regarding instructional practice and professional development and qualitative data—including document review; interviews in schools and at the district office; and observations of professional development sessions, school and district meetings, and classrooms. We examined the recent history of reform in the district, the district rationale and strategy for influencing instruction at its school sites, and the district’s professional development and accountability strategies to evaluate how they influenced instructional coherence and quality. Our analysis led to some key findings.

Key Findings

MPS’s approach to develop a diverse portfolio of schools (during the 1990s and early 2000s) resulted in increased numbers of schools opening and closing, more school choice, increased student enrollment and decreased dropout rates in smaller high schools. The theory of action was informed by business models of competition, choice, and market forces, with the role of principal being that of site manager and accountability based primarily on student enrollment numbers and budgets.

However, the choice strategy did not result in improvements in achievement. Beginning from when the state offered statewide data in 2002, test scores remained low and almost unchanging until 2005, before the instructional efforts began. During this time, 4th grade reading and mathematics scores declined, while scores fluctuated within a few percentage points at the 8th and 10th grade levels without registering noticeable gains. While it created a few good schools, the portfolio strategy did not provide a widespread focus on instructional improvement, academic achievement, or equity of outcomes for students.

In 2006, MPS launched an instructional improvement strategy focused on building professional capacity to implement common standards of instructional practice and to raise student achievement. Systematic tools, processes, and a range of professional development resources have been put in place. Early benefits have included:

1. development of a common language for instructional improvement;
2. increased transparency and focus on instruction;
3. changed expectations about the role of the principal as instructional leader; and
4. noticeable improvements in 4th and 8th grade mathematics achievement and modest gains in 8th grade reading (see tables 2.4 and 2.5)

The role of the district in supporting teaching and learning has been strengthened. A key next stage will be to continue to clarify and build professional capacity at the district and school levels. Different approaches to developing and using literacy and mathematics coaches and curriculum generalists have been attempted. The more effective model, used for supporting mathematics teachers, is distinguished by several key features: It has developed strong content knowledge for teachers, focused on the curriculum, and aligned central office oversight with the work of teacher leaders. There are clear expectations about roles and accountability for improving practice. These differences are reflected in much more pronounced gains in student achievement in 4th and 8th grade mathematics than in reading.

While the district has established a foundation for improving common instructional standards and curricular coherence, the results reported in this study indicate inconsistent implementation and uneven adherence to common practices. Schools still vary in their expectations for students, in selection of instructional strategies, and in student engagement. While there is increased focus on instruction, there is not yet widespread agreement or systemic implementation of the district's common instructional vision.

It has been difficult to transform the long-standing district culture, which has placed a high value on school autonomy and competition, to one that values instructional quality, coherence, and collaboration. District policies and resource allocation continue to support the culture of autonomy and competition. For the most part, accountability is still based on metrics rooted in a competitive reform strategy, such as student enrollment numbers. Although there are several tools in place to observe classrooms and monitor instructional practice, the district does not have an adequate instructional accountability system.

Conclusions and Implications

An ongoing challenge for Milwaukee is balancing the past history and ongoing practice of decentralized school autonomy with the current desire to align standards, curriculum expectations and guidance, and features of effective instruction. There are tensions between the previous portfolio approach and the recent managed-instruction strategy. Nevertheless, the potential to harness both systemic standards with local flexibility is powerful and important.

District and school staffs have identified a need to go deeper in implementing a coherent and consistent approach to professional capacity for instructional change. The district is poised to move from pockets of effective instructional practice within individual schools to a systemic approach that is more closely focused on common quality practice.

These findings suggest that the district may achieve further gains if it can:

1. **Continue to communicate, develop, and support a strong shared vision for instructional improvement.** The history of MPS has bred a sense that initiatives come and go. To stay the course with effective instructional change requires a long-term commitment and focused implementation within and across schools. To support this, MPS should continue to develop the emerging common language around instruction, particularly language associated with the instructional improvement strategy, the *Characteristics of High Performing Urban Classrooms* approaches, and other protocols, resources, and communications. An ongoing commitment would be clearly communicated by continuing to allocate human, financial and material resources toward instructional improvement.
2. **Focus the MPS accountability system on instructional quality and student outcomes.** Although the district is moving from a system aimed at diversity and school autonomy to one focused on instructional improvement, there are still practices in place that support the competitive school reform model, including the use of different accountability metrics. The work of the central office, of coaches and specialists, and of administrators and teachers needs to be aligned and strengthened around the shared goal of implementation of effective, high quality instruction. The question is not one of decentralization versus centralization, but rather the appropriate balance and blending of system-wide strategies with local flexibility for different school and student needs.
3. **Increase instructional quality and coherence through attention to curricular standards and materials, a clear focus on professional development, and attention to the personnel responsible for building teacher and principal capacity.** The district has made important strides in reducing the previous plethora of textbooks and programs and in improving consistency of curriculum standards and quality, especially in mathematics. MPS should also consider exercising more strategic direction over human resource decisions in areas that pertain to building teacher capacity, such as subject coaches and curriculum generalists.
4. **Leverage effective practices within individual schools so that they become available to the district's system of schools.** MPS exhibits pockets of effective practices within schools, but continuing isolation of practice overall. There will, of course, continue to be variation across schools given the ongoing portfolio of diverse schools. Nevertheless, concerns about inequity of experiences and outcomes for students require attention to the quality of teaching and learning across and within all schools. The introduction, for example, of clear and coherent mathematics standards, curriculum guidance, syllabi, professional development, and other resources has provided a foundation for focusing instructional improvement in ways that have produced gains in student achievement.

5. **Make professional capacity-building a central element of the MPS reform strategy.** Effective education reform places a strong emphasis on building the professional capacity of those with responsibility for implementing improvements at district and site levels. MPS should continue to support a range of professional learning opportunities, both embedded within school practices and through access to external expertise. MPS's existing approaches of coaching using "train-the-trainer," access to specialist staffing, and development of instructional leadership have had some influence. However, to meet the challenges of supporting improvement across all schools and classrooms, MPS must help educators develop both stronger content knowledge and the professional skills required to personalize and adapt instruction to specific contexts and student needs.

6. **Pay further attention to instructional leadership.** The district's efforts to strengthen leadership are progressing, but would benefit from further attention to the principal's role as part of a distributed leadership team that involves coaches, curriculum generalists, other administrators, teachers and central office staff. Principals require support to develop a repertoire of instructional leadership practices and to better balance the time they spend on managerial and operational matters compared to educational improvement. Most importantly, sustainable instructional improvement requires focused attention to, and support for, implementing effective teaching and learning approaches at the classroom-level. The district must develop capacity to use strategies such as learning walks and teacher evaluation protocols to develop insights about practice and to use these insights to inform school and district action to improve practice. It is important to shift from compliance with protocols to the purposeful use of data and resources to change instruction for improved outcomes for all students.

Introduction

Two very distinct school improvement strategies have vied for attention in the latest wave of U.S. school reform. One strategy decentralizes resources and decision-making to school sites—increasingly in conjunction with the creation of charters and other schools of choice. Where choice among a diverse set of options is a strong element, this strategy has recently been referred to as a *portfolio strategy*. The term is borrowed from the financial world in which risk is minimized by using a diversification strategy. School districts develop a portfolio by creating different types of schools and then managing the schools based on a set of expected outcomes. The idea is to replicate high performing school models and close schools that underperform.

The second approach calls for strong district oversight of school and classroom practices. Where there is strong guidance and support for teaching, this strategy is often referred to as *managed instruction*. Districts that attempt to improve outcomes through managed instruction develop common instructional frameworks along with professional development systems that aim to build the capacity of teachers to implement common practice.

While both strategies hope to improve student outcomes, they seek to achieve this goal through very different mechanisms. The portfolio strategy gives schools substantial autonomy and develops a market-based system that assumes schools will improve in order to attract students, or will go out of business. Conversely, managed instruction assumes that schools will improve if the central office takes a direct approach to guiding teacher and principal behavior.

Rarely has a large urban school district attempted to combine the strategies by managing instruction across a portfolio of schools. An important exception is Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), a district known for having had one of the most aggressive school choice plans in the nation for nearly 20 years, offering private school vouchers, charter options, and within-district public school choice. Over the past five years, however, Milwaukee has attempted to implement a reform model aimed at building common instructional practice across this diverse portfolio of schools. This report examines the challenges that arise when choice-oriented reforms intersect with capacity-building approaches. It addresses a set of questions raised by MPS leaders regarding the success of reform efforts aimed at improving instruction throughout the district.

Research Questions

The study is informed by four overarching research goals:

1. To understand what factors have influenced the district's attempt to build common instructional practice in its schools;
2. To describe the outcomes of the district's instructional reform strategy, especially changes in instructional practice intended to create greater instructional coherence around district standards;

3. To understand the strengths and limitations of key structures, tools, and practices used by the district to build common instructional practice; and
4. To recommend policy strategies that build on areas of success and address identified areas of need in implementing an instructional system to improve student outcomes.

Methods

To achieve these goals, we developed a multi-method case study of the district reform initiative. (See Appendix A for a fuller discussion of the study's methods.) Quantitative methods were used to analyze survey data regarding instructional practice and professional development in the district, as well as data collected through the district's "walk through" initiative to examine classroom practice. The survey data were analyzed based on elements defined in *The Characteristics of High Performing Urban Classrooms*, a document created by MPS in 2005 to guide instruction in the district. These characteristics were also used as a lens to analyze the walk through data.

Qualitative methods—including document review; interviews in schools and at the district office; and observations of professional development sessions, school and district meetings, and classrooms—were used to develop a case study of the district's efforts. We examined the recent history of reform in the district, the district rationale and strategy for influencing instruction at its school sites, and the district's professional development and accountability strategies to evaluate how they influenced instructional coherence and quality.

In what follows, we examine how school reform has evolved in Milwaukee from a choice-based strategy to one aimed at managing and improving instruction across a diverse set of schools.

Section 1: School Reform in Milwaukee 1991-2004

The reform strategies in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) were largely shaped by school choice policies enacted by the Wisconsin state government. These policies aimed to expand school choice for Milwaukee students and use competition to improve schools. Until recently, MPS attempted to respond to improvement with further expansion of choice policies through diversity of school provision, but in recent years, MPS has reduced its emphasis on school autonomy and choice and increased its efforts to support schools as they work to meet district standards for instruction. The recent history of reform in MPS can be broadly characterized as an incremental shift from a decentralized portfolio strategy to a more centralized approach aimed at managing and improving instructional practice. This section provides a brief background of the MPS policy environment and the district strategy from 1991-2004 and the results of the district's decentralized portfolio strategy for organizational and student outcomes.

Policy Context: Choice Policies in Milwaukee

The most influential school choice policy in Milwaukee at the writing of this report was the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), which was enacted in 1990. The MPCP provides vouchers for students living in families with a household income at or below 175% of the poverty line. Students using vouchers increased at a slow but steady pace until 1998, when the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that vouchers could be used at religious schools (Carnoy et al., 2007). In 1998, the number of schools accepting vouchers rose from 23 to 83 and the number of students using vouchers increased from 1,501 to 5,740 (see Table 1.1, next page). Since the 1998-99 school year, the number of students utilizing the MPCP increased each year, while enrollment in MPS decreased each year. In 2008-09, there were 20,224 voucher students and 85,369 students in MPS. This is a sizable change from the first year of the voucher program when there were almost 92,000 students in MPS and 337 students in schools accepting vouchers.

In addition to the MPCP, several other policies worked to create school choice for students in Milwaukee, specifically the Wisconsin Charter School Program, Chapter 220, and the state open enrollment policy. The Wisconsin Charter Program, established in 1993, allowed for school districts to establish two charters to a maximum total of 20 statewide, and 13 charters were created under this law. In 1995, the cap was removed. Further changes were made in 1997-98 as chartering authority in Milwaukee was given to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the Milwaukee Area Technical College, and the Common Council of Milwaukee. In 2008-09, MPS had 42 charter schools, UWM 10 charter schools, and the Common Council had 1 charter school.

Chapter 220 provides choice to Milwaukee students by allowing minority students to enroll in neighboring suburban districts. One of the major goals of Chapter 220 is to achieve racial balance on a voluntary basis. A district with a less than 30% minor-

Table 1.1: Voucher Students and MPS Enrollment¹

Year	Number of Schools	September Voucher Enrollment	MPS Total Enrollment
1990-91	7	337	92,061
1991-92	6	504	93,381
1992-93	11	591	94,258
1993-94	12	718	95,258
1994-95	12	786	98,009
1995-96	17	1,320	98,378
1996-97	20	1,606	101,007
1997-98	23	1,501	101,253
1998-99	83	5,740	99,814
1999-00	90	7,596	99,729
2000-01	100	9,104	97,985
2001-02	103	10,391	97,762
2002-03	102	11,209	97,293
2003-04	100	12,778	97,359
2004-05	117	14,427	93,654
2005-06	121	14,217	92,395
2006-07	121	17,410	89,912
2007-08	120	18,882	86,819
2008-09	127	20,224	85,381

ity population receives a financial incentive to accept a minority student. The program proved to be popular with parents in Milwaukee. The majority of participants in the program were black students from MPS transferring to suburban schools².

At the writing of this report, Wisconsin had a district open enrollment policy through which students could enroll in any district in the state, provided that the district had space in its schools for the students. Table 1.2 shows the number of MPS students who participated in these other choice options.

Students in MPS had a wide variety of options for attending school. The educational marketplace created by the state policies had a distinct impact on the district strategy over the past 19 years, most notably the time period from 1990—the year the MPCP was enacted—until 2003, the second year of William (Bill) Andrekopoulos’ tenure as superintendent.

Table 1.2: Enrollment by Non-MPS Charter, Open Enrollment, and Chapter 220³

Other Enrollment Policies	Enrollment September 2008
Charter schools authorized by agency other than MPS	5,015
Open Enrollment	4,367
Chapter 220	2,525

MPS Leadership History and Reform Strategies

Similar to many other urban districts, MPS experienced considerable turnover in its top leadership, with one exception: Bill Andrekopoulos, who held the superintendency for eight years. Even though there was considerable superintendent turnover from 1991 to 2002, the district pursued a relatively consistent decentralization strategy during that time.

Superintendent Howard Fuller began the process of decentralization in 1991 by reducing central office positions and directing resources to the school sites. According to a former principal, the central office was essentially dismantled as all the resources were shifted to the schools:

I was a principal under superintendent Howard Fuller, and at that time our district was very centralized. One of the things that Howard did was he broke down the central office; he got rid of a lot of the central office people. He shifted all of the money to schools, and he felt that if schools only had the money, they would know what to do. He got rid of our curriculum guides and curriculum leadership, and he just developed his 10 core principles and said to schools, “These are the 10 core principles for learning, and you figure out how to do this.” We had this system of schools, and everybody got to do whatever they wanted, and schools had to figure out how to meet these objectives. They got lots of money, tons of money, and all of this place [Central Services] was decimated.

The decentralization strategy continued through Fuller’s successors. In 2001, Spence Korte attempted to have MPS designated as the nation’s first charter school district. In Congressional testimony, Superintendent Korte argued that MPS’ strategy made it well positioned to be a charter district. He said, “Through [MPS’] recent decentralization efforts, over 90% of our school operations budget is allocated directly to schools ... the teachers, parents, principal, and school community have decision-making authority on how their funds will be spent.” Korte’s proposal took many in MPS by surprise and never gained traction politically. Korte resigned in 2002.

Appointed by a slim 5-4 board majority, Superintendent William Andrekopoulos began his tenure by charting a similar course for the district. Andrekopoulos had been an MPS employee since 1972 and was a former principal of a charter middle school in the district. His early work focused on finishing some of the initiatives of his predecessor, including continuing to look at school choice as a way to improve student outcomes. One substantial difference between Andrekopoulos and previous superintendents, however, was his immediate focus on improving the district's high schools. Andrekopoulos felt that student outcomes at the high school level could be improved by creating smaller high schools and providing students more educational options. As he explained:

What led to [high school reform strategy] more than anything is a low graduation rate. That was the one thing that we really focused on in the beginning. There were two big goals that launched that work. One was improving the graduation rate, and the second was improving outcomes kids have after they graduate.

Continuing to Build the MPS Portfolio through High School Redesign

In 2003, MPS launched the Milwaukee High School Redesign Initiative (MHSRI), which focused on the development of new small high schools with the support of a \$17 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The goal of the grant was to create 50 new small schools in Milwaukee. From this grant, \$11 million was given to the Technical Assistance and Leadership Center (TALC) New Vision program to provide technical assistance in launching the new schools. Superintendent Andrekopoulos described the grant as a key part of his high school reform efforts and fitting with his strategy of improving schools by supporting innovation.

The MHSRI was a key policy in changing the high schools available to MPS students. In 1998-99, 15 large comprehensive high schools accounted for over 90% of MPS's high school students. As of the 2008-09 school year, MPS had converted all of its low

Table 1.3: MPS Schools Categorized by Grade Structure 2007-08⁺

Grade Structure	Number of Schools	Number of Students	Percent of Schools	Percent of Students
Early Childhood	7	852	3%	1%
Elementary (K-5)	52	19,740	25%	23%
Elementary (K-8)	65	31,621	31%	36%
Middle (6-8)	19	7,531	9%	9%
High (9-12)	53	23,306	25%	27%
Middle-High (6-12)	14	3,371	7%	4%
All (K-12)	3	939	1%	1%

performing comprehensive high schools and created 44 new schools. The high school redesign strategy, combined with previous efforts to expand choice to MPS students, gave the district a diverse portfolio of school types (see Table 1.3).

Organizational Outcomes of the Portfolio Strategy (1991-2003)

Accountability Consequences

MPS's strategy focused primarily on relocating decision-making power and resources to the school sites with an emphasis on competing in the educational marketplace that had been created by Wisconsin state policies. The district leaders' theory of action was that students and parents would influence school accountability by choosing the most effective schools.

One of the major consequences of the decentralization strategy was that instructional practice and student academic achievement were largely neglected as important components of the district's strategy. As a long-time MPS Central Service employee commented:

I don't know anywhere where anybody thought that [decentralization] would actually improve academic achievement; there really wasn't any focus on that.... I say that because in a decentralized system, you absolutely have to have the accountability first. We never quite got around to that at all, and I was a major decentralizer. I was very much involved in making sure all the mechanics and the work was done to create the authority at the sites.

Superintendent Andrekopoulos described the reform in a similar fashion:

We only looked at it as a business model. We said, "You know, we got this business model, and in this business model we're going to give the authority to the people that are closest to the kids because we think in that business model, that makes sense." But we never looked at it through an educational lens.

Both Central Service and school site staff claim that the district created an accountability system that emphasized school management more than instructional practice or student outcomes. Principals focused primarily on balancing their checkbooks and marketing their schools to the community. Over time, being an effective principal came to mean being able to attract enough students and generate sufficient revenue to keep the school open. As a long-time central office employee said:

We have had a decentralized—I don't want to call it a strategy—I am going to say a decentralized approach to management. With that, I would

say it lacked a strategy. The only strategy, the only goal, was enrollment; the only reward was for enrollment. If you get the kids, you get the money; you got the authority, etc.

The district implemented annual testing to hold schools accountable for student achievement at a later stage in this strategy; however, this was not fully effective because most schools did not administer the tests. In practice, principals were measured by a single metric, measuring whether or not they could maintain the student enrollment necessary to keep the school open.

Instructional Quality

With enrollment serving as the de facto district accountability system, the processes for collecting information about and evaluating instructional practice were underdeveloped. There was little emphasis on performance expectations for teachers. According to a former principal, the teacher evaluation system provided little information about instructional practice:

Nobody checked [teacher evaluations] off, nobody cared, nobody followed up. They were pre-printed cards, and they were in colors. So if you were an exemplary teacher, there was a preprinted card that had a preprinted statement about your characteristics, and it was green, and it was, I believe, it was a 280. I think that was the number.... So you didn't care what the principal said about your work. When you opened up your envelope, you wanted to see that green card; it'd mean that you were exemplary. And at the bottom of the card there was probably three-quarters of an inch of space where the principal could write something about your work. That was it. You signed it and turned it in. Then if you were a satisfactory teacher, you got a yellow card, and again, there was a big pre-printed statement about you being a good teacher. And then if you needed improvement you got a blue card, and if you needed improvement and needed to be transferred to another school, there was a little quarter of a card stapled to the blue card to let you know that you needed to transfer out to another school. Nobody checked if you turned them in, and the principal wrote one sentence. Years ago that caused me to start working with our district and telling people, "We have to do something," because as a principal I would go into teacher files when it was interview process time, and I'd look [at] their evaluations, and I'd find cards with one sentence written on them. A teacher would have an exemplary evaluation card with one sentence. That didn't tell me anything.

Absent a meaningful teacher evaluation system, district leaders assumed that teachers were delivering effective instruction, however when Central Service employees actually visited the school sites they came to realize that the district lacked a common standard

of effective instruction. A Central Service employee described the impact of her first learning walk:

The first time I did classroom walk-throughs, we did five [classrooms]. By the fifth one ... I walked out of that last classroom, and I just burst into tears. Didn't feel it coming, uncontrollable: my soul hurt. It was a special education classroom. [The] teacher had been teaching for 25 years. She's special education teaching physical science. Kids are sitting [in the room], they had a handout with the 50 states on them. She was going from one kid to one kid. First kid read the state, then what the capital was; the second kid read the next five, what the capital was.... First of all, this is physical science classroom. Why are they reading states and capitals? Even if she was going to do the social studies in the science, the way she was doing it, reading states and capitals and rotating the kids is not effective instruction.... Twenty-five years of teaching, and she knew we were coming. She thought that was good teaching. I thought, "Oh my god." So I just think it's prevalent... I get chill bumps every time I think about it. And if that's what we've been doing the last 20 years, I see why we're in the shape we're in. And I don't know if that's the case in all schools, but something isn't working right.

Superintendent Andrekopoulos contended that the pockets of ineffective instruction were a by-product of the district decentralization strategy, which had not included a standard of quality instruction. The conception of effective instruction varied by the capacity of the individuals at the school site:

We only looked at it through a business model lens. And we didn't look at it through a human capital lens, because that [decentralization] model works if you have very successful, intellectually sound people on the end of it. So, at some of the schools in the district that were successful, they had creative principals, they had good staffs, they were really able to run with the model and take it to the next level.... But that wasn't the case across the board. We now know a lot more about teaching and learning and how kids in poverty learn, so now it's, "What can we do systemically, yet still allowing for flexibility in how we do things at the school level?"

But what you do—what you teach—needs to be framed centrally, or framed by the state. We had no concept of that two years back. It was like whatever people felt like teaching, they could go ahead and teach, and you could have six different textbooks in a school. Every classroom was a school system, and that isn't good for kids. It's a different era now; we know a lot more.... I think the role of central office is to set the standard: "This is the standard, and this is the expectation. We're going to hold you accountable for the standard." I don't think the standard can be set at

the school level. Put it this way: It can be, but ... if that happens, there's a danger of the achievement gap and a lack of equity among all kids if everyone's standard is different, and [some] people's bars aren't as high as other people's bars. I'm not saying an individual school can't set high bars and reach that standard, but I think the central office has to set the standard, to set the norm.

Professional Development Approach

Since improving instructional quality was not directly part of MPS's strategy, the district did not attempt to build capacity in this area. A central office leader described the incoherence fostered by a system focused on something other than teaching and learning:

I don't think the focus was on learning. I think doing all these things and bringing this person in for this, and bringing this person in for that, it was so helter skelter that no one asked, "So, what is your goal for bringing that person in? What are you trying to get at? What's your outcome?" None of the outcomes were student achievement. We need to have 10 professional development sessions per year, we need to have 20 field trips per year, and we need to.... It was all that without the goal of why you're doing it, where's the need? ...It was just doing, doing, doing without thinking why we're doing it. And then as a result, we didn't see any achievement, any success. So I think that's why we pulled [the decentralized strategy] out, and I think that's why it didn't work.

Professional development for principals focused more on managerial capacity than instructional leadership:

I think where our district has been in the past was that our district was really concerned about principals as managers. The way that our principals' meetings were organized in the past, we would meet with our superintendent once a month ... around managerial concepts, and that was just about it. There was really no emphasis on teacher evaluation and classroom observations. I used classroom observations a great deal when I was a principal, and I found out how powerful those were. But this was not a common practice in our district.

As MPS pursued a strategy based on autonomy and managerial accountability, the district professional development system provided principals and teachers with the skills they needed to keep their school sites functioning, but support for instructional practice was largely neglected.

Organizational Culture: Autonomy and Competition

The decentralized portfolio strategy was based on the idea that competition among schools would increase school performance. The district was successful in creating a culture of competition among its schools, however student test scores remained relatively flat.

MPS leaders stated that fostering competition was necessary to contend with the expansion of school options created by state policies. According to a district leader, the emphasis on competition was a direct response to the MPCP:

Vouchers are what put the focus on enrollment. The vouchers are what caused us to be more market driven. We are more market driven in the way the customer relates to Central Services and that's not all bad, but the district has all these strategies based on collaboration; you can talk about collaboration, but we created a culture of competition. We deliberately created a culture of competition. There is no question about it.

A long time school leader acknowledged that the district strategy of competition and choice required principals to dedicate time to marketing and recruitment. Another principal described what his experience working in this highly competitive system:

With enrollment changing, with district enrollment loss over the last number of years, schools really do compete for students. For example, our kids are skewed: we're a very high-poverty school, pretty high percentage of kids with special education needs. But we really value the diversity of kids with different levels. We discovered, just as an example, that another school that's the school for gifted and talented, was actually getting into the database and finding second grade kids with certain reading levels and above, and sending letters home to recruit those kids. There are many examples of that: Schools do go after each other's students, with some vengeance.

Although the district strategy was based on the idea that competition among schools would lead to school improvement efforts throughout the system, this was not the result achieved. Rather than systemic improvement, the strategy seemed to primarily change the energy directed into recruiting students and teachers.

School Choice and Student Mobility

The decentralized portfolio strategy fostered an environment in which parents and students routinely shopped for schools. A report on student mobility in MPS found that, each year, 15% of students moved to a new school, not including those new to the district or those in top grades, and 20% of high school students switched schools dur-

Table 1.4: MPS Schools started and closed⁶

Year	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
New	3	3	4	9	10	4	9
Closed	3	0	1	5	9	15	12
Total	6	3	5	14	19	19	21

ing the school year⁵. School choice policies combined with the residential instability that often accompanies students living in poverty gave MPS a substantial student mobility rate.

The district increased student mobility further by opening and closing a considerable number of schools. From 2001-2008, the district had more than tripled the number of schools it opened and closed (Table 1.4). A related consequence was the considerable amount of Central Service staff time and attention directed towards managing school places rather than other educational activities.

Some interviewees contended that the portfolio strategy allowed the district to become more responsive to parents. Nevertheless, while a diversity of provision and choice may be considered a positive or at least necessary component of the portfolio strategy, many interviewees indicated that the high student mobility rate, combined with unevenness in instructional programs, was a key reason that the district portfolio strategy did not lead to increases in student achievement.

Table 1.5: MPS Cohort Dropout Rate⁸

Year	Cohort Dropouts
1996-97	49.8%
1997-98	44.4%
1998-99	44%
1999-00	48.2%
2000-01	45.3%
2001-02	39.9%
2002-03	39.3%
2003-04	33.9%
2004-05	39.7
2005-06	33.8%
2006-07	30.2%
2007-08	32.1%
2008-09	31.8%

Student Outcomes

The MPS reform strategy that began with Superintendent Fuller in 1991 and continued through the first two years of Andrekopoulos' tenure resulted in two positive student outcomes: (1) enrollment in MPS increased 5.7% from 1990 to 2003, even while school options offered by Wisconsin state policies increased, and (2) the dropout rate decreased. (See Table 1.5.)⁷

Many people working in MPS during this time period credited the decrease in dropouts to the strategy focused on giving schools autonomy and increasing the choices available to students. The decrease in school size as large comprehensive high schools were broken up was also a likely contributor to increased graduation rates.

From 2002-2005, student achievement in reading and mathematics on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE) was relatively low and unchanged, particularly at the high school level. In Tables 1.6 and 1.7, scores in grades 4, 8, and 10 are compared because those grades have the longest history of testing in the Wisconsin state testing system.⁹

It should also be noted that the percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch (FRL) increased over the years from 1998 to 2008, as did the proportion classified as an English language learner (ELL) or as a student with a disability (Tables 1.8 and 1.9).

Superintendent Andrekopoulos described the mixed results of the initiative:

There have been some amazing successes and good programs. There have been some failures, but we know with innovation that you have to take a risk that there will be some failure in that process, and know that with that failure will come a lot of good. So that's really what we want to do. Now, the one thing that we still haven't done enough of is changing what happens in the classroom at the high school level. We've gotten teachers to care more about kids; we've gotten more of a sense of community.... We're getting kids more engaged around learning, but have we really significantly changed what's happening in the classroom? We've still got a way to go with that.

Table 1.6: Percent of Students Proficient in Math 2002-05¹⁰

Grade	2002	2003	2004	2005
4	47%	53.1%	46.4%	44.8%
8	35%	29.2%	36.4%	38.9%
10	28%	29.8%	31.2%	32.1%

Table 1.7: Percent of Students Proficient in Reading 2002-05¹¹

Grade	2002	2003	2004	2005
4	64%	67.1%	62.8%	62.3%
8	56%	52.9%	59.2%	59.4%
10	40%	36.4%	44.7%	41.9%

Table 1.8: Percent of Students Receiving Free or Reduced Price Lunch¹²

Grade Level	1998	2008
Elementary	72%	80%
Middle	70%	81%
High School	50%	69%
District	66%	77%

Table 1.9: Percent of ELL Students and Students with Disabilities¹³

Year	ELL Students	Students with Disabilities
2000-01	5%	14.6%
2007-08	8.6%	17.7%

Notwithstanding the decreased dropout rate, the sense among district leaders was that MPS did not achieve the level of improvement in student outcomes throughout the system that it had hoped for with its portfolio strategy.

SECTION 2: District Instructional Improvement Strategy 2005-09

Against a backdrop of policies and reform strategies aimed at school autonomy and competition, MPS attempted to improve instruction by developing common pedagogical standards, establishing learning targets and embedding professional development at the school sites to help teachers improve their practice. As Superintendent Bill Andrekopoulos commented:

Our district is going through a significant cultural shift. We have moved from a district reform model that was based on a portfolio of schools emphasizing the importance of innovation and choice as the lever for improvement to a reform model that has a community of practice and professional learning.... The district is emphasizing a strategy that offers a set of curricular options that reflect the district's and state's academic standards.

This section describes the district strategy for building common practice as it was designed in 2006 and implemented over the following two years. We also describe the strategy pursued by the district's division of diversified community schools, paying special attention to changes in the charter school strategy that emerged as the district attempted to build common practice.

MPS's Instructional Improvement Plan

In 2006, MPS leaders began to develop an instructional improvement plan that attempted to set new district goals and to align existing practices aimed towards common instructional practice. The instructional improvement plan was rolled out to principals in August 2006, when Superintendent Andrekopoulos explained the changing strategy in his remarks to principals:

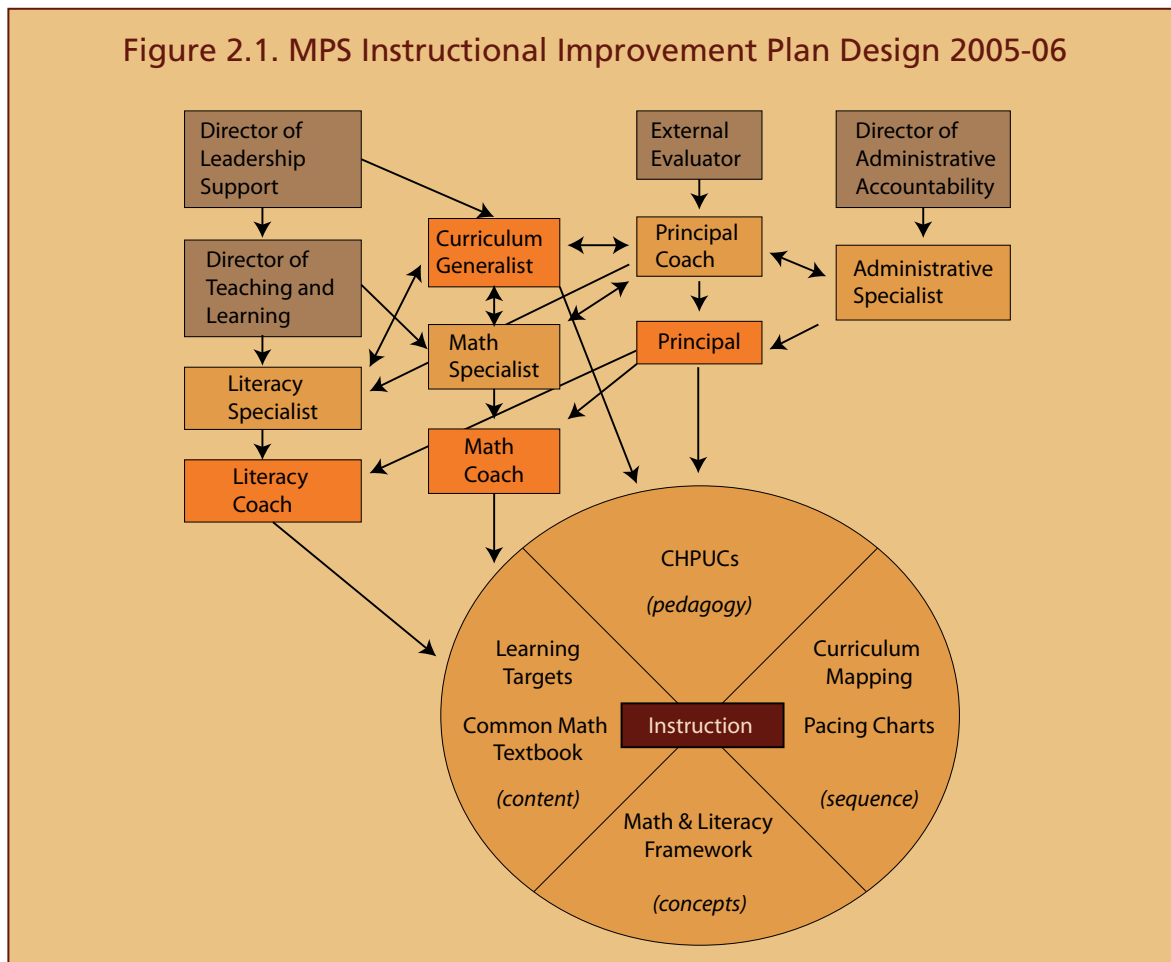
[In the past] the strategic direction of the district was not focused on student achievement. [It was] focused on governance, management, and parent empowerment—not on capacity building in the classroom or research-based strategies in education. We were a district of random acts of improvement, not a district with a systemic approach to improving education for all students. In this environment, some schools did well—we had several blue-ribbon winners—some made steady progress, and some schools' performance decreased during that time period.... The strategy over the next four years will be to provide the tools the classroom teacher needs and provide the time and support to improve their professional growth. The purpose of [the instructional improvement plan] will be to set the goals, align the work, define the services provided to schools, and to be accountable at Central Services for student results.

The district's strategy attempted to build common instructional practice through three processes: (1) embedding professional development at the school site using a "trainer of trainers" model; (2) building the capacity of principals to be instructional leaders; and (3) providing schools with instructional materials. (See Figure 2.1.)

The instructional improvement plan of 2006 included key positions for the following instructional leadership roles:

- literacy coach
- literacy specialist
- math teacher leader
- math specialist
- curriculum generalist
- school improvement facilitator
- principal coach

The literacy and math specialists and principal coaches were to be associated more closely with Central Services, as they supported multiple literacy coaches, math teacher



leaders, and principals respectively. The other positions worked directly at schools and were more closely associated with their respective schools than Central Services. The coaching efforts were placed under the direction of the Department of Leadership Support. Their intent was to provide consistency of purpose and direction and create opportunities for school staffs to obtain differentiated support. Principal capacity was developed through monthly principal institutes and principal coaches. Teachers were supported through a trainer-of-trainers model that embedded professional development in schools, whereby school site coaches were trained by central office specialists in order to train teachers to use the strategies presented by the district.

Although the literacy coach, math teacher leader, curriculum generalist, and principal were supervised and evaluated by separate individuals, the intent was that all would be guided by a common instructional vision. This vision was reflected in several documents created by the district specifying the goals and processes of instruction, in particular, *The Characteristics of a High Performing Urban Classroom* (CHPUC). Created in 2005 by MPS and the Milwaukee Partnership Academy, a group bringing together leaders in the school district, teacher associations, government, business, and civic groups, *The Characteristics of High Performing Urban Classrooms* identifies the following eight elements of an effective classroom:

1. Active engagement of student learners
2. Strategic use of instructional strategies
3. Routine use of a variety of assessments
4. Cultural responsiveness
5. High expectations based on learning targets
6. Partnerships with families and the community
7. Collaboration with colleagues
8. Impassioned, engaged adult learners

In each section, the document lists indicators for students, teachers, schools, and Central Service staff. For example, in the category of active engagement of student learners, the document says:

- Students will use high levels of critical thinking and follow established routines and procedures,
- Teachers will use open ended questions to foster critical thinking,
- The school will conduct walkthroughs and provide feedback on student engagement, and
- Central Services will model reflective feedback and facilitative skills.

Outcomes of the MPS Strategy

MPS has made some progress toward building common practice and instructional coherence across its portfolio of schools. According to a 2008 survey conducted by Stanford's Institute for Research on Education Policy and Practice, which had a 95% response rate, about two-thirds of teachers felt that their school had developed a common approach to instruction (Table 2.1).

The district's emphasis on instructional improvement appeared to provide a basis for creating the foundation for system-wide changes in instructional practice, but, we learned, adherence to district instructional standards has remained uneven across schools of different kinds.

Differences Across Schools

Since it began the new strategy, MPS has conducted an online instructional practice survey each year. The purpose is primarily to determine the level of implementation of the CHPUC's. The analysis for this section focuses on three of the indicators that most directly reflect teachers' actions in the classroom: (1) high expectations based on learning targets; (2) strategic instructional choices; and (3) actively engaged students.

In 2007-08, this anonymous voluntary survey was completed by about 2,295 teachers of the approximately 5,800 in the district, for a response rate of roughly 40%. The questions measure the degree to which teachers' self-reported practices are aligned with the standards set by the district. This may create both a response bias toward the socially desirable responses, and a selection bias, because it is less likely that teachers not following the district guidelines would take the time to complete a 137-question survey about the level to which they implemented district standards for quality instruction. There are also challenges associated with relying on self-reported assessments of instruction. Consequently, we evaluate these data along with other sources of data to better understand what instructional practice looked like in MPS. In subsequent sections, we examine data from the 2007-08 instructional practice inventory, principal survey data, and interview data.

**Table 2.1: Percent of teachers agreeing that,
"At this school, we share a common approach to instruction."**

	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Strongly Disagree	2	1.48	1.48
Disagree	43	31.85	33.33
Agree	80	59.26	92.59
Strongly Agree	10	7.41	100.00
Total	135	100.00	

We used the instructional survey data to examine patterns of teachers' self-reported practices across different types of schools. First, schools were divided into quartiles by the percentage of free and reduced lunch (FRL) students they serve. Quartile one represents the schools with the lowest percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch, while quartile four represents schools with the highest percentage of free and reduced lunch students. The results consistently revealed that schools with fewer FRL students reported greater consistency in setting high expectations based on the learning targets for students and using instructional strategies that promoted student engagement (Table 2.2). These findings indicated that MPS had considerable work to do in building common instructional practice, especially in its schools serving lower-income students.

It should be noted that although there were statistically significant differences among the schools, these differences may or may not be practically significant. For example, the survey asked teachers to respond based on how often they used instructional practices that the district has identified as promoting active engaged students. Teachers were to select from the following choices: 5=almost every day, 4=1-2 times per week, 3=1-2 times per month, 2=1-2 times per semester, 1=never. Given this range of choices, it is difficult to determine if using the practices almost every day is significantly different in practice from using them 1-2 times per week.

Furthermore, there are challenges in interpreting the meaning of the data for questions such as teacher expectations. The expectations that teachers have for students can be conceptualized as a complex interaction of what the teacher knows about a student's resources outside of school, the student's skills, the school's structure, and the teacher's capacity. If a student has few academic resources outside of school, an unstable family situation, and low skills, the teacher might still report high expectations for the student if the school is structured in a way to support the student and the teacher feels that he/she has the capacity to move the student forward academically. If the student has out-

Table 2.2: School Differences in Instructional Practice Ratings by Free / Reduced Price Lunch Status

Schools in:	FRL Quartile 1 (N=39)		FRL Quartile 4 (N=34)		T-Score	P-Value
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.		
Student Engagement	4.18	.27	4.02	.31	2.32	.023
High Expectations	3.77	.22	3.55	.30	3.51	.0008

side of school challenges and low skills and the school lacks the resources and know-how to overcome these challenges, then the teacher might realistically report low expectations for the student. If MPS has not made much progress on building school and teacher capacity, then it is quite plausible that student expectations might vary by the resources and skills that students bring with them to school.

Although the differences in reported instructional practice and expectations support the conclusion that instruction varies widely in MPS, this data does not specifically situate the instructional outcomes within the context of the district initiatives. To better understand the influence of district policies the schools were divided into two categories: schools operating under district instructional management mandates—these included low-performing schools identified for improvement (or SIFI schools) and other schools demonstrating mixed levels of performance that had received school improvement grants from the National Education Association (known as NEA schools)—compared with those operating with greater autonomy (labeled in our analyses as “no mandates” schools). The mandates pertained to curriculum choices, specific assessments, and instructional oversight. (For more detail, see Appendix A.)

When examining the schools in these categories, we found that the schools subject to district mandates had a narrower range of reported practices on the two constructs that most closely reflect pedagogical strategies: strategic instructional choices and using instructional practices for student engagement. Median ratings were nearly the same as those of schools with no district mandates, where there was a much wider distribution of reported practice. The range of scores in the “no mandates” schools was higher on the top end of the distribution, whereas both sets of schools had similar levels of scores

Figure 2.2: Use of Strategic Instructional Choice Based on Level of School Autonomy

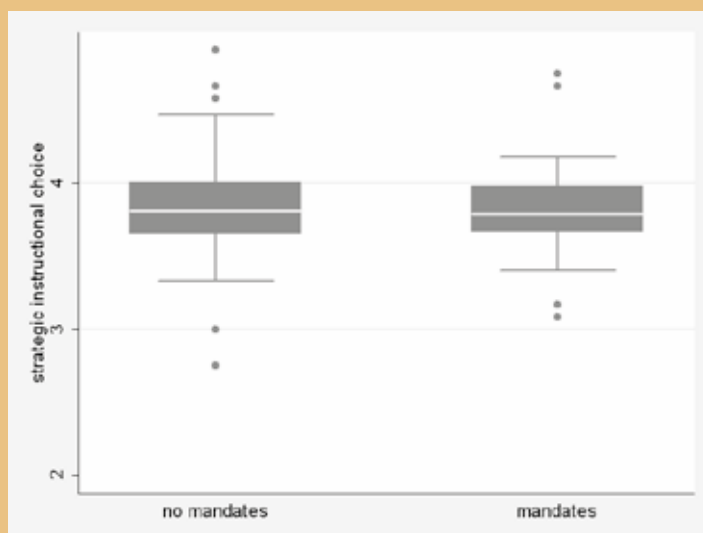


Figure 2.3: Use of Instructional Strategies for Student Engagement by School Autonomy

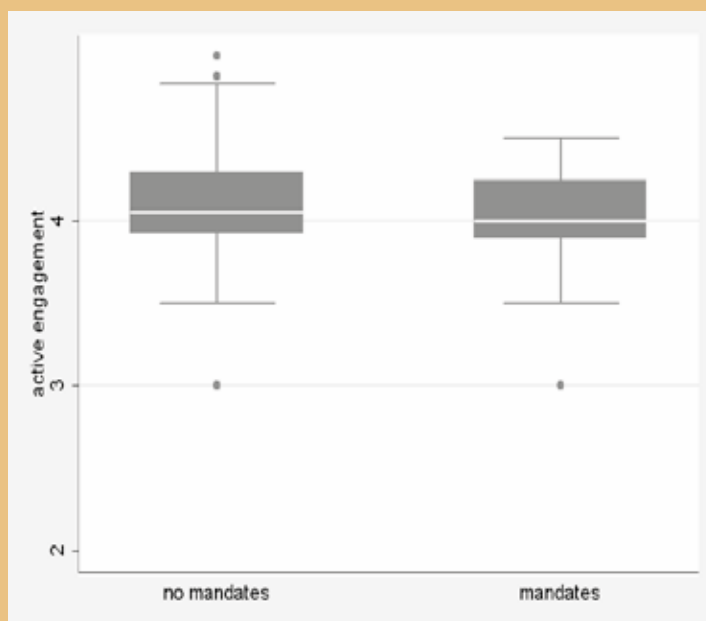
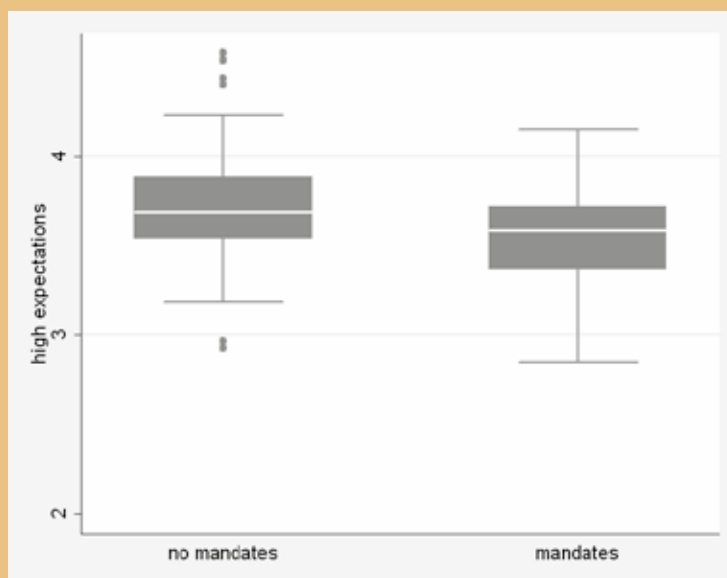


Figure 2.4: High Expectations Based on Learning Targets by School Level Autonomy



on the lower end of the distribution (Figures 2.2 and 2.3). This may mean that the district requirements increased the consistency of practice in the “mandates” schools and may have raised the floor of reported practice.

There were larger differences between the two sets of schools in the range of reported practices with respect to expectations of students, with the “mandates” schools showing more variability in scores and the “no mandates” schools exhibiting both a higher ceiling and a higher floor (Figure 2.4). This is consonant with our findings regarding the differences between high- and low-poverty schools, and there is some correlation between student characteristics and membership in these categories.

Because ours is not a longitudinal analysis, we cannot determine the relationship between district mandates and the median scores in these categories. Although the schools most subject to district control reported somewhat lower scores on these instructional practices, this does not mean that the district controls decreased school scores. Since these schools were given less autonomy because of low performance, it is equally possible that the district’s initiatives have improved the instructional practice at the sites. But even if the district’s policies are raising the floor on instructional practice, they have not lifted the ceiling to the highest levels represented in the higher performing, “no mandates” schools. This may mean that the district oversight may bring schools up to a certain level, but mandating instructional programs may not by itself be enough to move schools to high levels of instructional practice.

Another way to explore the possible relationship between the district’s instructional improvement plan and the consistency of instructional practice is to examine the results of the instructional practice survey for charter and non-charter schools. MPS divides its charter schools into two categories: instrumentality and non-instrumentality schools. The staff at instrumentality charters are MPS employees, and the schools have some freedom from district regulations, whereas staff at non-instrumentality charters are not MPS employees, and these charters have more autonomy from district policies. (Some states call these types dependent vs. independent charters.)

If the district strategy were successful in building common practice, it could be hypothesized that there would be less variation in instructional practice across the non-charter schools than across the two types of charters, which are intended to foster diverse approaches.

This, however, proves not to be the case. As illustrated in Figures 2.5-2.6, the charter schools had a smaller range of pedagogical practices in place, with the non-instrumentality charter schools—the schools with the most autonomy—exhibiting the narrowest range of instructional practices. These data could be explained in part by the response rates and resulting sample sizes, as non-instrumentality charters made up only 6.3% of the schools that responded to the survey, and instrumentality charters made up 13.18%, with the remaining 80.45% of responding schools in the non-charter category. Another possible explanation may be that the charter gave the school board the authority to close schools that deviated from their proposed approaches, which could result in charter schools reporting tighter adherence to district expectations. Further study is needed to explore these explanations.

The survey analysis also found significant differences among schools in the composite variable “professional community.” (See Table 2.3, next page.) Both charter schools and schools with more autonomy from district policies reported higher average levels of professional community. It is difficult to know what the status of professional community was before the district’s efforts at instructional management or whether trends were

Figure 2.5: Strategic Instructional Choices by School Governance

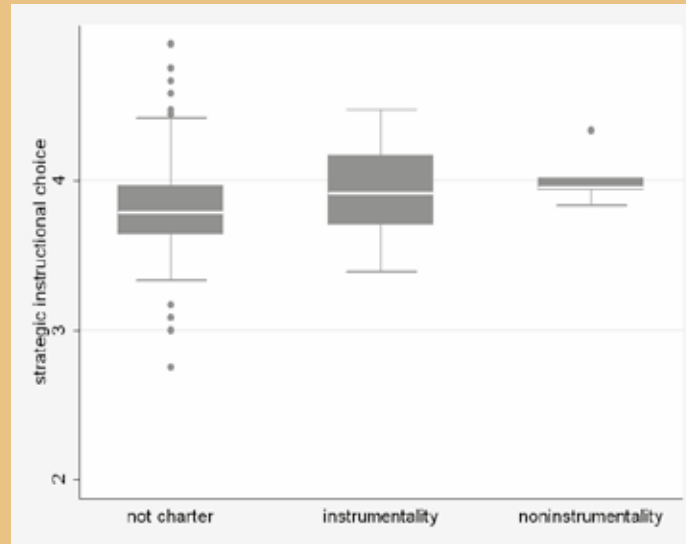


Figure 2.6: Use of Active Engagement Strategies by School Governance

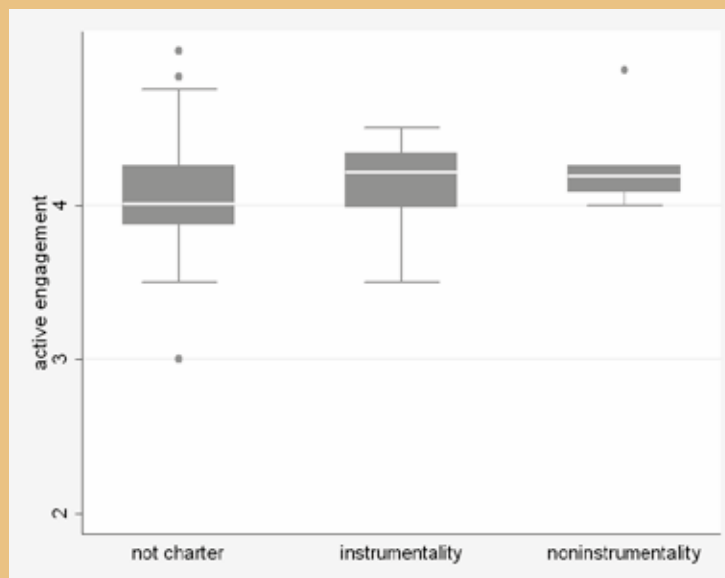
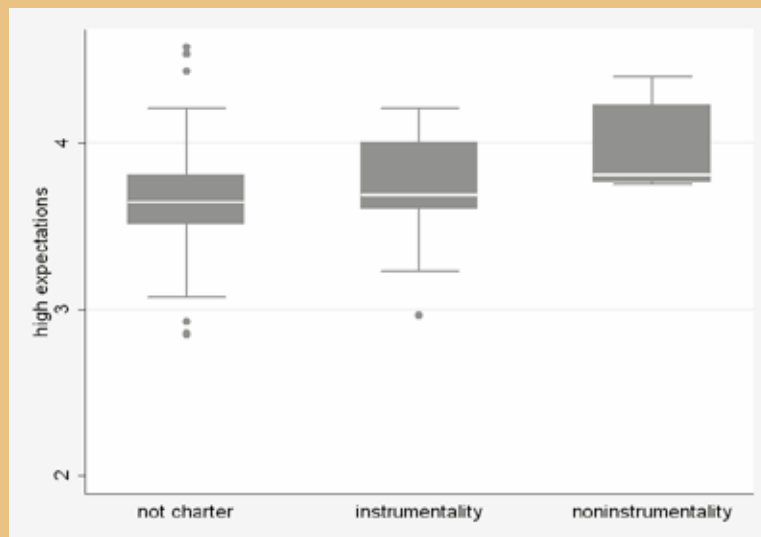


Figure 2.7: High Student Expectations by School Governance



related to the increased intervention of the district, but when combined with the data on charter schools, it does appear that there may be some relationship in MPS between the extent of school autonomy and the level of professional community experienced by teachers.

Overall, the data from the MPS indicates that there was considerable variation in instructional practice across the schools. When looking at schools based on the district tiering and intervention strategy, it appeared that the teachers in schools subject to more instructional mandates shared more similar pedagogical strategies, but reported less engagement in practices that characterize strong professional communities than schools subject to fewer mandates.

This suggests that, to some extent, the district was successful in creating common practice through its school intervention strategy. When schools were divided by char-

Table 2.3: Professional Community Ratings by Governance and Tier

Group	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	T-Score	P-Value
Not Charter	147	2.75	.33	-2.94	.004
Charter	24	2.96	.35		
No mandates	133	2.82	.35	3.02	.003
Mandates	41	2.64	.25		

ter status, the schools with greater professional community reported greater common practice. This suggests that both bottom-up and top-down mechanisms may work to build common practice at a school, but the more grass roots approach, at least in these charters, was associated with a stronger sense of professional community.

Differences Across Classrooms

The district-wide results for the Instructional Practice Inventory (IPI), which consists of data about observed classroom practice collected during learning walks, provide another source of evidence about instructional practice across the district.

In 2007-08, there were 164 Instructional Practice Inventories conducted in MPS. These were mandated for all low-performing schools and were conducted in other schools on a less consistent basis. Using an indicator system, the observers recorded levels of student engagement in the classroom on a 6 point scale. The district target was to have at least 70% of the classrooms observed designated as level 4 or above, reflecting relatively high levels of student engagement. This target was based on research conducted on the IPI that showed the most successful middle schools with an almost 3:1 ratio of observations or “hits” in categories 4, 5, 6 as compared to categories 1, 2, 3.

The descriptive statistics indicated wide variation in instructional practice across the district. Of the 164 IPIs conducted, the proportion of classrooms observed per school that were classified as level 4 or higher ranged from 0 to 100. The district median was 61.25. About half of schools met the target—with 70% of their classrooms exhibiting high levels of student engagement—while 30% of schools had fewer than half of their classrooms showing high levels of student engagement.

Evidence of Progress in the Field

Interview data provide a more nuanced view of the outcomes of the district’s focus on instructional practice. MPS employees indicated that the conversations around instruction changed. The data indicate, however, that the district still had considerable work to do in building common practice.

Common Instructional Vision

The interview data and survey data indicate that there were wide-ranging views about whether the district had achieved a common instructional vision. Further, there was agreement that even if a common instructional vision existed, it did not seem to have a systemic influence on instruction. One central office administrator commented, “I would say we have 200 plus schools with different visions, plus the central office. I bet we have over 100 different ideas here.”

Another district leader stated:

We don't have a picture in our head about what great classroom instruction looks like yet. If you go to this person, school A, school B, school C, and you ask them what is a great classroom, what has to be in every classroom, I'll bet you we'd get a different definition. And what does the research say about a great classroom? I don't think they could give it to you.

Some interviewees contended that the district's strategy was beginning to work, but that it had not yet reached all schools' practice, particularly at the classroom level:

I've heard that ... schools that different coaches work in are starting to change, and people are starting to try new things, but I haven't seen it, which is my frustration. So we've got a lot of pockets of schools where instruction is just as bad as it has always been, if not worse, and we've got some schools that are making improvement.

Attempts to specialize and diversify schools were viewed both as impediments to common instructional approaches and as attempts to create within-school coherence in the face of frequent district-wide changes in instructional philosophy. One of the charter school leaders expressed both of these opinions at once:

The sense is that [instruction] is different. The sense is that there's ownership of the staff; that it's not something that's mandated from the district that they do. It's something that they got together themselves, did their research themselves, and said, "We want to do this for kids ourselves," and it's somewhat protected. So as the district goes to the next flavor of the month—I know you've heard that a million times—that they're protected, and they can continue and sustain what they're doing. Instruction is across the board in the charter schools. They're individual. They have their own identity, their separate instructional practices. There may be some that are more popular in a certain year. For example, we had a year that everybody was putting "academy" in their name in some kind of way. Then we went into the community schools, they were all "community" this or that. And we had our service learning, project-based learning schools that came along. So you will find some charters that have some commonalities, but for the most part they are different. They are a system of schools, not a school system.

Even if the district developed a common instructional vision among all of the traditional MPS schools, the district would still have 20% of its schools' charters written specifically for the purpose of implementing an instructional program that differs from

the vision developed by the district. Nevertheless, some interviewees perceived that a common vision had begun to emerge:

I think there is beginning to be that ownership. I think that the district has suffered in the past from leaders that came in and they were here for couple of years and they have their ideas. And then, the principals would say well, two years that will be down the drain, now it will be something else. But because there has been some consistency with leadership I think that it's been a long enough period of time that it's like, "Oh this is what we are going to do. It's not going to go away; this is the change and we need to behave."

I think there are disconnects in each of those lineages [classroom to school to district]. But I think that now everybody can sit at the table even though there might be a different level of understanding and expectations in each of those. Before, I think the central office had the vision of what needed to happen and it was not necessarily understood in the same manner by the principals, and the teachers definitely didn't understand it. I think we have a lot more work to do with teacher buy-in and building capacity within the schools to elevate the levels of teaching and learning in the classroom.

Common Instructional Language and Transparency of Practice

Even though actual instructional practice still varied considerably, MPS made important progress in creating a foundation to support changes in practice. Teachers and administrators described a system that was more focused on instruction. The district seemed to have created a common language for instructional improvement, made instruction more transparent, and changed expectations for the principal's job.

The district created a common language for discussing effective instruction through the CHPUC. Although the CHPUC was not alone sufficient to guide daily instruction, it provided a common language for discussing instructional practice that did not exist previously. Prior to the CHPUC, quality instruction was defined school-to-school and classroom-to-classroom, but once the CHPUC was created, teachers, principals, and Central Service staff had a common language for discussing instruction. Although there was not full ownership of all elements of the CHPUC among the teachers, it served as a document that generated discussion.

Many of the elements of the CHPUC appeared to have been internalized, as teachers and school leaders frequently mentioned student engagement and expectations based on learning targets—two of the elements of the CHPUC—as important instructional objectives. Through the CHPUC and the IPI learning walks, there was considerable prog-

ress in building consensus that effective instruction should actively engage all students. An instructional coach described this as a key change in the district:

People are talking about instruction in a way they've never talked about before. One of the things I've noticed, and I've been in this district since '92 [is that] it used to be when I first started in this district as a teacher, people pretty much worked in their own setting. I think that's been teaching for years. People worked in their room. If they left you alone, you got stuff done, but everybody was going in different directions. What I see now is there's more school wide collaboration. You see people working more in teams, working as grade levels, across grade levels, and you're seeing that more and more ... especially in the successful schools, and that's why they're successful, because they're all going in the same direction, and they're working together. The schools with the most difficulty, there's probably still some people that are working isolated from everybody else, and that's not a good way to go. I think Mr. Andrekopoulos has provided that opportunity for people to work as teams, and I think bringing the learning team in, bringing in literacy coaches, the change in the way they do the school plan has changed tremendously.

MPS was successful in making instruction transparent through formal processes such as the CHPUC and IPI learning walks and an annual instructional practice survey. These processes were useful in sending a signal that instruction was important and certain types of instructional practice were more effective than others. The data was also useful in making the case for instructional improvement.

Reorienting the district to focus on instruction was a substantial change in strategy. Several district leaders described the ways in which some of these processes sharpened the district's focus on instruction:

Instruction has become more kid-centered, kid-focused. It's become more focused on student successes and growth and achievement. I've seen more use of data on specific kids. I've seen more individual planning for individual groups or individual kids. I've seen more grade level meetings, teachers working together as a grade level supporting each other. And I think there's been more conversation about instruction as a whole in this district in the last 5 years than there has in my 30 years' existence in this district.

Superintendent Andrekopoulos noted that there were many significant changes in the process used by the district to support instruction, but the next step would be to leverage the systems that were in place to change what could happen in the classroom. For example:

Now, the one thing that we still haven't done enough of is changing what happens in the classroom at the high school level. We've gotten teachers to care more about kids; we've gotten more of a sense of community. We have kids who feel more comfortable about the touching, learning, feeling things in school. We're getting kids more engaged at the high school level around learning, but have we really significantly changed what's happening in the classroom? We've still got a way to go with that ... we've worked really hard at putting a book together called *The Characteristics of a High-Performing Classroom*. I think people understand the importance of engagement. I think we can talk it, [but] I don't think we have a deeper understanding of it. I think that's still part of the next evolution. I see myself as a setter-upper as a superintendent. I've got to work through all of this stuff to get people to understand you've got to focus on instruction, and to break down the barriers, and to really battle through this over my tenure as the superintendent. I think I'm really setting this up for the next superintendent, to really then spend a lot of energy on changing what happens in the classroom instructionally. I think all of this work had to happen before you get to that point. So, I think the next person needs to be a strong instructional leader who really understands this and really focuses on this.

Student Achievement Gains

Between 2005 and 2009, student achievement in reading on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE) was changed little, except for modest gains at the 8th grade level. 15 (See Table 2.4, next page.) However, since the advent of the instructional reforms in 2006, scores in mathematics showed considerable improvement in grades 4 and 8, with about a 14 percentage point gain in proficiency levels at both grade levels. (See Table 2.5, next page.) The gains were even more striking when compared to the scores students earned prior to the instructional improvement plan. In 2002, only 36% of students in grades 4, 8, and 10 combined were proficient in math and in 2009 the number rose to 47% overall combined.

As noted earlier, it is important also to consider that over the past 10 years the percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch, and classified as either an English language learner (ELL) or as a student with a disability increased substantially. While 10th grade scores have not risen, they have stayed relatively stable while dropout rates have decreased, which means that more low-scoring students have been kept in school.

In the next section, we discuss the change strategies that were associated with these areas of improvement.

Table 2.4: Percent of Students Proficient in Reading
2005-09¹⁶

Grade	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
4	62.3%	63.3%	60.8%	61.2%	61.4%
8	59.4%	63.5%	60.1%	63.7%	64.2%
10	41.9%	39.7%	39%	41.3%	41.7%

Table 2.5: Percent of Students Proficient in Math
2005-09¹⁷

Grade	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
4	44.8%	53.1%	51.7%	60.2%	58.5%
8	38.9%	41.2%	39.9%	50.2%	52.1%
10	32.1%	29.7%	28.7%	28.8%	30.4%

Section 3: From a Portfolio of Schools to an Instructional Improvement Strategy

This section discusses the implementation of the district's instructional strategy and identifies factors that might explain the outcomes. We explore both the progress that was made in improving teaching and learning, especially in mathematics, as well as the challenges to instructional improvement that remained five years into the district reform plan. Many of the limitations in implementing the district's standards of instruction can be explained by the incoherence in the system created by policies designed to support the district's portfolio strategy. Both the policies and the organizational culture created by a portfolio strategy proved difficult to align to the most recent district strategy and to the achievement of systemic improvement.

Professional Development: Human and Curricular Resources

A number of policies used to implement the embedded professional development strategy were important both for the progress made in instruction and for the remaining variation in instruction across the district. Because the literacy coaches were implemented for the longest period of time, much of the discussion below focuses on this position, as well as the curriculum generalist position. Mathematics teacher leaders were more recently released from a portion of their classroom teaching responsibilities to serve as coaches, but given the positive results in math for MPS students, it is important to highlight how the math professional development strategy differed from other strategies.

Literacy Coaching: A Decentralized Approach

The literacy coach initiative was one of first initiatives developed by the district to build common instructional practice. Given that the district was still very much inclined toward decentralization at the time, the principals were given full autonomy in hiring their literacy coaches and were given little oversight as to their use. In addition not all schools were required to have a literacy coach. Consequently, there was wide variation in the use and capacity of the literacy coaches throughout the district, which may have contributed to the variation in instructional practice among the district schools. Whereas schools made gains overall at the 8th grade level, there was little overall progress in reading in grades 4 and 10.

Two principals provide a snapshot of the variation in literacy coach implementation. One principal noted:

Our literacy coach was here when I got here and she is wonderful. The one we had at my other school was great too. I think when principals pick that person they try to find somebody who has a lot of reading back-

ground and a good personality to work with the staff. You don't want a literacy coach that doesn't click with people.

On the other hand, a second principal stated:

I don't have a literacy coach; I don't know why. The literacy coach left the country the year I got here, and then nothing's been suggested to have him come back or be replaced. So I just had that [other position], which kind of provides similar coaching, but she'll confess she's new too, that's not her strength, she has no background in literacy.

Even though the literacy coaches' primary duties were outlined in the instructional improvement plan and an MOU, the literacy coaches were often drawn away from their coaching into "other duties as assigned," with little accountability for how principals utilized coaches. A Central Service leader described how this influenced the effectiveness of the literacy coach position, attributing many of the problems to the principals' use of coaches:

We didn't hold principals accountable to how to use that position. That position was created as a full-time release to go coach and model, do staff development. And then we kind of turned a blind eye when that person then substitute taught or became the assessment coordinator or librarian or guidance counselor or part-time AP or cafeteria duty or hall duty. Of course we're not going to get results, if you're not letting people do their job. You're not going to improve literacy if the person you hired to train your teachers to be better teachers of literacy doesn't ever get to do that training. It totally got watered down. And then a study came out and it said "stop making people be assessment coordinators, stop letting your literacy coach substitute teach, put them back in their role." So we started off that school year with a bang. That was two years ago, and people had this renewed focus, and we met with our principals, and said, "This is how it has to be."... By the end of the year, not even by the end of the year, by January, literacy coaches were substitute teaching.

Furthermore, the district had not developed an evaluation tool specific to the coaches. Even though the duties of the literacy coach were very different from those of a classroom teacher, the literacy coaches were evaluated by the same criteria as classroom teachers. Some interviewees expressed a view that if the evaluation were more closely aligned to the job then principals could be held accountable for using the literacy coaches primarily as coaches:

The sites have full control over hiring, through the interview process. There was a job description. There still is. One of the problems is we are still evaluated on the generic teacher evaluation form, which is part

of why principals have had free reign to use these people not for their intended purpose, because they're going to give them this form that talks about teacher things instead of coach things. We think that that's part of the problem. If principals are forced to use an evaluation form that talked about coaching, and how much professional development did this person provide your staff

For the district to reach its goal of decreasing the variation in instructional practice across its portfolio of schools, the schools need to receive consistent and appropriate professional development. Many important aspects of the coaching initiative seemed decoupled from the district goal of building common quality practice, which created variation in the effectiveness of the position. Nevertheless, in a 2008 survey, 88% of principals agreed that the teacher leaders at their schools sites helped them be more effective, indicating that the positions have potential for supporting school improvement. The challenge surrounding the strategy was that the decentralized selection, use, and evaluation was at odds with a district strategy aimed at building common instructional practice of high quality.

An additional challenge in defining the work of the literacy coaches was that, as both principals and central office leaders stated, there was, in practice, no district reading curriculum:

There really is no curriculum in the district. They've done some curriculum mapping at separate schools, which ... in a district this size needs to be a district responsibility. We definitely need some district guidance on where to go. Everybody's on a different page. District-wide, we have 19 different reading programs. So one of the charges [is that] we're going to narrow the scope of our reading programs because of high teacher and student mobility. One week our kids may be in a school that has direct instruction, the next week in a school that does just guided reading, and next week in a balanced literacy school. It's just crazy. So, the kids never have that spiraling of skills to get better. It's just learning how a new program operates.

By giving schools full autonomy over the materials used in teaching the learning targets, the district seemed to have created a system characterized by "curriculum clutter." Even though the district issued curricular guidelines, the autonomy granted to schools undermined the district's attempt to build common high quality instructional practice. A high school principal noted:

The district hasn't [created a curriculum] yet. If they really want to do that, they would do that with our support. Yes, it's micro-managing, but heck yeah, that's what you need to do. If they do that then I know that no matter where you go, the teachers are teaching the same. The district has

to mandate, come up with, a curriculum. First semester, second semester. We know this is what we're doing, and doggone it, we hold the teachers accountable for that. I'd rather have a mandate for what the school should be doing, and let us monitor it.

As the district gradually moved from a strategy that emphasized autonomy and diversity to one based on collaboration and common practices, it progressively moved to decrease the variation in the textbooks used by its schools and, beginning in the fall of 2010, all schools in MPS were to follow the same literacy plan.

Refining Professional Development: The Milwaukee Math Partnership

After the literacy coach initiative, the district developed a similar proposal for providing professional development to math teachers. However, the math initiative was different from the literacy position in three important ways: the math program utilized partnerships with local universities; it gave sites less autonomy over the use of the embedded coaches; and it focused the curriculum.

University Partnerships

District leaders thought that the primary reason math instruction was ineffective was because of lack of content knowledge by math teachers. To address this, they developed a program that allowed an MPS teacher to take math classes at the local university for free. In five years, there were 2,000 enrollments in 79 sections of University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee-Milwaukee Math Partnership classes. The majority of the Milwaukee Math Partnership (MMP) work was funded by a \$20 million grant from the National Science Foundation and \$10 million from the state for improving math instruction in MPS. The approach of focusing more on content knowledge than implementing a specific program seemed to help teachers feel more amenable to the initiative. A math teacher leader described how the MMP was received at his school:

The district team has always been pretty organized. They knew that people needed some more content. They had a nice network in place and still have. This model seems to be one that people for the most part buy into because it doesn't appear to be an extra piece that they have to do. It's not a whole "throw out everything you are doing, now you are going to do it this way," but it's honing skills, refining things; and people have been pretty receptive.

In working more closely with local universities and focusing on math content knowledge rather implementing generic instructional strategies, the district math program became more coherent.

Math Teacher Leaders

In addition, the math teacher leader (MTL) program overcame some of the issues that undermined the literacy coaching initiative, as it was introduced as part of a more coherent initiative. The math department instituted accountability conferences in which the MTL, principal, and a district representative met to discuss the MTLs' goals for the school and how they supported teachers. These steps were effective in ensuring that MTLs across the district engaged in similar practices. Most schools reported that MTLs helped with data analysis and supported teachers with one-on-one assistance, or team teaching and modeling instruction. Whereas the literacy coach initiative was more closely aligned to the decentralization attitudes that under-girded the portfolio approach, the MTL approach was more closely aligned to the current strategy aimed at building common instructional practice and district-wide coherence.

Curriculum Coherence and Focus

Since 2003, the MMP developed curriculum guides in grades K-10, created common high school course syllabi, and adopted common textbooks, which were well-received at school sites and created the perception of a coherent math program. Even though limiting the school textbook adoption list to three textbooks decreased school autonomy, those at the school sites felt that narrowed curriculum options helped increase coherence and was one of the strongest district supports:

The district-level leadership piece that they've taken in mathematics over the last two or three years has been one of the more successful content areas. Even though we haven't realized the gains in student learning yet, I think it's provided us more focus in a couple of ways. One, they did do a new math textbook adoption several years ago and limited our choices, but the timing was good because up until that time, every school was sort of doing their own thing. So just to have the opportunity to kind of rethink math materials, math textbook materials, and related curriculum and instruction has been important. Most importantly, we have a math teaching specialist who's been a very strong support in terms of guiding teaching and learning at the school levels that's aligned with the math textbook series. We're hoping to see some improvements in student learning in math this year based on two years of working within that now. But I would say that's been the most coherent, most focused, most sustained initiative across the content areas.

Teachers stated that even though it was difficult to learn how to implement a new math series, it was also difficult to develop a math curriculum on their own, as had often been required in the previous math plan. Teachers commented on the strengths of a more consistent curriculum, as well as some of the challenges of implementing a new math program:

[The math curriculum] is very coherent. We have had a staff of people that have worked very hard to put that together to get it off the ground and they have been working at it for a few years, so it's very strong and it's solid.... [Teachers appreciate it because] it's something concrete that you can work with. You may not like all the pieces, but there is a definite vision there and the material that they are going to use is well planned and well thought out. And to my knowledge, they are going to try and structure reading along the same lines as the math program, which was excellent.

The general attitude among many of the personnel responsible for providing instructional support to the schools was that the instructional program became more effective by becoming more coherent and focused.

Furthermore, as indicated by a specialist, a common curriculum had the potential to improve the delivery of professional development:

If we would've taken a week before school started this year and paid our teachers to come to one central location, be it a hotel or whatever, and say, "Here are the learning targets, here are the specifications, here is how this specification falls under this CHPUC. This is what it should look like at your school level, this is what it looks like at the district, and this is what it should look like in your classroom. And now let's bring out your curriculum, let's bring out your textbooks. Now that we've seen this and this particular [target], let's see where in your textbook it aligns. Now let's find the gaps in your textbook and try to fill that in, because you know what? Our learning targets are our curriculum." I don't know that anybody's ever done that.

This approach—which was associated with strong gains in mathematics achievement—was far different from the more decentralized approach that had been previously used in literacy, where gains were few.

Developing Instructional Leadership

Another area where the district struggled was in developing the capacity for instructional leadership in a district where managing schools to increase enrollment—rather than managing instruction—had been the primary focus. One strategy for supporting instructional leadership was to create the position of a “curriculum generalist” at the school level. The other was to try to build principals' capacities to act as instructional leaders. While each of these strategies was partially successful, the two were sometimes also in tension with one another.

The Curriculum Generalist

At the writing of this report, the district's professional development model was based on a trainer-of-trainers approach: district-level specialists trained coaches, who returned to school sites to train teachers. District specialists at MPS had anywhere from 20 to 38 schools to support, so it became difficult for them to provide in-depth training for the coaches on how to effectively implement a wide variety of curricula.

One of the primary reasons cited for the difficulties faced by coaches in changing instructional practice was that the coaches held no authority over teachers to hold them accountable for changing their instructional practice. To address this situation the district created the curriculum generalist position, which attempted to combine instructional support with administrative authority. There were two types of curriculum generalists: school-based, who were hired by principals; and district curriculum generalists, who were hired and assigned to a school by the central office. By giving curriculum generalists administrative authority, the district was able to overcome some of the problems with the previous instructional support initiatives, but other issues created difficulties in using the curriculum generalist as a resource for building common instructional practice across the district.

District-appointed curriculum generalists were often met with substantial resistance at the school site, and within other departments at Central Services. In addition, only a small subset of schools had district-appointed curriculum generalists, giving the majority of schools the autonomy to hire whomever they chose, or to choose not to staff the position. There was substantial difference between a district curriculum generalist and a school curriculum generalist. Whereas the school curriculum generalist might have brought a wide array of skills to the job and have performed a variety of duties, a district curriculum generalist worked with much more consistent job duties and skill sets.

The district began to appoint some curriculum generalists to schools to drive instruction, either as “an extra set of eyes on instruction” or as a resource to improve a principal's capacity as an instructional leader. The autonomy given to the majority of principals in hiring curriculum generalists created considerable variation in the skill sets of the person in that role, as well as in the list of duties they were asked to take on. Such actions may have worked against the district goal of decreasing the variation in instructional practice at the school sites.

There was greater consistency around the role of the district curriculum generalist, because Central Services maintained authority over hiring and placement. And yet, in centralizing the position, important tradeoffs occurred that may have decreased its effectiveness. A Central Service leader described how the structure of the district curriculum generalist position sometimes created barriers between these staff and local principals:

I think what has happened, especially for the [school], we have two types of curriculum generalists. We have curriculum generalists that the schools have self-selected ... and interviewed and hired.... Then there are the district-wide people, who had no knowledge ... they were just sent to their school, and I think that makes it very difficult, because what happens is that the principal first is thinking, “Why did they send this person here? What’s that person’s role?” And that principal does not evaluate that person if they come from the district level. So, who is this person taking information back to? What is going on? There’s a whole trust issue, and it might take a year to get over the trust issue. And then once you get over the trust issue ... just think about a year’s worth of progress down the tubes. Whereas you have a curriculum generalist that you know, and you have some input in, and will evaluate at the end of the year... that’s different.

Another central office leader observed something similar:

When I worked with the schools that were in need of improvement, [curriculum generalists] were faced with resistance. These are centrally hired people that are then sent to those schools in need of improvement.... I mean out of 13, 14 schools with curriculum generalists that I supervised, I had problems in 4 or 5.

Perhaps the most telling statement about the curriculum generalist position came from a principal who was slated to receive a curriculum generalist, but had not been given one. The principal said he was “not knocking down the door to have Central Services find one for me.” He made it clear that he did not consider the curriculum generalist a support for his school:

I was told I had to have one. So then I asked, “Can I help interview for that person?” And I was told no. And then I said, “How much of that person’s time do I own as a principal?” Because if they’re an administrator, there are certain things I would like them to do. And I was told that I don’t own any of their time. And I was told that whoever the curriculum generalist is isn’t going to be reporting to me, they’re going to be reporting to somebody at central office. So, to me, just from hearing that from the get-go, I’m not too fired up about having them. Because ... what are you doing for us, for me? If you’re just here to walk around and then go back and report at central office, then I don’t need you. If you’re here to work with us, then fine. But that’s what I’m worried about, this curriculum generalist will be just another person to walk around and say, “This isn’t working, that isn’t working.”

The curriculum generalist position was developed to remedy challenges associated with using teachers to train other teachers, but the trust issues that surrounded the position

mitigated the effects. In addition, by functioning in an administrative capacity, the curriculum generalist became subject to some of the policies that created isolation among those that provided instructional support. Additionally, they did not receive the same training as those charged with supporting math, reading, and writing.

Even amidst all these barriers, curriculum generalists were able to effect change in some places. There were many instances of the curriculum generalist effectively supporting instruction once the principal and curriculum generalist worked together. The problem was that the barriers inherent in the position contributed to considerable variation in the curriculum generalists' ability to influence instruction and support the district goal of building common instructional practice.

Principals and Instructional Improvement

The district also invested substantial resources in using the principal position as a key tool for implementing the district's strategy, reflecting wide agreement that the principal was the most important position in the district reform strategy. And yet, as with other critical personnel and practice decisions, it seemed that there was a lack of coherence around the principal's role in the district strategy.

For example, the district attempted to build the principals' instructional leadership capacity, which in practice meant that the principal ensured implementation of the instructional improvement plan. But even as the district attempted to transform principals into instructional leaders, they also assigned personnel to the school sites who could undermine the principals' role as an instructional leader. Principals sometimes referred to the coaches and curriculum generalists as "another layer of instructional middle managers," suggesting a need to consider a more integrated approach to distributed leadership focused on instruction that could better support the principal's key role.

Principals were taught to be instructional leaders primarily by monitoring instruction through learning walks (discussed further below) and providing feedback for improvement. A principal coach described the strategy:

The big strategy is trying to get principals to a point where they can be real good instructional leaders, and be able to evaluate good instruction, and also be able to evaluate poor instruction, and then be able to coach the poor instruction so that it gets to at least satisfactory or above.... And it doesn't matter the configuration of the school, from my perspective. What matters is that the principal has the toolbox to go into a classroom, see what's going on, and make suggestions through a conference with the teacher in how to get better. And hopefully that will carry through in other curricular areas that the teacher's involved with.

Instructional leadership was clearly defined as being in classrooms, observing instruction, and providing feedback. This vision of instructional leadership was also aligned with many of the tools given to principals, such as the CHPUC and IPI learning walk protocols. A critical area for attention was to look at how expectations for principals aligned with the district's broader practice of embedding professional development at the school site with a range of roles involved, including the literacy coaches, math teacher leaders, and curriculum generalists.

Surprisingly and contrary to intent, the embedded professional development approach may have undermined the principal's work as an instructional leader. Although the district strategy was to ask principals to improve their instructional leadership, it did not decrease the demands on the principals to serve as building and operations managers. Given that the principal could delegate the instructional duties but not operational duties to the coaches and curriculum generalists, the embedded professional development strategy might have resulted in principals prioritizing their managerial role. According to central office leaders, the professional development strategy unintentionally moved principals farther from instruction and deeper into operations:

With all the coaches at their schools they say, "Oh, yay, now I have somebody to do that." And I think they know that they're weak instructional leaders, and I think, in many, many, many schools, they rely on the literacy coach to be the instructional leader. That's one of the things that we fight against all the time, is saying to literacy coaches, "Do you want me to talk to your principal about this?" Because they put a lot of that on the coach. And of course the coach has to live there. Generally they say, "No, that's okay, I'll deal with it." But the principal does put the role of instructional leader on the coach, and then they schedule the fire drills and work on the budget.

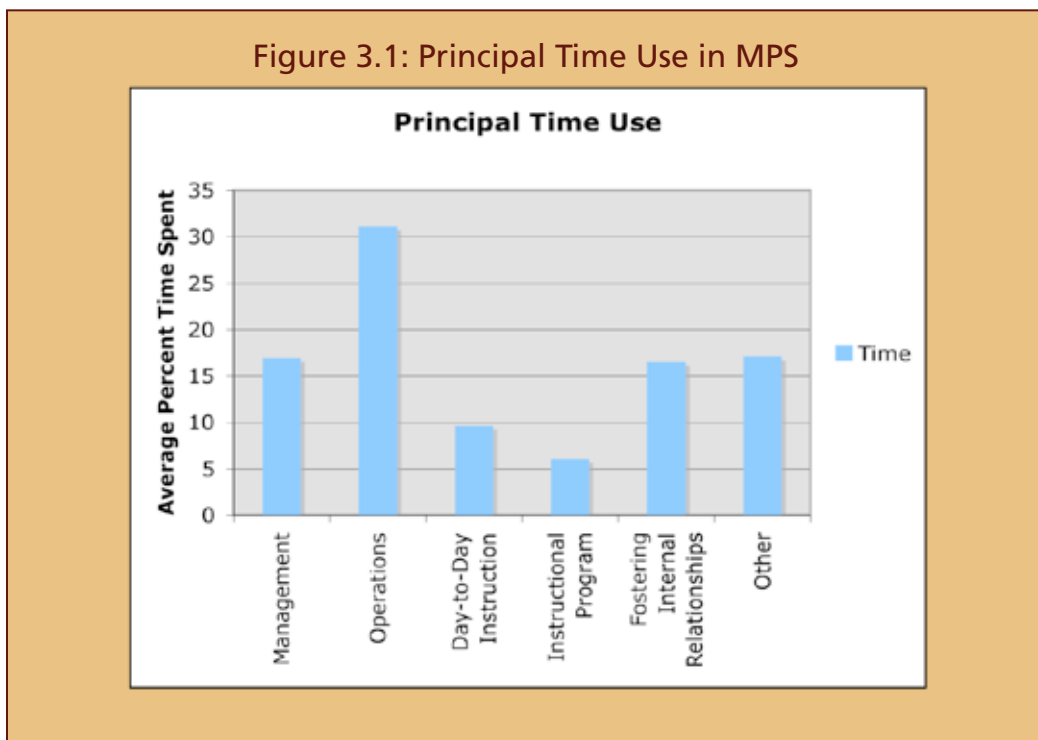
Anything from the floor to the ceiling is the principal's responsibility, whereas with the curriculum generalist it's almost like that person is a specialist in that chosen area; that's the only thing they have to work on. It's just like going to the hospital: If you've got a cardiologist who only specializes in the heart, they're going to be much more focused and do a much better job than a general practitioner looking at everything.... If you want the principal to be the true instructional leader in a school, the principal can't be bogged down with day-to-day operations all the time.... Day-to-day issues pull them away from that so much, whereas with the curriculum generalists coming in, their main focus is just directly on curriculum and improving instruction, and I can see that's a plus. But we would have had that same plus if you said the principal doesn't have to deal with any of the day-to-day stuff ... just get down to business and do instructional stuff.

A principal time use study conducted by the Stanford Institute of Research on Education Policy and Practice (IREPP) found that principals spent considerably less time on instructional issues than other areas (Figure 3.1). The principals spent less time on day-to-day instruction and the instructional program combined (15.75%) than fostering internal relationships (16.51%), management (16.97%), other (17.1%) or operations (31.15%), even though most of their professional development was focused on instruction.

Principals felt that the structure of their job and the district strategy did not work well together. According to one principal the district might have been over-coaching:

I'm starting to find out that there's this plan that feels like it's providing this over-coaching saturation model.... If there's not time spent making sure the coaches are aligned, then one coach is telling you this and the other coach is telling you this, then it's not productive. But then if both coaches are telling you the same thing, then you only need one.

In the IREPP survey, 53% of principals reported that they strongly agreed they had the skills necessary to work with teachers on instructional improvement, but only 10% strongly agreed that they had the time to work on instructional improvement. In the same survey 40% of principals strongly agreed that others in their schools had the skills necessary to work on instructional improvement, and 28% agreed that others had the time. From the principal perspective, the district built the capacity for principals to



work on instructional improvement, but was unable to structure the job in a way that allowed for principals to do so.

Given the time spent on management and the use of coaches, it may have been more functional for principals to receive professional development on how to manage an instructional team and develop distributed leadership practices, but this seemed absent from their professional development experience. According to one specialist, that may have been an important gap in principal capacity:

Principals don't receive training in how to coordinate all those different things. How does a principal know what is the role of the curriculum generalist or the literacy coach, and how does a principal utilize all those resources effectively so that there's not duplication, or that they're all moving forward?

The district had yet to develop coherent policies around the role of the principal for implementing the instructional improvement plan, which may help explain the uneven outcomes.

Data for Improving Instruction: The Use of Learning Walks

Part of the district strategy was to increase attention to and data about instruction for use by the principals, curriculum generalists, coaches, and teachers. The district used three learning walk protocols as the primary tools for providing feedback to teachers about their instructional practice: the Instructional Practice Inventory (IPI), the *Characteristics of High Performing Urban Classrooms* (CHPUC), and Measuring What Matters (MWM), an improvement system developed by the Institute for Research and Reform in Education that includes data collection, analysis, and reporting tools to support implementation strategies.

Principals seemed to have access to a considerable amount of data about instruction, but little buy-in about the quality of the data or how to use it to improve instructional practice. Although the tools raised awareness and may have contributed to a more common language about instruction, none of these protocols gave teachers and principals the data they felt was necessary to improve instruction.

The IPI's narrow focus on engagement could be misleading because it missed valuable data about the content of instruction. An employee involved with an IPI stated that she observed a classroom in which the teacher was giving incorrect information about a mathematical concept to students, but still scored well because the students were engaged in the lesson. A principal shared a similar concern:

Even if we take a regular teacher in a classroom: they teach, the students are engaged, [but] engaged in what? Are they engaged in building an ig-

loosely or engaged in the subject? What are they engaged in? Are they working towards some instructional objectives or something else?

Even though the IPI had limitations, it appeared to have been accepted more broadly than were the CHPUC or MWM learning walks:

Those [IPIs] are good for instruction, because you get a snapshot of what's going on on a regular basis. And if you do enough of those, you can say, "Okay, this time of the day it seems like there's not a whole lot of stuff going on, so we need to work on that." It's been very effective in that way. I'm still learning how to do a CHPUC learning walk because there's so many things that you have to observe, and I think it's a difficult one to do. With the IPI, you're just focusing on student engagement. And with the CHPUC, it's like you're looking at so many different things. In that few minutes, you have to do several of those to really get a good feel of what's going on. There's a lot of stuff to look at, and you can't do that in one observation. It's not realistic.

Many acknowledged that not all principals bought into the usefulness of the learning walk to improve instruction, but at a minimum it seemed to hold the principal accountable for being in classrooms and knowing what instruction looked like in the school, as a Central Service employee noted:

I think it's a discipline tool for the principal, not in a punitive way, but to get them to make sure that they walk around the building at least once or twice or however they want to pattern that, so that there's always a pattern and they always know what's going on within the classrooms because they are doing these walk-through pieces.

When talking to teachers, a different story emerged, however, as they described the learning walks as something easily manipulated by students and teachers in a way that provided an inaccurate picture of instruction. There was a large disconnect between the teacher's perspective about the learning walk and the perspective that was common at Central Services. For example, a teacher commented:

They weren't useful at all. Because with Measuring What Matters, I got 100% engagement, and they said the kids all knew what they were doing, what they were talking about, and that's how they really grade it, except that they weren't there 20 minutes earlier when I had a kid break into a cabinet and start going through science supplies. They weren't there when a kid basically told me off. They walked in, the kids know the game, and the kids tell you flat out, like my kids have told me, "I got your back, don't worry about it." When they see the administrator walk in, and everything they were doing that I was trying to get them to stop,

it disappears. They sit at their desks like little angels, they answer all the questions, they suddenly, magically can tell what we're doing. They work on the project, and then as soon as the walk is over, they go back to doing what they were doing... .

Some of the ineffectiveness in using the learning walks as a tool to move instruction might have stemmed from the district lacking consensus on a single learning walk protocol. Both principals and Central Service staff comment that, "there are just too many learning walks going on." Principals contended that there was not enough time to finish them all, which decreased the effectiveness of the tool:

So you only have so many hours in your day to finish those things. That's the hard part. You have the pieces there, the instruments, but getting it actually done is the hard part, and that's something, I think each year I think we're getting better at it, but we still have a ways to go. I sometimes wonder if it's too much, if we need to just focus on one piece. What are we looking for?

Because not all schools necessarily completed all their walkthroughs, Central Service employees questioned their value as well:

Even though there are walk-throughs, a lot of schools are not getting their walk-throughs done. They'll have enough to put out data, but then you have to look at how many walk-throughs they actually did, because a lot of people aren't getting them done. And even if they do, what happens with that data? How did you use that data? Just ask in any school, "Okay, so what change did you make based on your data?" See what answer you get. I think you're not going to get many schools that actually, A, presented to their staff in a timely fashion, and B, then made a decision about doing something different based on their data.

The data were also of limited use as a policy tool for district leaders because of limited access. A district supervisor described her access to the data as dependent on an informal relationship with the principal coach:

Right now we can't get data. Unless I know the principal coach who happened to do the IPI walk-throughs, I have no access to the IPI data. And there's no anchor to look at the data. So you're sort of blind. The [principal coaches] will present it to a school, and if the school's interested, they'll look at the IPI data, but we have nothing that cuts across schools right now.

An administrative assistant in the central office collected the IPI data centrally, but this was not widely known, as the data was not disseminated. The CHPUC and MWM learning walk data appeared to remain at the school sites.

The learning walks were not the integral part of the instructional improvement plan that the district had hoped they would be. Due to a combination of problems in both the design and implementation of the tools and limitations in the type of data produced, they were not fully useful at the programmatic level or to help individual teachers improve their own practice.

Accountability

The district accountability system posed other challenges to the district efforts to impact instructional practice. There was widespread consensus that the central office accountability system had been largely ineffective, although there was also a sense that this was beginning to change. Both school site employees and central office personnel indicated that most people exercised discretion over which district policies to follow, even if they lacked formal authority. As one employee noted, “I don’t think that we have policies that impede us, because if we have a policy that’s impeding, we just don’t follow it.”

There were two primary reasons that personnel did not initially feel accountable to the district initiatives we studied: first, the attitudes created by previously high rates of superintendent turnover, and, second, the accountability mechanisms from the decentralization strategy that remained in place. This section discusses how each of these factors created a system in which individuals were slow to take on accountability for central office policies aimed at instructional improvement.

Superintendent Turnover and Accountability

Amidst changing leadership it was difficult for the central office to develop a sense of accountability and consistency among MPS employees. Although this was changing, it may have slowed the effectiveness of Superintendent Andrekopoulos’ strategy. Prior to Superintendent Andrekopoulos’ tenure, MPS experienced considerable superintendent turnover, with five full-time superintendents and two interim superintendents over a 10-year span. Although collectively these superintendents pursued a broad decentralization strategy, individually they each introduced several different initiatives during their tenure. Consequently, even though MPS had focused on its instructional improvement plan for five years at the time we conducted our study, many people felt that little progress was made during the first two or three years, because people hesitated to commit to changing their actions in response to a new initiative. The coaches described the barrier created by this attitude:

A big barrier is the attitude “this too shall pass.” The district has had a history of bringing forth initiatives, and then changing their mind, not giving the initiative enough time to actually take root. And I’ve been in the district almost 20 years. Probably about 4 or 5 years ago, we started saying, “Okay, we’re not going to change, this initiative is staying, so it’s

really only been a 2-year initiative. Give us 5 years, and see what happens. Maybe by the fifth year our teachers will get it.

I think there is beginning to be that ownership. I think that the district has suffered in the past from leaders that came in and were here for couple of years and have their ideas. And then, the principals would say well, in two years that will be down the drain, now it will be something else. But because there was some consistency with Mr. A I think that it's been a long enough period of time that it's like, "oh this is what we are going to do, it's not going to go away, this is the change and we need to behave."

Over time, school site personnel built up an immunity of sorts to district directives that impeded the effectiveness of the instructional improvement strategy. School employees did not feel accountable to central office policies because they believed that if they waited long enough, the policies would change. As indicated by a coach, even though certain elements of the strategy were in place for almost seven years, they had only recently been implemented with any sort of consistency.

Inadequate Instructional Accountability

Perhaps the most important reason the district's accountability system was described as inadequate was because it was not aligned with the instructional improvement strategy. Instructional practice was at the center of the instructional improvement plan, so if the system was fully aligned, all employees would have been held accountable primarily for the instructional practice in the system. This was starkly different from the accountability system used in the decentralization strategy, which primarily held schools accountable for enrollment, operations, and the budget.

There was widespread agreement among teachers, principals, principal coaches, and central office administrators that neither teachers nor principals were held accountable for the instructional practice at the school sites:

I doubt principals are held accountable for the instructional practice of their teachers. But I'll tell you one thing: They'll be removed if they screw up on the money real fast. That's always been one of the things that you're told in MPS when you become an administrator. Don't screw up on the money, you can screw up on a lot of other things, but if you screw up on the money, you lost your job.

Furthermore, the initial attempts to change educators' focus emphasized compliance rather than effectiveness. According to many principals, most of the information collected by their supervisors focused primarily on bureaucratic managerial aspects of their jobs, such as filling out the proper forms. They felt very little accountability to their direct supervisors for instructional improvement:

[Principals] are not held accountable for instructional practice. They're held accountable for the compliance stuff. You have to do walk-throughs; you don't have to change what you see. You have to turn in your evaluations. If the supervisors that supervise the principal were holding the principal accountable for their teachers actually changing instruction, like, "This is what you need to work on this year, and we're going to hold you accountable for that," it would change tomorrow. If my evaluator was coming and he was going to say to me, "My school was working on cooperative learning," then more kids are going to be talking together. If that's what my school's going to accomplish by the end of the year, and if my supervisor was going to hold me accountable for having the teachers do that, it would change, like quick, because I would be working with them all the time, because I would know that at the end of the year we had to show some results. But there isn't any pressure. There's a pressure to balance your budget, there's a pressure to make sure that you have all of all the stuff that's fixable taken care of.

Many teachers in MPS also reported that the system did not seem to be designed to hold them accountable for their instructional practice:

There really isn't much accountability. I mean, we have our evaluations and whatever, but they don't mean anything. You can get a really, really bad evaluation and nothing happens. You can go over the CHPUC, and there are a lot of people who will say, "Oh yeah, I do that," whatever, and it's not any different in their classroom than it is a week before they heard it. I don't see it happening, I don't see it working. People try things, and they like to talk about them a lot, but as far as ... the accountability following through, it isn't there.

Superintendent Andrekopoulos stated that, although the district had not created a system that held principals accountable as instructional leaders, many of the things for which principals were held accountable related to instructional practice. Noting that the district had not yet terminated a principal for being an ineffective instructional leader, he said:

I don't think we've gotten to the point of being that sophisticated yet with our metrics.... Most of the things that we fire principals for lead to a decrease in student achievement because of lack of relationship building with staff, lack of organizational skills, lack of management, lack of discipline and control in the building. All of those lead to, are byproducts of, not being successful leaders. But to say that your test scores are flat and nothing has happened, so we're releasing you, we haven't done that. What we have done, though, is to move people. So if I thought that a school and a principal were in a rut, and nothing different was happen-

ing, I have moved people to another school, telling them that they were in a rut, and the good news is we've had some good results doing that.

The central office was structured to monitor school finances and other operational issues more effectively than instructional practice, particularly given the diversity of schools and curricula in the district. Therefore, even though the district's goals changed, the system still relied primarily on an accountability system that was not designed for looking at instruction.

The Mission and Organization of Central Services

Many respondents noted that the central office was not designed to support widespread instructional improvement. The portfolio reform strategy emphasized autonomy and competition, which became deeply ingrained in the MPS organizational culture. This culture made it difficult to implement an instructional improvement plan which relied upon collaboration. In addition, it deflected central staff's attention from developing strong capacity in each school to managing school enrollments, startups, and wind-downs.

Organizational Structure and Collaboration

Even as structures that were intended to build capacity were introduced, a culture of isolation persisted. For example, the positions that reported directly to central office directors—curriculum generalists, literacy specialists, math specialists and principal coaches—had very few interactions with one another and rarely shared discussion of instructional practice. According to one director, the central office was not set up well from the beginning to overcome this isolation:

It is not set up well at all, because it's in silos right now. We have an early childhood department that impacts what they call P-3, three-year-olds through grade 3. Then we have teaching and learning over here, and it has a reading department that does K-12.... And then they've got professional development sitting over here, they've got [District Identified for Improvement] sitting over there, then there is no mechanism for communication in central office, and there's no mechanism for working across divisions. There are people who are very protective of their division or their office, and they do not like other people intruding. There's not a sense to me of welcoming and working collaboratively around projects because, "This is my realm, and don't you dare step into my realm." That's a pretty negative way of saying it, but I think that there are a lot of very, very talented people here working in isolation.

The disconnectedness of personnel at the Central Service level seemed to be most pervasive in the literacy department. One Central Service employee described several dif-

difficulties involved in trying to integrate reading and writing into a single district literacy initiative. Another Central Service leader in charge of a portion of the literacy program said she attended an education plan review in which the school discussed a reading program that the Central Service leader did not know was in use in the district. She described this as sending a clear message to the school that those working in Central Services do not communicate effectively.

Central Office Attention to Managing the Portfolio

Meanwhile, the district had to devote considerable resources to shaping its portfolio, which detracted from the implementation of the instructional improvement plan by straining the limited resources in the central office. One central office leader indicated that there was little time for anything other than managing the district's portfolio:

Another challenge was just at the rate that we were opening schools and closing schools. It was hard to do anything else but that. Opening schools and closing schools took a tremendous amount of time [and] effort. But it was also very difficult to close a school, assembling the data and everything else. The first charter school that we closed, revoked the contract rather ... it was very hard; it was hard to even get the cumulative folders out of that school. I think that was a challenge, and from that we learned how to go about closing a school better, we got better at it: how to have the student services there the very next day to put out our communications, how to have people down here to help re-enroll children in other programs, how to help the money go with the kid to the new school ... and what to do with transcripts and report cards and on and on and on.

The effort required from multiple central office divisions to open and close schools can distract from the district's instructional mission. MPS leaders readily acknowledged that the focus on innovation and opening schools did not lead to changes in instructional practice as had been hoped. Superintendent Andrekopoulos stated that the district missed an important opportunity by not fully explaining how the drive to open small schools connected to instruction:

I think in backing up a bit and rewinding this, we should've put [instruction] in the center of it initially, because people thought it was all about size, and they thought it was about structure. Relationships, relevance and rigor are the three things, but we never really defined the relationships and rigor and what we really mean about student engagement and teaching higher-order thinking skills, and getting kids more involved in the learning process. We didn't talk enough about that initially. I think that was a mistake. I think we got the ideas, but I think they were still too far on the surface; we didn't drill down deep enough in the beginning.

So people thought it was all about creating small high schools. But no, it was about changing the delivery system for kids, and small could be a vehicle for that; small learning communities could be a vehicle for that. So I think people now are kind of seeing that, “No, that wasn’t the reason why we did this.”

There was broad agreement that for approximately the last five years the district focused more on instruction than ever before. Although no one specifically said that the district had attended to its portfolio at the expense of supporting teaching and learning, there was a sense among several district employees that the division of teaching and learning had been under-resourced. One specialist spoke about the district “creating our own incompetence” by giving individuals too much work to do their jobs effectively. For example, the district writing specialist supported all 207 schools, and each of the district literacy specialists supported between 20 and 30 different schools, each with different literacy curricula. A district leader argued that a more conscious allocation of resources was needed:

In practice, our teaching and learning area has been dismantled over the years, not really built up, both in human resources and resources to be able to do this. So to improve it has to be a purposeful decision to say, “You know what? To support schools and instruction, we have to make teaching and learning the centerpiece of our work, and all those other pieces exist because of teaching and learning.” And it’s not that way. So if that does happen, we can definitely do this a lot smoother. If it doesn’t, it’s going to be a lot more difficult.

In January of 2009, Superintendent Andrekopoulos reorganized the division of teaching and learning and changed personnel, to begin dealing with these issues. This study ended before it the effects of those changes could be evaluated.

Charter Schools and Instructional Improvement

Finally, district leaders needed to reconcile the chartering strategy—intended to foster innovation—with the instructional improvement plan. With a robust division of charter and partnership schools authorized to create distinctive approaches, MPS experienced a natural tension in implementing its strategy. Even though the district instructional guidelines were written in a broad manner, with the intent that they could be implemented within any school design, the disposition of the charter schools was not to adopt a common district-wide instructional framework.

Although the charter school strategy and the instructional strategy were not necessarily aligned, one district leader argued that it made sense for the district as a whole to continue to pursue both:

Charter schools don't fit into the strategy of building common instructional practice, and there are some issues we've got to resolve in the district. [Chartering] has slowed down inasmuch as the entire context of the district is shifting from one where innovation is thought of very broadly to one where innovation is thought of narrowly, and consistency, coherency is thought of broadly. I think that's the shift, and it's a shift in both systems and practice. Those are tough organizational shifts. I don't believe there's any sense of the innovation side of this going away. In fact, I think there's quite a bit of support on the board to really allow them to behave as charter schools—especially around our instrumentality charters.... But I think there's a balance in this thing, where you get the vast majority of schools on a common platform of the what and the how, and then you have a group of schools that are testing out other concepts, other ways of doing the work. And I think it's smart for us as an organization to have both of those in play. And the charter schools that are successful, you keep them going; and the ones that aren't, you shut them down. And that makes room for other ideas to be surfaced and tested.

In contrast, another central office leader stated that the district needed to decrease school autonomy to realize its goals:

I think the glitch in the road with the whole piece now is now we've gotten to this stage of centralization versus decentralization, and I think the small schools and autonomy and all those kinds of things are great, but then on the other hand, when you go to the CHPUC and other kind of models to monitor growth, it's going to be more of a central approach, and a mandate to all, because what we are looking at is that we're looking at regular schools, charter schools, and instrumentality charters. So what you're looking at is two different sectors that are set up with two different governing bodies of rules and regulations. And I think with a centralized approach, everything will kind of meld back together again. Not saying that decentralization doesn't work, but I think now, especially for schools that are not meeting the mark, we need to start looking in that direction to probably be more prescriptive, and the district is starting to do that: be more prescriptive about what's expected of a given school, and if you find yourself on the SIFI list, it's not doing it your way anymore, it's doing it the district way.

Superintendent Andrekopoulos maintained his support for policies that allowed for innovation and school creation, even as the district attempted to build common instructional practice:

I think what you're going to see happen over time is that the only schools that will be chartered will be high-performing. That if you're not a high-performing school, you're not going to be chartered, you're not going to have the autonomy. That's just the way it is. So then how does that affect the startups? We're going to give schools the ability to start up, but I think we're going to work with schools better. We've gotten much better at startups and what needs to happen before schools can open the door. We're much better at that. But if it doesn't work, we won't be afraid to just say, "No, this isn't working, we're going to dissolve you." You have to continue creating new schools, because out of that you'll have some that aren't successful, but you'll have great places. For example, what we see at Community, what we see at ALAS, what we see at Ronald Reagan, those are examples. ALBA is another example. These are places that didn't exist before which are great places for kids. So if you don't have the innovation, you're not going to create those new visions for kids and create that sense of ownership around a teaching pedagogy or a philosophy. You need to have that in the organization to grow. Otherwise you're just status quo.

Another district leader described the chartering strategy as a service to the community that improved in recent years as the district focused more intensely on developing quality charter schools rather than attempting to open a large number of schools:

Our goal was to open 50 schools. We didn't meet that, but we came pretty close. In 2002, we had 16 schools with 4 new ones opening that year; so, 20 [total]. Now we have 44, and as long as there is interest among parents and the community to have charter schools, I believe our board and our superintendent and our administration are going to be responsive to that request of parents. One of the successes is just the pleasure of providing to the parents ... something that they want. We're public schools, and I think the public should have some say in what kind of schools they want, and want to send their children to. And so I see it as a direct service to meet the needs of so many of the parents and children, families that have chosen to attend charters. And I think that's a big success.

Even as the district attempted to create policies aimed at developing an instructional program for all schools in the district, it maintained many of the structures that supported the portfolio strategy. Some of this was because of a specific choice by district leaders to continue to pursue innovation. In attempting to balance a strategy aimed at decreasing variation in instruction with a strategy that also allowed for variation in school structure, the district was struggling to learn how to address the tension in the two strategies in a way that lead to consistent quality in instructional practice and equity of opportunities for students.

Section 4: Conclusions and Policy Implications

This study describes the challenges in building strong instructional practice within and across a portfolio of schools. This is particularly important given the special set of complexities created by the interaction of a portfolio strategy and a centralized instructional improvement strategy. These elements need not be standardized uniformly for all schools, but the strategies should align to support improvement for schools. An approach that combines systemic practices across the district and schools with flexibility for the needs within individual schools is required.

MPS has struggled to create policies that respected the autonomy necessary for the portfolio approach without undermining the interconnectedness necessary to build coherent, high-quality practice in all 207 schools. The district has refined its strategy each year, and although it is too early to draw conclusions, the mathematics initiative may provide a solid example of a district strategy that is effective and scalable by building common practice in a system largely designed to support differentiation.

While the initial outcomes have been mixed, the data suggested that the district is developing a foundation to support instructional improvement. Little change occurred during the first few years of the instructional initiative as district employees largely ignored central office policies because of the long-term history of superintendent turnover and the tradition of accountability around choice and enrollment, rather than quality and outcomes; however, elements of the strategy were becoming embedded in school and district practice. Prior to his retirement, Andrekopoulos felt that the district was well positioned to make deeper changes in actual practice should his successor focus on instructional leadership and classroom practice. It may very well be that the next superintendent will play the most influential role in realizing improved instructional outcomes to support student learning.

Theoretical Implications of District Level Reform

MPS achieved two distinct increases in student outcomes from each of its reform strategies. The portfolio approach yielded significant improvement in the district's graduation rate, and the managed instruction approach has begun to show increases in student achievement, particularly in mathematics. The district found it particularly difficult to change instructional practice because it had not fully dismantled the policies that supported competition among its schools. Giving school personnel autonomy over many key elements of the school design and then later expecting them to implement common instructional practice sent mixed messages, especially in the context of a district history that had ignored instructional quality. Perhaps the results would have been much different if MPS had used more of its resources to ensure that teachers and principals had a substantial repertoire of knowledge and skills before allowing schools to vary their school design.

A hybrid strategy that gives schools autonomy and delivers high quality instruction has the potential to combine the positive results gained through a portfolio strategy with strong gains in academic achievement. For this to occur the district needs to be very clear about the mechanisms in each strategy that result in improved outcomes.

The most notable outcome of the portfolio strategy was an increase in graduation rates, combined with only slight decreases in student enrollment. The portfolio strategy gave schools the autonomy to develop new designs -- including smaller models offering greater personalization -- and students responded by staying in school longer. What worked in the portfolio strategy was creating schools that were personalized and differentiated. The drawback was the schools were not held accountable for their instructional practice; consequently, student achievement was stagnant in all areas.

Aside from creating a district focus on instructional practice, the most significant outcome in the early stages of the instructional improvement plan were increases in some student outcomes, with the most substantial gains coming in mathematics achievement. These changes could be attributed to having principals monitor instruction more closely, alignment of district and site professional development expectations, and setting clear curricular standards by settling on a smaller set of options for the district math curriculum and increasing teacher's math content and pedagogical knowledge.

As revealed in the district's instructional practice survey, this approach appeared to create more consistency in teaching practices used in high-poverty and lower-performing schools; however, in the schools most subject to instructional mandates, teachers also reported feeling less a part of a professional community. This data reveals a potential problem in the way the managed instruction reform strategy has been implemented via common curriculum expectations, augmented by individual coaching. Including means for teachers to consider and agree on instructional strategies that they hold in common, and to engage in the kind of professional collaboration around content that occurred in the mathematics initiative, may prove important in the continued refinement of the strategy.

Theoretically, the hybrid approach combines the research on high reliability organizations¹⁸ (Sagan, 1995) and teacher professional accountability (Darling Hammond, 2004). The research on high reliability organizations suggests that to create an organization that delivers predictable and satisfactory results, leaders must first exert strong central control before decentralizing. Individuals must know what is expected from them and have the capacity to reach the organizational goals before they are given the discretion to make their own decisions.

Building teachers' capacity requires a greater commitment to professional accountability, which expects teachers to acquire specialized knowledge, meet standards for entry and then uphold professional standards of practice in their work within the research on organizational behavior. If principals and teachers have clear expectations and the capac-

ity to realize those expectations then policy makers can give them autonomy and expect satisfactory result. Implementing a system which is based on both of these theories in tandem would predict better results than would use of either a choice-based portfolio system or a centralized managed instruction approach alone.

In the hybrid approach this would mean that principals know how to create and maintain school structures that personalize the student experience and implement processes that allow teachers to collaborate around specific content. Teachers would have to be given the skills to personalize the student experience, be content-area experts, and know how to work together on instructional improvement. Once principals and teachers demonstrate that they possess these skill sets, they would be allowed to vary their school structures and instructional practice to fit the needs of the particular students they wish to serve. MPS may have been better able to implement its hybrid approach if it had prioritized professional accountability in a way that allowed them to combine the increases in graduation rates generated by allowing schools to better respond to student preferences with the increases in academic achievement associated with a successful focus on instructional improvement.

One of the appeals of the portfolio strategy is that it requires fewer resources to implement. Schools are given autonomy and, if they fail, it is largely seen as the fault of the individual school and not the system around it. A strategy aimed at building instructional capacity requires that the district allocates substantial resources to the schools and works to ensure their success rather than just shuttering the doors of the failing schools. Giving schools autonomy has great appeal from a policy-maker's perspective, but those in charge must be careful that autonomy does not become neglect and they must make specific efforts to blend student choice and teacher capacity.

District and school staffs have identified a need to go deeper in implementing a coherent and consistent approach to professional capacity for instructional change. The district is poised to move from pockets of effective instructional practice within individual schools to a systemic approach that is more closely focused on common quality practice. Our findings suggest that the district may achieve further gains if it can:

1. Continue to communicate, develop, and support a strong shared vision for instructional improvement. The history of MPS has bred a sense that initiatives come and go. To stay the course with effective instructional change requires a long-term commitment and focused implementation within and across schools. To support this, MPS should continue to develop the emerging common language around instruction, particularly language associated with the instructional improvement strategy, the Characteristics of High Performing Urban Classrooms approaches, and other protocols, resources, and communications. An ongoing commitment would be clearly communicated by continuing to allocate human, financial and material resources toward instructional improvement.

2. Focus the MPS accountability system on instructional quality and student outcomes. Although the district is moving from a system aimed at diversity and school autonomy to one focused on instructional improvement, there are still practices in place that support the competitive school reform model, including the use of different accountability metrics. The work of the central office, of coaches and specialists, and of administrators and teachers needs to be aligned and strengthened around the shared goal of implementation of effective, high quality instruction. The question is not one of decentralization versus centralization, but rather the appropriate balance and blending of system-wide strategies with local flexibility for different school and student needs.
3. Increase instructional quality and coherence through attention to curricular standards and materials, a clear focus on professional development, and attention to the personnel responsible for building teacher and principal capacity. The district has made important strides in reducing the previous plethora of textbooks and programs and in improving consistency of curriculum standards and quality, especially in mathematics. MPS should also consider exercising more strategic direction over human resource decisions in areas that pertain to building teacher capacity, such as subject coaches and curriculum generalists.
4. Leverage effective practices within individual schools so that they become available to the district's system of schools. MPS exhibits pockets of effective practices within schools, but continuing isolation of practice overall. There will, of course, continue to be variation across schools given the ongoing portfolio of diverse schools. Nevertheless, concerns about inequity of experiences and outcomes for students require attention to the quality of teaching and learning across and within all schools. The introduction, for example, of clear and coherent mathematics standards, curriculum guidance, syllabi, professional development, and other resources has provided a foundation for focusing instructional improvement in ways that have produced gains in student achievement. Creating a collaborative culture of shared teaching strategies and inquiry within schools will be important to realizing the next steps.
5. Make professional capacity-building a central element of the MPS reform strategy. Effective education reform places a strong emphasis on building the professional capacity of those with responsibility for implementing improvements at district and site levels. MPS should continue to support a range of professional learning opportunities, both embedded within school practices and through access to external expertise. MPS's existing approaches of coaching using "train-the-trainer," access to specialist staffing, and development of instructional leadership have had some influence. However, to meet the challenges of supporting improvement across all schools and classrooms, MPS must help educators develop both stronger content knowledge and the professional skills required to personalize and adapt instruction to specific contexts and student needs.

6. Pay further attention to instructional leadership. The district's efforts to strengthen leadership are progressing, but would benefit from further attention to the principal's role as part of a distributed leadership team that involves coaches, curriculum generalists, other administrators, teachers and central office staff. Principals require support to develop a repertoire of instructional leadership practices and to better balance the time they spend on managerial and operational matters compared to educational improvement. Most importantly, sustainable instructional improvement requires focused attention to, and support for, implementing effective teaching and learning approaches at the classroom-level. The district must develop capacity to use strategies such as learning walks and teacher evaluation protocols to develop insights about practice and to use these insights to inform school and district action to improve practice. It is important to shift from compliance with protocols to the purposeful use of data and resources to change instruction for improved outcomes for all students.

MPS's commitment to instructional improvement has been important and valuable. Considerable progress has been made in establishing a strategy focused on instruction, building shared language, increasing transparency about instructional practice, and prioritizing resources and attention to instruction. To resolve the ongoing tensions between school diversity and common instructional goals, Milwaukee must engage in a dialectic that allows diversity to thrive on a strong base of professional capacity. An important next step will be to continue to build, develop, and implement the instructional improvement strategy as part of an overall integrated teaching and learning system, with attention to creating and sustaining teachers' knowledge and skills, along with curriculum coherence and focus, useful assessment, and well-supported, collegial instructional practice.

Appendix A—School Accountability Categories in MPS

Within the MPS accountability system in 2008, schools were placed in tiers based on fiscal management, special education compliance, academic attainment as measured by the WKCE (Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination), and value-added as determined by the district’s benchmarks and value-added system (a component slated to end in 2008-09). Schools scoring high in all categories had full autonomy from district policies, except for legal compliance requirements, and were classified as Tier I or Mosaic schools. Schools placed in Tier III are the school improvement, or SIFI, schools, which have low value-added and low attainment over the past five years. In these schools, although the site retains an administrator, a district administrator had direct authority over the day-to-day operations and school budget. The remaining schools were Tier II/NEA schools, so designated because many of their extra supports, such as instructional coaching, were funded by a grant from the NEA. These schools were making steady progress in improving student outcomes, and had a mix of autonomy and specific mandates. Table A1 describes the requirements for each tier.

Table A1: Differences in School Autonomy by Tier

Tier	Professional Development Mandates	Curriculum and Instruction Mandates
School Improvement (SIFI) Schools (Tier III)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District Curriculum Generalist • Math Teacher Leader • Prescribed meetings/professional development for principals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 90 minutes reading K-5 • 60 minutes math K-8 • Reading intervention class 6-9 (Read 180) • Prescribed intercession for year-round schools • Curriculum guides (reading and math) • Weekly walkthroughs (10) by Principal/leadership team • Instructional Practice Inventory (3 per year by external staff)
NEA Schools (Tier II)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District Curriculum Generalist • Math Teacher Leader • Grade level meetings • Prescribed meetings/professional development for principals • NEA sponsored Saturday Professional Workshops for staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District designated monthly common reading assessment based on standards (CABS) • Early Mathematics placement test (high school) • Common Mathematics textbook • Curriculum Mapping tool for math/reading • Weekly walkthroughs (40) by principal/learning team • Instructional Practice Inventory (2 per year by external staff) • Evidence monitoring conference with district curriculum generalist • Prescribed sections in education plan
Mosaic (Tier I)	Have access to all professional development offered to other schools.	Have access to all curriculum supports offered to other schools.

Endnotes

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3. Borsuk, Alan. 20,000 Students Now Use Vouchers, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, November 9, 2008. <http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/34184444.html>. Accessed April 19, 2008.
4. MPS District Report Card 2007-08
5. MPS District Report Card 2007-08
6. MPS District Report Card 2007-08
7. Although dropout data is unavailable for the full time period covered by the decentralization strategy, decreases in the dropout rates have corresponded with the time period covered by much of the decentralized portfolio building strategy, which was roughly from 1990-2003 (see Table 4.D.1).
8. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction <http://data.dpi.state.wi.us/data>. Accessed July 31, 2010.
9. Currently Wisconsin tests students in grades 3-8, and 10, but this did not become policy until 2005.
10. MPS District Report Card 2008.
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12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. The Milwaukee Partnership Academy was created in 1999 and includes representatives from the Metropolitan Milwaukee Alliance of Black School Educators, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee Area Technical College, the City of Milwaukee Mayor's Office, Private Industry Council, Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce, Helen Bader Foundation, Milwaukee Board of School Directors, and the Greater Milwaukee Committee, among others. <http://www.nea.org/newsreleases/2005/nr050921b.html>
15. The data compares scores in grades 4, 8, and 10 because those grades have the longest history of testing in the Wisconsin state testing system.
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