

Portland Public Schools

*Findings and Recommendations*  
*from the*  
**Central Office Review for  
Results & Equity**

conducted in partnership with the  
Annenberg Institute for School Reform and the  
Portland Schools Foundation



January 10, 2005



# Central Office Review for Results and Equity

In July 2003, the Portland (Oregon) Public Schools (PPS) entered into partnership with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University and the Portland Schools Foundation to conduct a Central Office Review for Results and Equity, or CORRE. CORRE is a five-step process developed by the Annenberg Institute's School Communities that Work Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts. CORRE was created to help district communities:

- determine the current state of student results,
- assess the effectiveness of district policies and practices that deal with those results, and
- develop action steps to strengthen their capacity for supporting schools.

The process is also designed to build the capacity of a team of district stakeholders to work together collaboratively and effectively as they gather and examine data needed to improve policies and practices across the district. (A more detailed description of the CORRE process appears in Appendix A).

## The CORRE Process in Portland

In May 2003 representatives from the Annenberg Institute were invited to meet with Portland school and community leaders to introduce the CORRE process and its potential value for ongoing improvements in the district. Over the summer, plans were finalized, and a CORRE Team was assembled in the fall. The team, consisting of central office, school, parent, school board, community, and Annenberg members (see Appendix B), met for an orientation session in November 2003.

The CORRE Team's first task was to gather data on the district's current performance; team members visited schools and reviewed various documents and reports. Early in 2004, the team examined the data in order to identify a priority for close review. From a number of possible lenses through which they might view the operations of central office, the team chose accelerated academic, linguistic, and cultural supports as the focus for this review (see sidebar).

To deepen its understanding of the chosen priority area, the team conducted more than forty interviews and focus groups in late April 2004. These activities involved a cross-section of school and community stakeholders. By design, the majority of interviews

**Accelerated academic, cultural, and linguistic supports** addresses the needs of students who are behind academically or require special education and those whose culture or language differs from the dominant culture or language of the school. The role of central office in this area includes offering professional development that helps teachers differentiate instruction based on the characteristics and needs of children; developing diagnostic tools; and communicating the availability of supports to educators, communities, and families.

were with central office leaders, since it is their roles and responsibilities that are under review in this process. Interviews were also done with members of the board of education and others. The focus groups brought in building-level personnel, students, parents, and community members.

Staff at the Institute compiled the data from these sessions and prepared a preliminary draft of the findings. The CORRE Team met in July to analyze the findings and discuss their implications for central office policy and practice.

In October 2004, the CORRE Team presented its findings to the district's new superintendent, Dr. Vicki Phillips, for her review. At Dr. Phillips's invitation, the CORRE Team reconvened in December to continue a discussion of possible action steps. The results of that work, as well as the PPS leadership's response to the Institute's recommendations (see the Recommendations section later in this report), are contained in a separate report by PPS, which should be considered a companion piece to this summary.

A detailed timeline of the CORRE process in Portland appears in Appendix C.

## Key Findings from the CORRE Team

### A. Big Picture Perceptions about Portland Public Schools

1. There is general agreement that PPS has great potential for success, especially due to the large proportion of Portland children enrolled in public schools, quality staff, and a strong, new superintendent.
2. There is near-universal agreement that school-based educators and parents have no "system" experience of PPS. Their opinions of the helpfulness and efficiency of central office depend on their interaction with particular individuals and vary from school to school, classroom to classroom, and person to person.
3. Some people view variation throughout the system – particularly that resulting from school-based flexibility in making decisions and using resources – as a strength. Others express concerns about the differences – inequities – in school quality that such flexibility fosters.
4. School-based staff, especially – and many central office staff, as well – feel that central office lacks a service orientation and describe it as "reactive."
5. The district lacks a data orientation. Hardly any responses to questions about student achievement and well- and under-served populations cited performance data of any kind.
6. Clarity of direction, strategies for implementation, and strong leadership were cited as lacking by respondents from throughout the district.
7. Fiscal operations, financial analysis, and school budget transparency improved under

the Scherzinger administration. While greater transparency is still needed, processes have been put in place where none existed before.

8. Resource scarcity – of funds, materials, and staffing at all levels – was widely cited as a significant and far-reaching problem. There was widespread acknowledgment that central office staffing has been cut extensively over the years.

## **B. Central Office Operations and Culture**

9. Frequent reorganizations of central office senior leadership and other personnel changes are viewed as contributing to miscommunication and overall confusion as to who is responsible for what.
10. Even within central office, there is little clarity about roles and responsibilities. Some perceive that the human resources department has a disproportionate influence on decision making. There is also a sense of misalignment in the reporting lines of a number of offices and teams.
11. Teachers and principals agreed that communication with central office is largely one-directional; there are few opportunities to give input into decisions that directly impact their work.
12. Collaboration and communication across units and departments within central office are weak; many people inside and outside central office described central office staff as working in “silos.”
13. Leadership has tried to address the collaboration issue by developing interdepartmental committees. While some of these teams, particularly the Central Academic Support Team, have had some positive effects and show potential, the number of meetings has overwhelmed central office staff.
14. Several central office staff who provide central supports don't want to be considered part of central office. Instead, they describe themselves as providing supports based on school and student needs and their assessments of those needs.
15. Issues of race, culture, power, and insider/outsider status feed negative interpersonal relationships and divisions in central office. Many in central office, schools, and community shared concerns about respect for diversity of all kinds and noted that there is no forum for addressing issues of race and culture openly or productively.

## **C. Supports for Students**

16. Pockets of excellence across the district were acknowledged, with variation in instruction and resources from school to school and neighborhood to neighborhood.
17. There is widespread acknowledgment that PPS students are not uniformly well served. Specifically cited as being underserved were students of color, low-income students (particularly where concentrated in certain neighborhoods), and English-language learners.

18. There is agreement that resources are being targeted at students with special needs (special education, English-language learners), but there is little understanding of whether they have resulted in improvements in the supports for and achievement of these students.
19. Lack of diversity and cultural competency among district staff at all levels leads to disconnections among staff, students, and community, in addition to negative impacts on students' experience of school.
20. Many teachers and principals believe more time for them to learn from each other and to align/coordinate services would improve their ability to support students.

#### **D. Supports for School Leaders, Teachers, and Teaching**

21. Principals and teachers described central office supports as uneven, at best. Some cited particular structures or roles as helpful (Teachers On Special Assignment, in particular). But teachers and principals most often describe getting support by networking with each other on their own and mining relationships with particular individuals in central office.
22. Provision of professional development is said to be weak, inconsistent, and fragmented. This fragmentation contributes to confusion about accountability and responsibility for professional development in central office.
23. More instructionally focused professional development has recently been available through the office of the Chief Academic Officer; while teachers and principals indicate it is more relevant than it was in the past, many problems remain.
24. Supports for new teachers (mentoring) and new principals (training) are seen as insufficient and/or reactive.
25. Many called for systematic focus on curriculum and a stronger connection between system goals and instructional supports.
26. Based on our interviews and review of documents, there are very few centrally provided curricular supports. Several school-based staff noted this absence and expressed concerns about the consistency of what is taught and how teaching is supported.
27. Except for the Developmental Reading Assessment, there were no references to or discussions of formal assessments or other ways to examine instructional effectiveness.
28. Several respondents noted improvements in the hiring of principals, but others saw flaws in the process.
29. Most agree that teacher recruitment and hiring is not efficient. Most point to human resource practices and/or contract constraints (hiring rounds 1, 2, and 3). The relationship between the human resources department and the teachers union is antagonistic on both sides.

# Preliminary Recommendations from the Annenberg Institute Based on the CORRE Team Findings

## 1. Develop and communicate a central office service orientation.

Virtually all of the descriptors that interviewees used to describe their experiences and relationships with the district point to the need for a service orientation. The service orientation must focus the public's attention on the work and attitude of the Portland Public Schools from the school door to the superintendent's door. This new attitude should be evident in central office staff communication with teachers, principals, parents, students, the larger community, and central office colleagues.

PPS should consider a variety of relatively low-cost operational actions, such as:

- Develop a single district calendar for major predictable requests, reports, and assessments of administrators, teachers, and staff.
- Request information directly from school personnel only after going to no less than two central office departments for that information.
- Coordinate central office requests of schools through a chief of staff office or other member of superintendent's leadership team.
- Address basic technology issues such as the phone answering system.
- Develop standard service protocols for staff at all levels.
- Build on areas already seen as partly successful and work with staff who already have a noted service orientation to change the internal and external image and experience of central office.

## 2. Build (or re-build) centralized guidance and support for instruction.

The variation in instructional supports across PPS is significant and there is scant evidence of centralized guidance. As a result, standards are uneven and achievement is inequitable.

PPS should consider actions such as:

- Restore a department of curriculum and instruction, with responsibility for developing centralized supports for teachers based on the results of a teaching and learning review (see below).
- Conduct a teaching and learning review to assess the delivered curriculum against district and state standards and to set priorities for the nature and scope of centralized curriculum guidance required. This more in-depth review is necessary to address focus-group and interview data pointing to instructional inconsistency, lack of central supports generally and, in particular, insufficient supports for underserved students.
  - ✧ As much as possible, use local educators and community leaders in the conduct of the review.
  - ✧ Use data from the teaching and learning review to bring coherence to the provision and supervision of professional development.

- Approach the union as a partner in developing supports for new teachers.
- Given the quality of instructional staff and the strong respect for peers' knowledge, build an infrastructure of support for peer-to-peer learning opportunities, particularly among principals.
- Provide increased opportunities for administrators and teachers to engage with each other about instructional issues.
- Focus more capacity-building efforts on new teachers and principals.

### **3. Make collecting, organizing, analyzing, and acting on data on student achievement and staff and program efficacy a priority across the district.**

Making data a priority requires providing necessary supports – such as the technology, time, training, and alignment to instruction and student achievement – that will allow this kind of work to gain traction. The superintendent and board leaders should also continue to communicate and model the importance of data and its role in informing decisions.

PPS should consider actions such as:

- Develop concrete steps to integrate a data orientation into the strategic plan and its operational components. This would require answering such questions as: What kinds of data are needed and who needs it to fully implement the plan? What modifications to the plan are necessary? What supports need to be built?
  - ✧ Model data-informed decision making through the interactions of the CORRE Team and other central office leadership with each other and with schools.
  - ✧ Continue the practice of site-based school staff briefings on student performance data and emphasize the importance of these briefings by addressing them in each administrator's performance review with such questions as: What did you learn from the review of data? What changes did you make? How are you evaluating the effectiveness of those changes?
  - ✧ Expand the definition of data so that it is not just about test scores, but also includes other outcome data relevant to student achievement and development.
- Build external partnerships to:
  - ✧ support the development and implementation of a PPS data warehouse which would connect data that is currently stored separately and make it more accessible throughout the district; and
  - ✧ help gather opinion data from staff and community about affective aspects of schools (e.g., existence of professional learning communities, welcoming atmosphere) and central office supports (service orientation, etc.).

### **4. Provide supports for schools and their students as determined by a deeper understanding of their needs and assets.**

A “smart district” manages a diverse portfolio of successful schools and networks of schools that receive differentiated central office support based on local needs and assets.

PPS needs to provide both visible and real affirmation of the value placed on success for *all* students.

PPS should consider actions such as:

- Begin disaggregating student data by race, ethnicity, nationality, language, and disability status as soon as possible. Of equal importance is disaggregation of data by program (e.g., special education, bilingual education, etc.).
- Institute a program evaluation cycle (tied to implementation of a data warehouse) to understand the impact of specific programs targeted at special needs students.
- Incorporate “diversity” into the district language as a focus on serving and educating students in the context in which they are living and growing up. Provide coordinated opportunities for central office staff to learn about the people and students who live in the community.
- Connect central office work with the work of community-based organizations to increase educational opportunities and enhance teacher, student, and parent in-school experiences. Build on existing relationships of resource staff connected to various racial and ethnic communities.
- Develop a roundtable of “support service partners” around an agenda that aligns with the district’s instructional goals to assist school staff in mining community resources for schools and developing sustainable partner relationships.

## **5. Directly address unhealthy relationships and ineffective structures across central office and with schools.**

The new PPS superintendent has a very strong track record in defining an instructional focus and implementing strategies to support equitable improvement. However, even the most well-executed and well-led academic support effort would be seriously undermined if key relationship issues such as a climate of distrust, factions, and other pathologies of central office are ignored. These relationship and climate issues must be addressed more deeply than by simply instituting another central office reorganization, about which staff are already somewhat cynical.

PPS should consider actions such as:

- Develop concrete steps for addressing issues related to race/racism and respect for diversity within central office, beginning with the work and commitment of CORRE Team members themselves. To the extent possible, the steps should be developed in the context of a district strategic plan. Commit to finding resources to address facilitation, mediation, or training needs identified for improving cultural proficiency.
- Develop new practices, structures, and lines of accountability for central office staff that foster collaborative work and adherence to a prominent reform agenda owned by the school board and the superintendent.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities of central office staff; set clear lines of accountability and supervision; change reporting lines and committee structures that send mixed messages.

- Design and support accountability structures for supervisors in developing expectations for and communicating with staff.
- Eliminate the possibility of central office staff designing their own jobs by default through clear and widely understood job descriptions.
- Describe/title all positions in terms of their service-orientation functions.
- Set predictable “meeting blocks” for scheduling central office meetings involving staff who spend significant time in schools (area directors, principals, etc.) to minimize disruption.
- Challenge fiefdoms – real or perceived – in the PPS central office.

## Toward Action Steps

In the relatively long period of time between the collection of data in Portland and the publication of this report, due to the major transition the system was undergoing, much has been accomplished. The findings and recommendations have been discussed with CORRE Team members and the superintendent. Many district and community leaders have already begun to take action based on the CORRE results. If a snapshot were taken today of the areas highlighted in the CORRE data collection in spring 2004, the district would already look different. For example, as early as our October 2004 visit, several informants noted positive developments in the relationship between the teachers union and the administration and in communication between central office and schools.

While many action steps to follow up on CORRE are management prerogatives, the Annenberg Institute believes the power of a collaborative team approach has already been demonstrated and should be continued. The district and community leaders who have participated in CORRE have been using their ample stores of courage, will, talent, and capacity for hard work in the service of achieving high standards of teaching and learning for Portland’s public schools. PPS has a tremendous reservoir of these same assets still waiting to be tapped, supported, and held accountable. The district will be called to draw on these resources as it moves forward with the important tasks that have been set in motion by CORRE – tasks that will carry the community closer to the ideal of results and equity for all Portland’s children.

## What Is CORRE?

The Central Office Review for Results and Equity (CORRE) is a five-step process to help school districts evaluate the capacity of the central office to support high academic performance for all students in all the district's schools. Participants in CORRE identify high-priority issues in the district, examine quantitative and qualitative data about it, and develop plans and propose action for improvement.

CORRE is not an audit, a consultant report, an external review, or any other practice commonly done *to* districts. The CORRE process is facilitated by Annenberg Institute staff and consultants *in collaboration with* a district and its community. Districts that participate do so voluntarily, motivated by a strong desire to look closely at their central office practices and improve their work with schools.

CORRE was developed by School Communities that Work: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts, created by the Annenberg Institute in 2000. The Task Force developed a vision for “smart districts” – urban education systems that have the capacity to achieve both results and equity for all their students, with no significant differences in achievement based on race, ethnicity, or family income. The Task Force concluded that there are three things a “smart” school system must do:

- Provide schools, students, and teachers with needed supports and timely interventions.
- Ensure that schools have the power and resources to make good decisions.
- Make decisions and hold people accountable, using indicators of school and district performance and practice.

The Task Force concluded its work with the publication in 2002 of the *Portfolio for District Redesign* – a series of tools, including CORRE, to help districts perform these three key functions. Building on the work of the Task Force, Institute staff have continued to expand understanding of key central office roles as part of these functions, including communicating big ideas, promoting a service orientation and a data orientation, increasing capacity, brokering partnerships, advocating for and supporting underserved students, and addressing inequities.

CORRE brings together a team of leaders from the district (central office staff, board members, teachers, principals), the community (community-based organization leaders, parent leaders, foundation officers), and consultants from outside the district who are experienced in content areas, systems and culture change, and leadership for learning. The team goes through the following steps.

### *Step 1. Preparation*

CORRE Team members are chosen and receive an orientation facilitated by the Annenberg Institute team members. Meetings are scheduled. Institute and district liaisons prepare background information about the district for the team and begin to identify issues that CORRE might address.

### *Step 2. Developing Shared Understanding of the District and a Plan for Inquiry*

The team discusses the background information about the district and visits schools to develop a shared experience of the district. The team then identifies and prioritizes key issues, sequences the inquiry, creates questions related to central office support of teaching and learning, and identifies key informants – usually including students, teachers, parents, principals, and community partners.

### *Step 3. Deepening Understanding*

The team deepens its understanding of the key issue(s) by collecting data, which may include school visits, classroom observations, surveys, focus groups, shadowing of students, and interviews with central office, parents, community members, school staff, or students.

### **CORRE as a Research Study**

CORRE shares many of the qualities of a comprehensive research study. It is based on a conceptual framework; uses research tools – mainly interviews and focus groups – to collect data; and adheres to the strictest research ethics for dealing with human subjects.

CORRE differs from a comprehensive research study primarily with respect to sampling. Rather than basing focus group and interview lists on randomized sampling or related statistical methods, the CORRE Team (also not a statistically representative sample of the district/community, but representing many perspectives) draws upon its collective knowledge to identify participants. Furthermore, all the participants are volunteers, and thus the sampling of groups such as parents is often limited because their participation is usually subject to their availability.

The findings report perceptions across individuals and groups, such as teachers, parents, or principals, noting similar themes relevant to the roles/functions of central office. The subsequent recommendations for improvement build upon those themes.

The data derived from both interviews and the focus groups represent those individuals' perceptions about the focus area. These perceptions may or may not align with quantitative data. But making perceptions explicit is vital, both to convince the district of the need for change and to indicate the areas in which the district may need to improve its policies and practices.

### *Step 4. Compiling and Analyzing Data*

The data is compiled, categorized, and analyzed by Institute staff. The team vets the findings – testing them, based on their own experience in the district – and draws conclusions about implications for central office practice and policy.

### *Step 5. Developing Action Steps*

CORRE shifts from inquiry to action. Based on the feedback from the team in Step 4, Institute staff develop recommendations for action steps, drawing on a framework developed by the Institute that translates the functions of a smart district into key central office roles. These are presented to the team and the superintendent and, eventually, at a public meeting with the board of education. The recommendations may consist of next steps for the district as a whole or specific recommendations for the leadership of the district.

To review progress on the implementation of the action steps, the Institute conducts follow-ups two, four, and six months after the public report is issued. In some cases, the district deepens the post-CORRE relationship with the Institute by requesting support for implementation of one or more of the action steps.

## CORRE Team Members

## Appendix B

### Portland Public Schools Community

Joyce Bernheim, *Parent Representative*

Rose Bond, *Special Programs Principal, DART Schools, PPS (retired June 30, 2004)*

Julia Brim-Edwards, *Co-chair, PPS Board of Education*

Judy Bryant, *Area Director, PPS*

Mary Del Rio, *Teacher, Clark Elementary School, PPS*

Brad Fishel, *Board Member, Portland Schools Foundation*

Vanessa Gaston, *President/CEO, The Urban League of Portland*

Steve Goldschmidt, *Executive Director, Human Resources, PPS*

Kathy Jaffe, *Principal, Chief Joseph Elementary School, PPS*

Maxine Kilcrease, *Assistant to the Superintendent, PPS*

Carolyn Leonard, *Director, Office of Compliance, Diversity, and State & Federal Programs, PPS*

Dave Masunaga, *Principal, George Middle School, PPS (retired, June 30, 2004)*

Vicki Phillips, *Superintendent, PPS (beginning August 1, 2004)*

Patricia Pickles, *Chief Academic Officer, PPS*

Lorenzo Poe, *Co-chair, PPS Board of Education*

Bev Pruitt, *Area Director, PPS*

Leslie Rennie-Hill, *Senior Program Director, Portland Schools Foundation*

Scott Robinson, *Chief Technology Officer, Information Technology, PPS*

Jim Scherzinger, *Superintendent (retired July 31, 2004)*

Dee Simmons, *Uniserve Consultant, Portland Association of Teachers*

Pat Thompson, *Principal, Madison High School, PPS*

Karla Wenzel, *Community Representative (resigned due to relocation)*

*with support from Deborah Higa, Administrative Liaison to the CORRE Team*

### Annenberg Institute for School Reform

Marla Ucelli, *Director, District Redesign*

Frank Barnes, *Senior Associate*

Gregory Hodge, *Consultant*

*with support from Tamara Micles, Research Associate*

# Appendix C **Timeline for the Central Office Review for Results and Equity by the Portland Public Schools**

## **Introduction**

May 8–9, 2003 Staff from the Annenberg Institute met with PPS leaders, Portland Association of Teachers, members of the Board of Education, representatives from the Portland Schools Foundation, and city and county leadership to introduce and explain the CORRE process.

## **I. Preparing for the Review**

July 28, 2003 Arrangements for conducting the process and a framework for naming members of the CORRE Team were agreed upon.

Twenty-four people were subsequently named to the CORRE Team, including three from the Annenberg Institute.

November 13, 2003 Orientation meeting for the CORRE Team members, facilitated by Annenberg Institute staff.

## **II. Developing Shared Understanding of the District and a Plan for Inquiry**

January 15–16, 2004 The CORRE Team visited schools to get a shared “feel” for the district.

Following the visits, the team examined and discussed data about performance, demographics, and context. From their discussion, the team identified several priorities and chose a focus for their collective inquiry during the CORRE process: accelerated academic, linguistic, and cultural supports.

## **III. Deepening Understanding of the Priority Issue**

April 28–30, 2004 Members of the CORRE Team conducted a total of 42 focus groups and interviews.

Focus groups involved teachers, principals, teacher leaders, parents, students, and community members.

Interviews included PPS senior leadership, managers and office heads, and staff providing supports to schools and students.

#### **IV. Compiling and Analyzing Data on the Priority Issue**

- May–June 2004      Annenberg Institute CORRE members, with support from additional Institute staff, compiled and categorized the data from the interviews and focus groups, reviewed key PPS documents and plans, and requested additional data (mostly quantitative) needed to complete a preliminary analysis of the CORRE Team’s findings.
- July 23, 2004      Institute staff presented the preliminary analysis. The CORRE Team collectively agreed upon the key findings of the review and discussed their implications for central office policy and practice.

#### **V. Developing Action Steps**

- October 6, 2004      Annenberg Institute staff presented the CORRE Team’s findings and the Institute’s recommendations for next steps to the superintendent.
- December 10, 2004      CORRE Team members met to plan action steps and consider their integration with efforts already under way or under consideration by the superintendent.

# Acknowledgments and Appreciation

**T**he Annenberg Institute wishes to thank the Portland School Board and the Portland Schools Foundation for the opportunity to work with the Portland Public Schools community. We commend the members of the CORRE Team for the great openness, candor, and good will with which they undertook the very difficult task of examining the culture, habits, and practices of the PPS central office and their impact on schools and those they serve. In particular, we have appreciated the work of the lead liaisons, Dr. Patricia Pickles for PPS and Dr. Leslie Rennie-Hill for the Portland Schools Foundation; Ms. Carolyn Leonard, the PPS coordinator for the data-collection stage of the review; and Ms. Deborah Higa, the administrative liaison throughout the Institute's CORRE partnership with PPS.





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