



**Little Rock School District**

**Central Office Organization and Human  
Resources Functionality Assessment**

**Narrative Summary**

Prepared by the Urban Schools Human Capital Academy  
for the Commissioner of Education  
State of Arkansas

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## **Purpose of this Assessment**

The Arkansas State Commissioner of Education requested that the Urban Schools Human Capital Academy (USHCA) provide a high-level review of the organizational structure of the LRSD central office and a more in-depth assessment of the functionality of the Human Resources department for the LRSD.

How the central office supports principals coupled with a focused strategic human capital approach to ensure that the most effective people are in every position of the school district, is the lens that this assessment used to determine the key recommendations. The following components and questions guided our work:

Review Components	What we Looked For
Understand the current state of the Central Office organization and core Human Capital functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What is the best central office structure to provide maximum services and support schools?</li><li>• Do the district's functions best support schools' efforts to drive student achievement?</li></ul>
Assess processes and procedures that affect Central Office and Human Capital service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Are current processes and procedures designed for staff to provide high quality customer service in an accurate, efficient and timely manner?</li></ul>
Assess data integrity, management and decision- making efforts around key human capital data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How reliable is the data that is integral to supporting the district's human capital efforts, drives decision-making, and supports day-to-day operations</li></ul>
Identify a set of recommendations to inform strategic focus and attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Where should the district focus their strategic planning and execution efforts</li></ul>

Specifically, this review intended to address the following goals:

- Identify an effective central office leadership structure that supports improved student growth and achievement, with a focus on effective management of principals as well as the delivery of a strong curriculum/instruction/assessment approach
- Provide information and understanding of the work to support talent management strategies and to understand human resources and identify the strengths and gaps in functionality and its capacity to implement an effective human capital strategy

## **Context**

On the Little Rock School District (LRSD) home page of the website, the district invites families to enroll in the state's largest school district where the district is dedicated to meeting the individual needs of students. LRSD is committed to providing a welcoming, nurturing educational atmosphere for all students.

The historic Little Rock School District (LRSD) serves 22,759 students in 44 schools. This district is richly diverse both racially and socio-economically. Thirteen percent of the students are designated as English Language Learners (ELL) and 12 percent of the students have Individual Educational Plans (IEP) and are identified as special education students. Seventy-one percent of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. In 2015, the state board of education voted to take over LRSD due to poor student achievement as evidenced by six of the schools being identified in academic distress after more than half the students in these schools did not score proficient on state tests. Additionally, two-thirds of the 30 elementary schools scored in the lowest 25% on math exams. Since that time, the State Board and State Commissioner are responsible for overseeing and making policy decisions for LRSD. In 2016, Mike Poore was appointed superintendent of schools. Mr. Poore is the 6th superintendent to lead the school district in the past 10 years and reports to the state commissioner. A 7-member community advisory school board was appointed and functions in an advisory capacity under the supervision of the commissioner until LRSD is returned to local control, or until the State Board reconstitutes the school district. The Community Advisory Board meets monthly and conducts student and personnel hearings, builds community capacity, provides regular reports and makes recommendations to the State Board and the Commissioner of Education. Additionally, in recent years, LRSD has seen significant reductions in funding due to the loss of 37 million dollars of desegregation funds as well as enrollment decline, reductions in state funding, the closure of three schools, and the reconfiguring of a fourth school. As a result, it has been challenging for the district to meet improvement goals.

Since the initial takeover in 2015, there has been modest improvements in achievement at some schools, but there are still schools that are functioning far below acceptable standards. The ADE release of the ESSA School Index Report in October 2018 reported that LRSD has 18 schools with letter grades ranging from A to C, while 14 schools are grade D and 8 schools received a letter grade of F. Reading scores across the district remain low.

The district is making positive progress in the area of facilities and updated the master facility plan so that the LRSD can compete for additional funding for facilities. The new Little Rock Southwest High School will open up in the Fall of 2020 and there is a plan to utilize remaining vacant buildings. The facilities plan is aligned to support the rigorous academic and social emotional goals for student achievement.

As the district moves forward, LRSD is working to improve student achievement despite its financial strains with the ultimate goal of returning to local control. With these significant challenges ahead, there must be a sense of urgency to accelerate these outcomes.

## **Overview of the General Organizational Structure, Systems and Operations of the Central Office**

Through reviewing the most current literature about effective and efficient structures for high-performing executive leadership teams, and a series of internal and external stakeholder interviews, we identified the following high-level key findings:

Overall, we found that the organization of the LRSD is similar to other similar-sized urban school districts. It is evident that there have been significant reductions of staff in the central office as executive leadership have many direct reports and oversee multiple departments with considerable scopes of responsibilities.

### ***Strengths identified***

- The superintendent and central office leaders are committed to improving the education and lives of children of Little Rock.
- The district and Union appear to have a positive working relationship and have worked to make the best agreements during this very challenging time.
- The implementation of Power School and e-finance has aligned the financial and payroll systems with the state.
- Position control safeguards have been implemented and appear to be working well.
- There is a leadership development program that has been successful in developing an internal pipeline for school-based leaders.
- There is a District Instructional Leadership Team that is organized by school needs and provides differentiated services.
- The High Reliability School approach provides a foundation to improve school culture.

### ***Areas of Concern identified***

#### **Central Office Functioning**

- LRSD is not currently organized to meet the needs of schools
  - School-based staff consistently reported that the central office is not set up, organized or oriented to support their work
  - Both school-based and district staff report that there is very little cross-functional collaboration to address the district's major challenges; work is primarily done in silos
  - The organizational chart does not show any community or family engagement.

#### **Growth and Development of the Workforce**

- Professional Development is not aligned to what the staff needs
  - Professional development roles are dispersed across the central office with no coordination or alignment
  - Professional development offerings do not line up with the district's academic priorities, do not build staff expertise over time and are not differentiated

- There is no process for identifying the current level of performance or development needs of employees
- Principals receive little or no support for their development

### Span of Control and Scopes of Work

- The spans of control and scopes of work of central office leaders are inconsistent and/or inappropriate
  - The CFO/COO has broad responsibilities for all operations.
    - CFO work is typically longer-term, strategic and external-facing
    - COO work is typically more day-to-day and often urgent
  - The Deputy Superintendents do not have adequate time to spend in schools developing principals as instructional leaders
    - In addition to high supervisor to principal ratios, each Deputy has significant additional duties
  - Most Chiefs and Senior Directors are responsible for wide-ranging and disparate scopes of work weakening the quality of supervision

### Lack of Procedures and Processes

- LRSD lacks standard operating procedures and processes
  - Even when processes such as staffing allocations are codified, they are inconsistently implemented
  - School-based staff reported that they often do not know who to call at the central office to find support or address a problem
  - The central office often works in a reactive mode
  - The district was late adopting state-standard technology such as e-finance, Applitrack, and TESS
  - Metrics are not used across LRSD to drive, measure and improve performance

### High Level Recommendations for Central Office

In general, the school district is not organized in a way that supports schools or enhances the work of staff. There is also considerable unevenness in staffing patterns as evidenced by inconsistent staffing guidelines for schools. Additionally, the district is held back by a lack of clear processes for responding to issues. The instability of the top district leader and the historical rotating door of the superintendency provides the backdrop for people to not engage together to support schools. People are working hard, but there appears to be no coherency of approach to the work of the central office which at times masks the sense of urgency.

These recommendations consider the unique situation of LRSD and its special financial challenges. While there are considerable gaps in how the central office provides appropriate support for schools, the following recommendations can be implemented with little additional expense and will ensure high yield support to schools. These recommendations also focus on the Tier 2 central office leadership positions. These are the senior-level positions are just below the superintendent in the central office organization. The central office must be organized to support the improvement of teaching, learning and instructional leadership. As a result, our recommendations include:

1. Create stability in the Superintendent and other Chief roles.
2. Reduce the span of control and scope of work of central office leaders to ensure that each function is well-managed.
3. Design and implement structures and systems to supervise and provide differentiated support to principals and schools.
4. Make the growth and development of educators the highest priority of the central office after student achievement.
5. Streamline processes, remove barriers, eliminate silos and ensure that everyone is working toward the common goal.
6. Foster a culture of trust, respect and challenge to increase risk-taking and innovation.

## **Overview of the Human Resources Functionality**

The human capital functionality assessment looks at the districts' human capital strategic actions by looking at HR practices, procedures and policies. The focus of the analysis identifies information and understanding of the work to support talent management strategies and its leadership and capacity to implement HR strategic work. This comprehensive view provides a basis for identifying areas of strengths and gaps in HR practices.

Through reviewing critical HR functions, benchmarking best practices and holding a series of internal and external stakeholder interviews in LRSD, the following high-level findings were identified.

### ***Strengths identified***

#### **Teacher Preparation and Recruitment**

- Partnerships that support building a strong pool
  - TFA Partnership
  - Teachers for Tomorrow
  - Strong University Partnerships
  - Academy Pathway for HS Students
- TalentED implementation and increasing automation of processes

#### **Hiring and Selection**

- Improving the employee hiring through TalentEd
- Hiring incentives for hard to staff subjects and positions

#### **Staffing and Deployment**

- Low number of displace teacher assignments

#### **Performance Management**

- Waiver of fair dismissal process
- HR provides support to principals to exit underperforming staff

#### **Compensation and Benefits**

- There has recently been an increase in educator pay from state legislators
- LRSD has a strong benefit package
- The salary jump after 5 years of service is a strong retention strategy

#### **Career Management**

- There is an internal Leadership Development pipeline
- There are partnerships with University of Arkansas Little Rock for employees to obtain advanced degrees
- There are a number of teacher leadership positions and opportunities

#### **Principals as Human Capital Managers**

- Principals understand and embrace the role as human capital leader

## ***Human Resources Gap Areas***

- Recruitment and retention efforts are not driven by a strategic plan that leverages key data to drive focus; i.e. hiring forecasts, recruitment and hiring yield by initiative or source.
  - There is not a dedicated recruitment team
  - Currently there is minimal tracking of key recruitment metrics and outcomes
  - Renewal contract issuance is 6 months to 1 year delayed
- Schools often open with multiple vacancies
- There are varying perspectives on quality and quantity of teacher hiring pools that impacts high needs schools
- There are a lack of specific supports and strategies to support hiring and retention for high need schools
- Some interviewees shared negative hiring experiences
- There is a lack of a referral program to attract and identify talent
- Applicant data is not purged and often candidates from two years ago are still active and this
- There is a low number of early offers and early offers should be used to a greater extent to obtain highly effective candidates
- Late resignations (with no mitigating policies), late budget allocations, and forced placement timing hinder early hiring;
- The majority of hiring is done in July/August and the district often loses highly effective candidates for vacant positions
- There is no prescreening of applicants to prequalify candidates
- New Teacher Support is not consistent or comprehensive
  - Interviewees described a decrease in the quality of the mentoring and induction program; mentors may not be in the same building or subject
  - For alternative certification new teachers have difficulty balancing work with meeting the certification requirements
- Data is not routinely collected or used to measure the performance of the department or determine goals for the department
  - HR's efforts and capacity to strategically leverage data is not clear
- HR is not optimally structured to provide strategic and proactive support to Principals
  - There does not appear to be differentiated services to schools from HR
  - Primary HR support and problem solving to principals and school chiefs handled by Chief or Director of Certified Staffing (48 schools and programs -- 30 elementary, 7 middle, 5 HS, 6 other programs)
  - HR Assistants (4) are focused on administrative tasks and transactions
- Most HR Processes are manual or handled by disparate technology/systems
  - There are too many paper driven processes, manual handoff and too many signatures for approvals
  - There are often delays in hiring process due to manual tracking and inconsistent communication efforts
  - The current processes rely on non-integrated systems and applications
  - There is no process for tracking vacancies



- Payroll timing and accuracy is sometimes problematic

**High Level Recommendations for Human Resources Functionality**

1. Implement early and proactive planning to target and attract high quality recruits
2. Improve the quality of the applicant pool and streamline application efforts
3. Develop recruitment messages that align with and reflect the district's and community's core values
4. Drive policies and processes to enable earlier hiring of teachers and principals
5. Employ equitable distribution practices to analyze the distribution of teachers based on teacher effectiveness measures to ensure that high need schools are staffed with effective teachers and support personnel
6. Incorporate evaluation results and other teacher quality measures in all key human capital decisions including retention, development, and promotion activities
7. Improve proactive and strategic talent management support to principals
8. Identify clear metrics and goals for the department/teams/individual roles that align with the district's overall goals and overall talent management objectives

### **Next Steps and Conclusion**

This report provides a review of the current central office structures and of human resources structures and processes, systems, and processes in LRSD. By prioritizing the critical roles of both central office and school leadership and a strategic approach to human capital across the district in driving improvements in student achievement as a foundation, LRSD can make significant improvements in its operations. Districts will not see district-wide improvements without significant engagement by the central office and their willingness to undo the traditional siloed organization to truly focus their support on schools.

Concrete next steps and more detailed recommendations and actions are outlined in the PowerPoint Report. At the highest level, this report and its learnings will be presented to the Commissioner Key and the State Board of Education and to the Superintendent Poore and the Community Advisory Committee. In terms of implementing the recommendations, it will be important to prioritize the recommendations and assess the impact in terms of capacity and complexity. The district should then identify timelines and assign owners to each of the recommendations.

In summary, these recommendations are based on proven research where a central office focused on improving instruction at the schools coupled with a strong strategic emphasis of strategic human capital would serve as a catalyst of change to improve teaching and learning and thus, student achievement for all students.

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## Addendum A

### **Supporting Central Office Research**

The importance of effective leadership, particularly at the school and district levels, has come to the forefront of education policy and research in recent years. According to results of a 2010 survey administered on behalf of the Wallace Foundation, “school and district administrators, policymakers and others found principal leadership as among the most pressing matters on a list of issues in public school education. Teacher quality stood above everything else, but principal leadership came next.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the state’s ESSA plans focus on investing in teacher and principal leadership

In addition to the focus on the impact of school leadership on student achievement, research also highlights the role of central office leaders in promoting school and student success. A seminal report by Honig et al. describes the important role leadership of central office leadership in supporting school principals and building capacity for effective reforms particularly around instructional improvement.<sup>2</sup> When central offices are transformed around key principles, districtwide improvements in student learning are possible. Aspects of this transformation include:

- Focusing centrally and meaningfully on teaching and learning improvement
- Engaging the entire central office in school improvement
- Calling on central office administrators to fundamentally remake their work practices and their relationships with schools to support teaching and learning improvements for all schools

### **Human Capital Approach to School Improvement**

USHCA<sup>3</sup> was founded by former New York City Public Schools Chief Human Resources Officer and Fairfax County Public Schools and Montgomery County Public Schools Associate Superintendent for Human Resources, Elizabeth Arons, as a nonprofit initiative in Human Resources reform. USHCA was established in response to the many critical issues school districts face that could be addressed--at least in part--by more integrated Human Resources support for Human Capital initiatives. Issues such as recruitment, retention, professional development, principal and teacher quality, and many others pose extremely difficult challenges to school districts. Federal, state, and local leaders have paid unprecedented attention to the quality of educators – specifically teachers and principals – in public schools. Propelled by incentives in the federal Race to the Top priority, and now Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) as well as key research on the impact of teachers and principals on student

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<sup>1</sup> *The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning*. Wallace Foundation, January 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Honig et al., 2010.

<sup>3</sup> USHCA has worked with over 30 districts to support and assist in building the leadership capacity of Human Resources in each of their partner school districts

learning, understanding school improvement in the context of the human capital in the district is of the utmost importance.

The mission of every school district is to provide the best possible education to each and every student. All individuals working for any school district must contribute to this mission. The Human Resources Department plays a critical role in ensuring that there is an effective teacher in every classroom and an effective leader at the helm of every school, as well as high quality people in all other positions in the district. The role of Human Resources is critical as 85-90% of a school district's budget is people. To contribute to workforce quality, Human Resources must focus on the "right work," which means that priorities must be strategically aligned to the mission and vision of the district. The "right work" of Human Resources includes the following strategic functions:

- Recruitment, Hiring, and Selection
- Induction and Assignment
- Staffing and Deployment
- Performance Management
- Linking Professional Development to HR Functions
- Compensation and Benefits
- Career Management (Retention and Succession Planning)
- Service and support for principals and central office hiring managers

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