



FOREWORD

Relationships and Resources for Leadership in Schools: The Role of Non-System Intermediary Organizations

This brief focuses on a familiar topic – educational leadership in schools. It does so in a novel way by working to bridge work on leadership in the schoolhouse with work that calls attention to how dynamics beyond the schoolhouse matter for educational leadership.

To bridge these two lines of work on educational leadership, the authors focus on the educational ecosystems in which schools around the world operate and depend on for essential resources in delivering education. Using a multi-level distributed leadership framework, they explore the educational ecosystem as a potential source of resources for educational leadership in schools. More specifically, observing the growing importance of intermediary organizations, especially non-system or non-governmental intermediary organizations in educational ecosystems globally, the authors zoom in on how these organizations build relationships and access resources. By straddling the local school and the broader education ecosystem, non-system intermediary organizations enable resources beyond the schoolhouse in the broader ecosystem to flow into schools –resources that are critical for educational leadership. The focus is especially timely, as schools around the world continue to grapple with the challenges of a global pandemic and the glaring educational inequities exposed in ways that are difficult to ignore.

The authors generate useful and usable knowledge for educational policymakers and practitioners about the important role that non-system intermediary organizations play for local schools and the relationships and resources that are central in this work. To generate insights about how these non-system intermediary organizations build relationships within vast and diverse ecosystems, the authors shrewdly focus on five, mature non-system intermediary organizations (think NGOs)

in the United States that work directly with schools. Viewing the education ecosystem from the perspective of non-system intermediary organizations, the report captures the ecosystem from their vantage point by focusing on three core issues all having to do with relationships and resources:

First, the brief examines how non-system intermediary organizations initiate and maintain interactions with other actors in the educational ecosystem and what purposes motivate initiating and maintaining relationships. Non-system intermediary organizations interacted frequently with diverse ecosystem actors, government, and non-government organizations, to procure an array of resources, from funding to expertise, using a combination of outreach and in-reach strategies as well as introductions brokered by a third party.

Second, the report identifies and describes the various types of relationships that non-system intermediary organizations have with other ecosystem actors, identifying the factors that shape the formation of these relationships. Non-system intermediary organizations' relationships with other ecosystem actors involved four types –contractual, brokering, collaborative, and consultative– that depended on a combination of ecosystem factors and factors internal to the intermediary organizations.

Third, the authors identify the key resources that non-system intermediary organizations access and activate through their relationships with other actors in the education ecosystem, analyzing the actors that shape the types of resources accessed for schools. Intermediary organizations accessed a range of material, human, and social resources depending on a variety of factors including the intermediate organization's participation in collaborative networks and the type of donor organization.

These are important insights into the critical role of intermediary organizations in building relationships to access resources in the educational ecosystem for schools. The work also offers a diagnostic framework for thinking systematically about relationships and resources in the educational ecosystem and the role of intermediary organizations therein. Such a framework would be useful and usable not only by researchers but also policymakers and practitioners as they grapple with the challenge of finding critical resources for educational leadership in schools, particularly struggling schools.

The power of a policy brief is not just in the questions answered, but also in the questions that the reading prompts. This brief prompted several questions about accessing and activating resources in the educational ecosystem for educational leadership in schools, and the role of non-system intermediary organizations therein. One question concerns how schools received and used the resources that intermediary organizations brokered for them: Were there differences in how these organizations worked with schools to activate the resources they accessed for them? How did schools use the resources that intermediary organizations accessed for them, and were there differences among schools in the use of resources? What factors, both school level as well as the nature of the relationship with the intermediary organization, shaped how schools used resources? In short, the policy brief opens a whole other research agenda centered on schools' use of external resources that intermediaries brokered for them. A related set of issues here might probe whether the nature of the leadership work matters as regards whether and how resources are accessed and activated. Educational leadership includes everything from developing the organization to managing instruction. Even focusing in on managing instruction the terrain for educational leadership is vast, from multiple school subjects (eg, math, science) to various dimensions of teaching (content, pacing, materials, grouping, pedagogy).

There is evidence to suggest that educational leadership arrangements differ, for example, depending on the school subject. Hence, a potential fruitful line of work might investigate whether and how the role of intermediaries in accessing and activating resources for schools differs depending on the particular focus of the leadership work.

Finally, the brief makes a case for cross-national research on these matters. While this brief focuses on the United States where NGOs have a well-established history of working in the educational ecosystem, future work might involve other countries so that we might learn by comparing across 'national contexts'. Nations differ radically in how they govern and provide schooling for children. Whereas responsibility for education in the US is segmented across and within federal, state, and local governments, in many countries this responsibility lies with a national ministry of education. Such arrangements are likely to affect how NGOs access and activate resources for schools in the educational ecosystem. One issue in doing such work concerns the unit of comparison in cross-national research on the role of NGOs in accessing and activating resources for schools (Spillane, Peurach, & Cohen, 2019). The nation state is not always the relevant unit. While national governments in some countries have all or most of the constitutional and administrative responsibility for schooling, in several other countries provincial, state, or even local governments take that responsibility, or it is divided among these entities. Hence, to study the role of non-system intermediaries in accessing and activating resources for schools cross-nationally, we need to grapple with what is the operating system in different countries.

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