

DISTRICT DEVELOPMENT – THE NEW HOPE FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM

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The District Development Support Project (DDSP) managed by the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) aims to strengthen the capacity of educational districts to enable them to support and promote school development and improvement. The purpose of this paper is to stimulate discussion about the nature of an effective educational district, to explore possible strategies for enhancing district effectiveness and finally to examine some of the possible ways in which district-level structures can facilitate school improvement.

The paper has taken as given the existence of district-level structures in South Africa. While educational districts may exist both now and in the future – the big question is what is the role and function of the district office in a transforming educational system? This issue emerges at different points of the paper as it has a fundamental impact on conceptions of district effectiveness, the structure of district offices and their staffing and the identification of strategies to improve the functioning of district offices.

1. THE RATIONALE FOR FOCUSING DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS AT THE DISTRICT LEVEL.

The decision of the DDSP to choose the educational district as the focus of its project intervention raises the question – why focus on school districts rather than on individual schools? The answer to this question lies in the historical neglect of sub-system levels of the education system and the disappointing results of previous school improvement approaches.

School districts are the orphans of the educational system. Spillane and Thompson, writing in America, describe the district as the “neglected layer” of the educational system. Educational reform initiatives in South Africa have until now ignored the district. Rensburg (1999) notes that “whereas the first wave (of reform) has focused on the establishment of a single and non-racial education system through the creation of a single national Ministry and Department of Education and the consolidation of nine provincial department of education, the next wave must clarify new roles and responsibilities, powers and authority of provincial head offices and regional and district offices”¹.

The fact that school improvement and development efforts are now paying greater attention to the role of the district in school development is indicative of a growing disenchantment with current, school-by-school, small-scale improvement initiatives. For many years in South Africa, educational development initiatives prioritised teacher in-service training. However, despite the extent of effort, it failed to yield large-scale changes in the quality of education and the emphasis of development activities shifted to “whole school” approaches, which tried to involve all teachers and incorporate aspects of organisational development. Despite the millions of Rands which have been poured into this inset-based or school-based type of educational reform, its impact on learner achievement has been negligible, or at best unknown.

¹ Address given at National Conference on District Development

This problem is not confined to South Africa, American researchers Elmore (1996) and Cuban (1994) note that despite the resources and effort dedicated to school reform projects, core school practices related to teaching and learning practices have remained remarkably stable. The effect of the few successful school-based reform programmes can be likened to creating small spots of light which benefit individual schools, but have no impact on the education system as a whole. Creating more spots of light will not be sufficient to create the depth and breadth of change needed. As reformers became frustrated with “tinkering at the edges”, they began to seek a more systemic approach to educational reform.

Small-scale reform efforts are often not sustainable over a long period of time (as donor or allocated funds are granted for limited time periods) and they can only provide assistance to a limited number of schools. By locating improvement efforts within school district structures it is more likely that programme designs and approaches will be incorporated into the district’s standard operations. It is also more likely that experimental approaches can be taken to scale through the district’s structures. This has been successfully illustrated by the experiences and achievements of the District Primary Education Programme in West Bengal where innovations introduced in a number of schools through a donor-funded project were then spread to schools not participating in the project through the district’s involvement with the DPEP project.

The position of school districts in the educational hierarchy means that they have great potential to be a vehicle for medium- to large-scale educational reform. The potential of the district to be the fulcrum around which educational change and improvement pivots lies in the district’s ability to fulfil its core function. The core purpose of educational districts is to support the delivery of the curriculum and to ensure that all learners are afforded good quality learning opportunities - the quality of which is evidenced by learner achievement. The school district is the lowest level of the educational system at which individual schools are brought together under the authority of some sort of co-ordinating structure. The district’s potential to be a force for change is linked to its proximity to schools, allowing it to be responsive to local needs, yet able to introduce changes linked to system-wide or province-wide reform efforts. Reform initiatives can therefore be tailored to suit the needs of local schools and district office staff can be responsive to difficulties faced by individual schools and intervene to resolve such problems far quicker than if problems were referred to a superior structure responsible for many more schools in a larger geographic area.

2. THE REALITIES OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

District offices existed in both homeland and the various racially-defined South African education departments. Following the installation of a democratically elected government in 1994 and dissolution of homeland authorities, the education system was restructured in order to incorporate the different racial and homeland departments. District-level offices were incorporated into the new education system. Racially-defined district structures were dissolved and new, “non-racial” districts formed incorporating different types of schools. Since 1994 there has been considerable debate on the form and function of district offices and in some provinces

these debates have led to the large-scale reorganisation of provincial departments of education and their supporting bureaucracies at provincial, regional and district level.

It is necessary to offer a working definition of an education district for this paper, as the term has slightly different meanings when used in different provinces (Mphahlele, 1999: 27). In this paper the term district will be used to refer to administrative and managerial units within the education system which are located closest to the schools, forming an intermediate layer between individual schools and larger components of the education system, such as regional or provincial bodies. In the interests of administrative convenience, districts may be divided into smaller units (e.g. clusters of schools). Districts have a full-time staff attached to them, usually made up of professional bureaucrats and support staff employed by the government.

Mphahlele (1999) reports that in South Africa most district offices have a staff complement of about sixty officials. However, there are many unfilled posts in rural district offices (Mphahlele, 1999: 27). Typical functions of the school district include administration, providing curricular and procedural support to schools, quality control and resource allocation to schools. In some education systems, districts may have the authority to develop policies concerning learner achievement, learning goals, curriculum frameworks, resource allocation and staffing.

Mphahlele's (1999) research on school districts in South Africa showed that district sizes vary according to the density of schools in a particular area, with rural districts typically covering a far larger area than urban districts. District size is generally determined by the number of learners served.

2.1 The work of school districts

It has already been noted that the primary function of school districts is to support the delivery of the curriculum in schools and to monitor and enhance the quality of learning experiences offered to learners. While this is arguably the function of the entire education system, district offices have a particular role to play in working closely with local schools and ensuring that local educational needs are met. In supporting the primary function of the district, there are five possible areas of operation for districts:

- ? Policy implementation
- ? Leading and managing change
- ? Creating an enabling environment for schools to operate effectively
- ? Intervening in failing schools
- ? Offering administrative and professional services to schools and teachers.

These different areas of operation should be aligned to support the district's primary purpose.

Policy implementation.

Since 1994 a plethora of educational policies have been introduced which aim to effect redress, undo the authoritarian ways in which education was managed and improve the quality of education, particularly in historically disadvantaged schools. The primary implementing agents (who are closest to the site of implementation) of these policies differs - is sometimes the district office (e.g. implementing decisions

concerning right-sizing and labour agreements) and in some cases responsibility for implementation lies with school governing bodies (e.g. determining school language policies) and with individual teachers (e.g. implementing the new curriculum in classrooms). It is in the country's interests to ensure these different policies are implemented in such a way that the noble outcomes determined by the central (and provincial) governments can be achieved.

Several policy analysts have noted that as policy is implemented, it is reformulated (Spillane, 1996: 64; McLaughlin 1979; Wildavsky 1973). The final outcomes of a policy are determined by the manner in which it is implemented, by the agent who is closest to the final site of implementation. Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) note that the degree of co-operation between different implementing agencies needs to be "close to 100 percent" in order to ensure that a number of small deficits do not cumulatively create a large shortfall. This requires close co-operation between provincial departments of education, districts and schools.

If implementation outcomes are to be in line with the intended policy outcomes, then it is in the state's interests to ensure a high degree of support for these policies from those who will be implementing them. This implies that district staff must be conversant with national and provincial policies, be able to explain them to others and know how to translate them into action. Spillane (1996) writes that district administrators have an important role to play in mobilising support for state and federal policy (1996: 64).

Leading and managing change

In a transforming education system, the district office has a key role to play in leading and managing change. Due to the district's proximity to schools, it is possible for district staff to not only inform schools about new ways of operating, but also to model new types of behaviour and offer support to teachers and principals. In order for the district office to offer instructional leadership and to facilitate a process of change and adaptation in schools, district staff need to understand the nature of the change process and the content of the change which they wish to introduce (e.g. a new curriculum framework or new style of school management and governance). They also need to understand the way in which these policies impact on previous styles of interaction between the district office and schools.

Creation of an enabling environment for schools to operate more effectively.

Legislation on the governance and management of education in South Africa has followed the international trend of granting functions previously held by bureaucratic bodies to schools and lower levels of government. The constitution allows for the existence of provincial departments of education and allocates particular powers to these departments. The South African Schools Act allocates the power to develop policies on matters which were previously decided by national statute (eg. language policy and policies on religious observances) to school governing bodies. One of the problems with current legislation is that the powers and role of school districts is not clearly spelled out (discussed in more detail below).

It could be argued that granting policy making powers and management functions to schools undermines the need for coherent and consistent policy implementation as outlined above. In order for the effective implementation of policy, schools need to

have the internal capacity to exercise these powers and a sound understanding of the extent of and limitations on their powers. The district has a role to play in ensuring that school-initiated policies adhere to national guidelines and that disputes and problems which school-based managers are unable to resolve are dealt with speedily in order to ensure that institutional problems do not derail the teaching and learning process.

Power to intervene in schools which are failing and not serving the educational needs of learners.

It is essential that district offices be granted sufficient power to intervene in schools and resolve problems when the need arises. Because the legal powers of districts are not clearly spelled out by legislation, it is not uncommon to read about problems in individual schools being referred to the highest authority in provinces, the MEC². If districts were granted greater authority to act on behalf of the provincial department of education, such problems could be resolved more quickly and both time and money could be saved, as high-level personnel would not be required to settle local disputes.

In the United States and United Kingdom greater authority was given to state departments of education and LEAs to intervene in failing schools, including the power to close and reconstitute schools when it was deemed necessary.

The district as an administrative and professional service centre for teachers

The importance of the district office as an administrative centre ought not to be forgotten. The district office needs to maintain accurate information systems on the number of learners attending its schools, school-related data, personnel-related information and information on school and learner performance. The use of quantitative data in decision-making is one of the features of effective districts – a point which will be discussed in greater depth below. The maintenance of accurate records is also essential if districts are to act as service centres to teachers. Teachers, as employees of the Department of Education, require that accurate personnel information is maintained and that personnel-related queries can be resolved as quickly as possible.

The professional development of teachers is one of the critical challenges facing the education system - research has shown that many teachers require professional development in both teaching methodology and subject content knowledge (Taylor and Vinjevoid, 1999). District offices need to be able to offer professional development programmes for teachers and educational managers.

2.2 Challenges facing districts in South Africa

It would be inappropriate to review international models of district effectiveness and district improvement without first considering the way in which South African school districts operate and the challenges that they face. The following description of difficulties experienced districts is drawn from a range of sources including Godden and Maurice (1999), Chinsamy (1999), van Wyk (1999), reports from provincial district development conferences and discussions with educational researchers.

² Member of the Executive Council. The equivalent of a “provincial minister” of education.

2.2.1 External conditions.

- ? The role and powers of districts are not clearly defined by legislation. Several pieces of legislation (the South African Constitution, the South African Schools Act and provincial Schools Acts) stipulate the powers and functions allocated to the national department of education, provincial departments of education and individual schools. However for the most part there are few legislative provisions which acknowledge the existence, role or powers of district structures. This means that district officials can often not take decisions on particular matters (eg the teacher or learner discipline) as they are uncertain whether the resolution of these matters forms part of their legal competence.
- ? The duties of districts are not defined by internal documents regulating the education bureaucracy.
- ? There is often a lack of communication between districts and regional / provincial offices.
- ? Districts are bombarded with directives and initiatives from various different directorates at regional, provincial and national levels. In some cases these directives receive contradictory information or are not co-ordinated, leading to added pressure on districts and perceptions that districts are unresponsive or unwilling to co-operate with these initiatives.
- ? Districts are caught between pressures from above and below – they must respond to local pressures and demands from schools and at the same time respond to (possibly contradictory) demands from superior structures.

2.2.2 Internal conditions

District structure

- ? There is a serious mismatch between the functions of the district office and its structure.
- ? District officials lack job descriptions and are uncertain of their individual responsibilities.
- ? Human resource development initiatives are ad-hoc, spontaneous and unplanned.
- ? The breakdown of communication between districts and regional or provincial structures leads to the implementation of contradictory directives and the late implementation of programmes. Schools often complain about the lack of communication between themselves and districts – schools are required to fetch circulars and communiqués from the district office. This means that circulars often reach schools late as the method of communication depends on a principal being able to visit the district office regularly. In more remote areas of the country schools often do not have telephones and there is an absence of regular postal deliveries to schools.

Organisational culture

- ? The amalgamation of different education districts and departments meant the merging of different organisational cultures, in some cases a new ethos has not replaced old organisational habits and norms. The merger of different departments also has implications for administration, for example in some

regions three different processes for granting leave were followed and new systems are not yet in place.

- ? Organisational cultures are not consonant with the present demands and expectations placed on districts. This is discussed in greater depth below.
- ? There is a lack of incentives to change professional culture in districts.

Capacity

Human:

- ? District offices are under-staffed and not all posts are filled
- ? The ratio of administrative to professional staff, favours administrative staff
- ? There are too few professional staff who are specialised in primary education or the education of learners with special educational needs.
- ? Officials see themselves as “postmen” whose function is little more than to deliver circulars to schools and not as professionals responsible for assisting schools and teachers.
- ? Within district offices there are some staff who are under-utilised and there are others who are over-stretched, particularly those in managerial roles.
- ? Those appointed to positions within district offices lack managerial and other skills necessary to carry out their assigned tasks.

Material:

- ? District offices often lack the most basic administrative infrastructure – there are no computers, photocopiers are often out of order and basic office supplies are often in short supply.
- ? District officials cannot visit schools because of a lack of transport – state vehicles are often stolen or not repaired.

Financial:

- ? District offices do not have capacity or authority to authorise expenditure on small items
- ? There is often inefficient use of resources, but officials are not able to take action to remedy the problem as the decisions needed require the exercise of powers not granted to the district.

Physical

- ? District offices are often housed in dilapidated buildings which do not foster a professional ethos and which are unsuited to the function of the organisation.
- ? District offices may also be located in expensive, rented accommodation, the rental of which consumes a large proportion of the district’s budget.

Since 1994 educational districts have been faced with implementing a range of new policies, including new systems of school governance which promote notions of self-managing schools and a new curriculum. In addition to the organisational and material challenges which districts experience, the interpretation and implementation of these new policies has created additional challenges for district officials. The devotion of more management functions to schools holds implications for the way in which districts manage and work with schools.

3. THE EFFECTIVE SCHOOL DISTRICT

Relatively little written has been written about the features of effective school districts (Fullan 1992, Coleman and LaRoque 1991, Murphy and Hallinger, 1988) in comparison with the amount of research generated by the effective schools movement which examined the factors that promote school effectiveness (Edmonds 1979; Mortimore 1988; Levin and Lezotte, 1990; Stringfield and Teddlie 1993; Sammons 1995). In some cases, characteristics of effective districts have been extrapolated from research on effective schools (Murphy and Hallinger, 1988: 175; Coleman and LaRocque, 1991: 12). Murphy and Hallinger (1988) note that in general the research on school districts and superintendents has been “sparse” (1988: 175). Although these observations were made about ten years ago, Internet searches, surveys of recent ERIC abstracts and examinations of recent issues of journals dealing with educational administration show that there is little change from situation described by Murphy and Hallinger.

In order for a district to be considered effective, it should be both **organisationally** effective (referring to the manner in which the district carries out its internal operations and fulfils its functions) and **instructionally** effective (its manner of operation should have a positive influence on student achievement in schools under its jurisdiction). The following definition of effectiveness takes both of these dimensions into account:

“the extent to which any (educational) organisation as a social system, given certain resources and means, fulfils its objectives without incapacitating its means and resources and without placing undue strain on its members” (VanVelzen, in Reynolds et al, 1996: 1).

For a district to be seen as organisationally effective it would need to satisfy certain requirements which would apply to most large organisations and would include having sound leadership, low levels of internal and external conflict, staff motivation and satisfaction, having a productive work ethos and having internal processes and policies which support the attainment of output goals and staff satisfaction.

3.1 Selected features of effective educational districts

Despite the relative paucity of information on the characteristics of effective districts, some research has taken place (Coleman and LaRocque 1989, 1991; Murphy and Hallinger, 1988; Rozenholtz, 1989). Coleman and LaRocque (1989; 1991) studied the features of twelve districts in British Columbia and determined which factors contributed to student achievement and a positive district ethos, while Murphy and Hallinger (1988) studied twelve instructionally effective districts in California. A full summary of the findings of these and other studies is contained in Appendix Two.

Lists of features of effective schools, organisations or districts are not particularly useful in understanding what makes an organisation function well in its context. Lists of “effectiveness features” also do not indicate causal relationships between features nor do they suggest what should be done when an organisation is not effective. For

this reason, particular aspects of effective districts which are pertinent to district development and improvement in South Africa have been singled out for discussion.

Priority given to teaching and learning related matters

One of the key factors influencing district effectiveness appears to be the extent to which it prioritises teaching and learning-related issues – the core business of any educational institution or system. Effective districts made the improvement of teaching and learning a top priority and paid attention to issues relating to curriculum and instruction (discussed in more detail in Appendix Two). There was also a strong commitment to improving student performance, as evidenced by systematic improvement efforts and district operations to support this goal. Effective districts also appeared to share a vision related to instructional performance – even if it were as simple as “putting children first”. However, vision and slogans are worthless unless they are translated into action! In the districts studied, at least two thirds of district goals focussed on curricular and instructional goals which drove the operations of the entire district (Murphy and Hallinger, 1988: 177). These goals were often set by the district in collaboration with school principals (ibid). Rosenholtz (1989) notes that although goal setting took place in both ‘stuck’ and ‘moving’ districts, in ‘stuck’ districts it took place in an unfocussed way while in ‘moving’ districts goals centred on continuous improvement (Fullan, 1992: 207).

Dominant functions relate to improving teaching and learning

Most of those who conducted research on effective districts comment on the role which these districts played in monitoring school performance. Murphy and Hallinger (1988) note that districts devoted more time to monitoring technical core activities and inspecting outcomes than was expected - district superintendents reported that at least 10 % of their time was spent personally monitoring school sites and evaluating and supervising school principals. Other district officials also spent considerable amounts of time monitoring the implementation of district curriculum activities (Murphy and Hallinger, 1988, 178).

School performance ought to be assessed with reference to some general norm or standard, such as the district’s instructional goals which may refer to a common standard to be attained or improvement target. This ensures that all schools are assessed according to a common framework related to learning outcomes (Coleman and LaRocque, 1991: 34). Typical measures to ensure accountability include classroom observation, on-site support and the public ranking of schools according to learner achievement.

Internal operations

One of the recurrent features of effective districts was the emphasis placed on accountability – both of schools and districts. Districts were accountable for their own performance and instituted self-monitoring mechanisms to assess internal operations. Districts studied by Murphy and Hallinger (1988) were described as having an “internal focus”, with a significant proportion of their time being devoted to examining internal operations. At the same time districts are also held accountable for the quality of schools under their authority.

Both Coleman (1991) and Murphy (1988) comment on the use of quantitative data in decision making in effective districts. School performance on standardised tests was

used as a means to review schools' performance. Hargreaves and Fullan recommend that data be used for "improvement, not embarrassment" (1998: 122). They suggest that accountability measures (and test performance) be used to promote greater success and not to shame them (ibid). Murphy and Hallinger suggest that district officials discuss these results with school principals and staff and together devise strategies for improving performance. In addition to information on school performance, districts also require accurate data about the schools which they serve, student populations and particular problems experienced in different areas - this implies that a sound data collection, analysis and review processes be in place.

Leading by example

The head of the district played an important part in setting the tone for the district through influencing the norms and practices of subordinates, setting vision and devoting the time to key activities (Murphy and Hallinger, 1988). This should not imply that the most senior official is solely responsible for the district's vision, however senior officials do have a role to play in setting vision and managing internal process in order to support the attainment of that vision. Effective superintendents also modelled types of behaviour demanded of schools, whether it related to methods of collaboration with colleagues or standards of accountability (Coleman and LaRocque, 1991: 150). Murphy and Hallinger (1988) also note the importance of strong leadership by superintendents, particular in matters related to curriculum and instruction, "setting school system goals, selecting district-wide staff development activities and in pressing for district-school goal co-ordination and in supervising and evaluating principals"(1988: 178).

3.2. Effectiveness – a caution

It is necessary to sound a caution when discussing notions of organisational or educational effectiveness. The notion of effectiveness is culturally and contextually bound and is influenced by the perceived function of an organisation or institution. This can be illustrated by referring to three examples of how different countries view the purpose of education. In America, student achievement and global competitiveness are foregrounded in debates on school reform and effectiveness, while Wyatt (1996) writes that in Australia attributes such as the development of a positive self-concept, self-discipline and confidence are considered more important than matters of economic dominance. In Malaysia the goals of the education system are expressed in terms of developing a moral, just, tolerant society with the capacity for educational development (Lee, 1999). These different ways of understanding educational effectiveness will in turn affect judgements about the effectiveness of educational institutions. The way in which the functions of education districts are stated will to some extent determine the way in which its effectiveness is assessed.

The possibility of cultural and contextual bias in the research findings reported above should be held in mind as the studies were conducted in Canada and the United States. In both cases, the research studies which generated these findings were conducted in countries with large, well-established, fairly stable educational bureaucracies and long-established political systems. In these countries there are good communications infrastructures and standardised tests which can measure student attainment at various grades. The author has not found any reported research on the features of an effective

district in emerging systems or which operates in conditions of deprivation and educational performance similar to those found in many South African schools. The set of effectiveness features described above (and in the Appendix) therefore reflect findings based on a particular type of system operating in a very different political and social context. This is not to suggest that all research on features of district effectiveness should be discounted, some of the features may be able to be reproduced. The picture of an effective district painted by this research may not reflect realistic performance targets for many South African districts given their current problems and the fact that they operate in an emergent system. District effectiveness (and development) must be viewed in light of the context of the formation of the education system and the shift between very different ideological systems governing the management of education. Realistic criteria should be set for measuring district effectiveness.

Reviewing the list of features of effective districts creates another problem for those wishing to improve districts in South Africa – there are so many areas of operation where improvement needs to take place, what should improvement projects focus on? As noted earlier, causal links between different effectiveness features are not known.

4. IMPROVING SCHOOL DISTRICTS

What can be done if a school district is not functioning effectively? This section of the paper considers various strategies that can be adopted in the interests of improving organisational effectiveness. The following section reviews possible ways in which the district can support instructional effectiveness. Clearly however, these two dimensions of effectiveness are linked and cannot be separated so neatly in reality – organisational effectiveness should be promoted in order that instructional effectiveness can be achieved.

Before examining different improvement strategies it is important to sound the following warning for those wishing to effect district development programmes – one size does not fit all! Hopkins, Harris and Jackson (1997) differentiate between three types of schools – the failing, the moderately effective and the generally effective – and suggest different improvement approaches appropriate to each type. Just as there are different types of schools, it is fair to assume that districts operate at different levels of effectiveness.

Similarly, different organisational cultures exist which influence the type of intervention programme which is appropriate for a particular district. Roberts and Pretorius (1999) adapted Kaplan's (1996) framework of dependent, independent and interdependent organisations and applied these organisational states to schools. This framework can also be applied to districts. The characteristics associated with different states are summarised below:

Dependence	<p>Organisation is dependent on a external body or group to provide direction and set operating norms. Accountability is viewed in terms of punishment or treat from a superior body.</p> <p>Little or no acceptance of own agency and ability to affect its own state (fatalism). Tendency to blame others for its problems. Often heavily reliant on one individual for direction.</p> <p>Innovation is not encouraged or supported.</p>
Independence	<p>Greater self-reliance and the development of its own identity – separate from a superior organisation.</p> <p>Ability to recognise and solve problems increases</p> <p>Tendency to “go it alone”. Partnerships reflect a “what can I get out of it attitude”.</p>
Interdependence	<p>Ability to enter into mutually beneficial relationships with others</p> <p>Individual identity retained, but works with others and not in isolation, the emphasis is on mutual benefit and reciprocity.</p> <p>Accepts responsibility for solving problems and for acknowledging weaknesses in operations. Seeks to address these but also seeks external advice.</p>

The implications of the existence of different organisational states for development interventions is that programme developers must tailor programmes to be appropriate to each organisation’s development path (and problems associated with each stage). This requires a thorough evaluation of existing conditions and operations to determine operational needs and weaknesses before any programme is introduced. Changing the ‘developmental state’ of a school district becomes more important when there is a mismatch between the organisational culture of schools which are required to operate in a more independent and interdependent manner associated with greater self-management and the exercise of powers granted to them by the South African Schools Act. In the past, a culture of organisational dependence was encouraged in state departments which were expected to implement regulations determined by the central bureaucracy without questioning or challenging them.

Efforts to improve districts can focus on one or a combination of the following: organisational structures, inputs to the organisation, internal processes governing the management of inputs and outputs. The strategies outlined below include general organisational change approaches and strategies which have been extrapolated from school development/ improvement programmes.

4.1.1 Focussing on primary operations

Efforts should be made to ensure that all operations and internal processes are directed to supporting the delivery of the curriculum and improvement of teaching and learning. This will in turn determine the organisation’s organogram and structure, the type of people appointed to work in the district office and district’s internal systems. The vision, mission, internal structures, communications channels, human resource development programmes and all other activities should be focussed on ensuring the best possible organisational operations in order to support improvement in student learning (and outcomes). Systems and processes should function optimally so that staff members are able to spend a larger proportion of their time attending to

matters relating to teaching and learning. Staff should not be burdened by unnecessary administrative tasks which take them away from their primary focus.

4.1.2 Re-culturing

Organisational re-culturing is a popular strategy used to bring about change which typically involves developing shared norms, ethos, vision and goals. Hatch (1998) writes that “over the past 15 years, ‘shared vision’ and ‘common goals’ have jumped to the top of the charts on organisational change” (1998: 519). The assumptions, values and norms of an organisation are powerful influences on the change process (McAdams, 1997: 141). Schlechty (1990) writes that re-culturing should precede re-structuring initiatives (1990: xvi). Coleman and LaRocque (1991) note that effective districts shared a common vision and ethos which guides all their activities.

Re-culturing can also include the adoption of ‘culture-guided management’ strategies, such as Total Quality Management (TQM) which emphasises continuous improvement and the elimination of error. The staff of the Vermont state department of education underwent training in TQM to change the goal of the department “to one that better fits with its new structure and goals” (Lusi, 1996: 95). Changing organisational culture may require adapting the way in which planning takes place, introducing new work-styles (e.g which promote greater collaboration or focus on productivity) and promoting new approaches to problem solving.

4.1.3 Re-structuring

In order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of organisations it is common to implement restructuring programmes: changing organograms, instituting new structures and divisions and re-organising the way in which human resources are deployed. Several provinces in South Africa have embarked on re-structuring programmes in order to enhance their operational and instructional effectiveness. Organisational restructuring was a very popular strategy for enhancing corporate performance in the 1980s which included breaking large organisations into smaller units, flattening organisational structures and focussing only on core operations.

Restructuring initiatives usually involve efforts to enhance organisational capacity, developing greater organisational flexibility and modifying the way in which it relates to other organisations (Lusi, 1996:15). Organisational infrastructure may need to change and new technology be introduced (Lusi, 1996: 15).

Increasing organisational flexibility often poses difficulties for organisations which have been steeped in a fixed way of operating. Educational districts are professional bureaucracies (Mintzberg, 1979). Lusi (1996) notes that typical bureaucracies are hierarchical, with clear divisions of labour, rules governing employee actions and the movement of information up and down the organisation (Lusi, 1996: 16). Traditional state department of education (SDE) structures do not encourage cross-office initiatives and the work of each office is self-contained (Lusi, 1996:17). Lusi recommends that if departments of education (and school districts) are to engage in complex educational reform, they would need to make the following changes:

- ? The organisation would need to become more innovative (with risk-taking being encouraged and supported). This implies that a more independent or interdependent culture exists;
- ? Organisational hierarchies would need to become flatter and organisational boundaries become more permeable (allowing greater team work between divisions and individuals and enabling greater interaction with other institutions);
- ? The organisation would require a vision and mission driving their activities;
- ? Traditional methods of decision-making and planning would need to change to enable those at the lowest levels to have the power – information, authority and resources – to act on decisions;
- ? The norms of the organisation should promote trust, risk-taking and excellence. The culture of the organisation should be collegial, supportive and reward the taking of initiative and responsibility. (Lusi, 1996: 20)

Restructuring also involves change the way in which employees' work is structured and the division of tasks and responsibilities between different people.

Re-structuring has been discussed in a fairly technical manner, however restructuring can be a traumatic and difficult process for those affected. Tewel (1995) wrote an article entitled "Despair at the central office (restructuring of school districts)". In it he considered the "psychological fallout" of the restructuring process which "paralysed" staff members when they were needed most (1995: 65). The introduction of new roles, reporting lines and job descriptions creates stress for employees as there is increased uncertainty about operating procedures and sometimes a sense of loss of power. Tewel writes that the restructuring process places added burdens on the superintendent (head of district) during the transition period (1995: 67). There is also an awkward period when "the new organisation exists on a chart in name only and is not really functional. While the old organisation no longer exists on paper, however it continues to haunt the minds, habits and performance of staff" (Tewel, 1995: 68).

Tewel concludes with the following suggestions for easing the process of transition:

1. Create an environment conducive to mutual trust and risk-taking
2. Develop a shared mission
3. Empower staff members to use their professional discretion in making decisions
4. Provide opportunities for learning
5. Eliminate barriers to change (both individual and organisational)
6. Be focused and consistent over time

(Tewel, 1995)

There is a danger inherent in large-scale restructuring initiatives – too much time may be devoted to activities related to the restructuring process and insufficient time spent actually doing the work of the district office! A balance must be found between change-related activities and the normal functioning.

4.1.4 Re-staffing

A more radical approach to effecting organisational change is to replace key personnel in the organisation. Literature on organisational change stresses the role of

charismatic leaders in leading and directing the change process (Fullan, 1992). It is sometimes necessary to replace organisational members with people better suited to carry out a task (as was done in the schools in the Chancellor's district in New York).

Re-staffing should be in line with the central vision and goal of the organisation. It is interesting that in the United States of America districts have undergone an overall reduction in the number of staff dealing with instructional and curriculum-related matters. This mirrors the situation in most of our district offices where administrative or support staff outnumber professional staff. If the focus of districts is to support schools and support learning, why does the staffing complement not reflect this? One strategy to improve district performance would be to increase the number of staff dedicated to improving teaching and learning.

Replacing staff members is not an easy option – either from a relational perspective or from a legal perspective. Current South African Labour Legislation and employment agreements concerning Public Servants make it more difficult to remove or reallocate staff.

Replacing or reallocating existing personnel or hiring new staff members may take place as part of the process of organisational restructuring. If the district does not have staff members with skills deemed necessary to effect educational change, then it will be necessary to find individuals with those skills and either second them to the district office (if they are employed in other parts of the education system) or to appoint new staff members.

4.1.5 Review of internal operations

It is very difficult to effect improvement if the organisation's existing strengths and weaknesses are not known. Districts ought to undertake a detailed assessment of the way in which they function and to measure the extent to which they are instructionally effective. It may be necessary to use outside expertise in order to identify weaknesses and operational problems.

The problem with this approach is that an internal review does not always lead to the creation and implementation of improvement activities. There is also a danger that poorly performing districts will tend to transfer blame for poor performance to other parties or lapse into a 'victim mentality' which denies personal or organisational agency and is a serious impediment to self-directed improvement.

In order for an internal review of operations to be useful, it must be conducted in an open and honest manner and should be linked to the district's vision and goals. Internal audits or assessments are one of the primary elements of strategic planning.

4.1.6 Rational planning

The "Changing Futures" project, conducted by the North-West Regional Educational Laboratory in the United States of America, promoted improvement through a process of district strategic planning. This included setting district direction, developing a performance and local profile which includes information on student performance, school and district characteristics and existing improvement activities, establishing

priorities, developing and implementing improvement plans, monitoring the success of these plans and renewing effort (Blum and Kneidek, 1991: 18). Olson, a project director in a district development project, cautions that “strategic planning is essential, but it is not sufficient to cause lasting changes in school districts” (Quoted in Blum and Kneidek, 1991: 17). Improving planning processes (and the implementation of those plans) will become increasingly important as districts move from crisis management to long-term planning.

4.1.7 Human Resource Development

Spillane and Thompson (1997) note that local capacity is pivotal to implementing educational reform (185). District capacity will first be discussed with reference to the capacities needed to implement new policies and reforms, thereafter general HRD capacity building strategies will be considered.

Capacity development

Spillane and Thompson (1997) write that “local capacity consists to a large degree of LEA (local educational authorities) leaders’ ability to learn new ideas from external policy and professional services and to help others within the district learn from these ideas” (1997: 187). District leaders need to assist officials in learning about a reform and make it possible for them to teach others about it. If individuals in the agencies supporting policy implementation do not fully understand the content or implications of a new policy, this can lead to unintended outcomes. This is clearly illustrated with reference to the implementation of Curriculum 2005 in South Africa. During implementation several myths have developed which are reproduced by teachers – these include the fact that it is not necessary to teach reading, that textbooks are irrelevant and that testing should not take place (Minister Asmal’s press release on the announcement of the C2005 Review commission, 2000). These myths may have some tenuous basis in outcomes based education methodology but are distortions of government’s efforts to introduce the new curriculum.

Developing capacity needs to pay attention to the development of human, social and financial capital (Spillane and Thompson, 1997). *Human* capital refers to the willingness and desire of individuals to learn and adopt new ways of doing things. It also entails the knowledge and skills held by individuals in a group or organisation. In a study of the implementation of a new instructional approach to teaching mathematics, Spillane and Thompson noted that district officials needed to have knowledge about particular subjects and needed up-to-date knowledge on teaching and learning (1997: 192). District officials also needed to know how to help others to understand and implement reforms – a process which entailed more than telling teachers what the reforms were about and forcing them to change. The traditional approach to building capacity has been to offer short training courses for staff members in order that they may acquire the necessary skills, but as indicated below “one-shot” courses often have disappointing results.

Social capital refers to the relations among individual in a group or organisation. Developing social capital requires changing the way in which people relate to one another in order to reach goals. Spillane and Thompson write that social capital is a component of district (or LEA) capacity which results from the prevalence of norms such as trustworthiness, trust, collaboration and a sense of obligation. The

development of social capital therefore is closely linked to re-culturing an organisation.

Financial resources are the third component of district capacity. However this term relates to more than just the availability of money, it includes the amount of time allocated for development or reform activities, the staff allocated to carry out particular functions and the availability of material resources. Time – the time to pay attention to developmental activities and carry out a wide range of functions - is an important resource and one which is often most sorely needed in small, under-staffed district offices.

Building capacity through training is a common strategy for enhancing district performance. However, in order for this to be effective the organisation needs a clear, well-thought out training policy which links training programmes to particular needs and to particular job functions. Informal discussions with trainers who offer training courses for district officials report that current training initiatives are often ad-hoc with officials being sent on a myriad of training programmes many of which do not have direct application to their designated role in the organisation.

Work structuring and performance management

Human Resource Development (HRD) extends beyond the provision of training or educational opportunities for employees, it begins before an individual is employed. One of the foundations of HRD is job analysis, which entails developing a *job description* which outlines the tasks and duties of an employee, the employee's functions, powers and tasks (what people are paid to do), hierarchical relations which govern an employee's performance; *job specification* which indicates the skills, and experience needed by an employee and *job design* which refers to how elements and tasks of a job are combined to obtain optimal employee performance and job satisfaction. Once a person has been recruited, s/he must be orientated to the organisation and provided with opportunities to develop skills which will enhance performance. However, it is not possible to direct staff to appropriate training opportunities unless there is some form of performance appraisal which indicates what areas of an employee's performance need attention.

It is no use having extensive capacity building programmes, fancy job descriptions and work structuring if there is no mechanism by which the impact of these policies and programmes can be measured. Capacity building and Human Resource Management aims to ensure better functioning. Performance appraisal systems should be used to measure the effects of capacity building and provide some form of internal pressure to encourage change. Change requires both pressure and support – pressure to change and to actually effect improvement (through systems of sanction and reward) and support which enables employees to develop their skills and improve areas of poor performance. Job descriptions should be linked to performance indicators for employees whose work is reviewed regularly with the aim of improving performance (developmental appraisal) and offering rewards or sanctions for performance.

4.2 The implementation of district development initiatives

One of the problems with reform efforts is that often large amounts of money and effort are poured into projects, however they result in minimal impact because there is no compelling reason to change. In order for district development to be successful it is important to create a demand for change and improvement. The way in which this is done will largely be dependent on the type of district (its organisational culture and developmental state). Creating a demand for change may require that rewards are offered for improved district functioning. In organisations exhibiting signs of dependent cultures, there is often a greater need for external pressure to change. In better functioning districts, it is more likely that there will be greater internal demand for change based on people's internalised professional standards. Creating a demand for change should not simply rely on project-related initiatives but should also be encouraged through systemic measures, such as holding districts accountable for their and their schools' performance and instituting policies which promote and reward organisationally and instructionally effective districts.

Development and maintenance activities must be balanced – development activities should not interfere with or undermine the normal functioning of the district office. It is too easy to use any of the above strategies as an excuse for implementing change and attending to the core business of the district. Those wishing to introduce development initiatives should ensure that they have strategies to ensure that this does not happen.

5. DISTRICT STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING INSTRUCTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFECTING SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

The primary function of school districts is to ensure the quality of learning and teaching taking place in schools under its jurisdiction. It is therefore not surprising that school districts concern themselves with ways in which they can improve the performance of learners and of schools when performance is not up to standard.

School reform has been characterised by two trends which can be labelled as being “outside-in” and “inside-out” approaches (Joyce and Calhoun, 1998; Muller 2000). The “outside-in” approach tries to drive school reform from the policy level and through the introduction of standardised frameworks, curriculum materials, assessment methods and performance standards which have across-school applicability. On the other hand, the “inside-out” proponents argue that the site of school reform is the individual school, that school needs and conditions should determine the nature and form of a reform. Strategies using this approach place great emphasis on internal processes and organic development. Historically these approaches have been juxtaposed, but in the late 1990s they began to converge on a central issue – the importance and centrality of learner achievement to education reform.

What relevance does this have for school districts? In adopting improvement strategies it is possible for districts to adopt either model – directing their efforts to improving individual schools (inside-out). Districts can choose to improve schools by putting in place rigorous accountability standards (outside-in). A possible strategy

which combines these approaches would be to use outside-in measures such as the administration of common examinations in all schools in a district which would enable the district to monitor learner performance and determine which schools were performing below standard. This data could be used to categorise schools into those which were failing, moderately effective and generally effective. Thereafter development strategies appropriate to each school type could be introduced. In Type I³ schools strategies should focus on stabilising the internal functioning of the school, in Type II schools development activities should be directed to improving learner performance through the provision of classroom-based support and training. Policies and programmes should also be put in place to reward and maintain performance in Type III schools.

The implementation of school improvement strategies requires that the district have sufficient capacity to support effective instruction. Massel and Goertz (1999) argue that the following are needed to do this:

1. district organisational capacity
2. quantity and type of people capable of supporting curriculum functions
3. quality of interaction between and among organisational levels
4. material resources
5. organisation and allocation of school and district resources

Internal functioning, the availability of resources and staff capacity all influence the extent to which the district can implement any of the strategies outlined below. There are several possible ways in which the district can support or facilitate school development or reform:

1. By instituting accountability mechanisms for schools (and districts)
2. Identifying and taking good educational practices to scale
3. Initiating development projects or activities
4. Creating supporting conditions for development projects

5.1 Accountability systems

The introduction of systems of accountability can be a means to effecting school improvement. In the 1990s in the United States, systems were introduced in several states to ensure school and district accountability for learner performance which were tied to rewards for good performance, penalties for poor performance and intervention strategies for districts and schools which did not meet performance standards. The introduction of performance-based accountability systems was linked to the creation of a complex set of standards for learners. Elmore et al (1996) write that the introduction of such a system requires that “states much decide whom to hold accountable, for what levels of performance, on the basis of what types of performance indicators and with what consequences” (Elmore, Abelman and Fuhrman, 1996: 69).

The system which was introduced in Mississippi is of interest, as the primary focus of the accountability system is school districts. It is seen as a low-cost model which utilises existing technology (Elmore, 1996: 77). Standardised tests are administered

³ Based on Hopkins et al's (1997) categorisation of school types and suggested improvement strategies.

to learners in grades 4-9 and criterion reference subject tests are administered in high schools. Districts must also fulfil process related requirements which may relate to management procedures and staff development requirements. Based on a complex assessment system⁴, district performance is rated on a five point scale. Districts must attain a score of at least 3 in order to achieve a satisfactory rating. Those districts which score high on the rating scale (4 or 5) are offered limited incentives which include deregulation and exemption from some process requirements. Schools which are rated as 1 or 2 may be subject to sanctions which can include withdrawal of state funding or the introduction of remedial measures to improve performance. However, one state board member commented that “in effect we have a small cluster of carrots at the very top and a small cluster of extremely clumsy sticks at the very bottom” (Elmore et al, 1996: 80). There is a concern that the incentive system ignores schools which fall in the middle of the assessment band. The Mississippi system ranks school districts in relation to one another and not in relation to a fixed standard. The ranking system is determined biannually which means that school districts do not have any external measure against which their performance can be assessed from year to year. Acceptable performance is therefore seen as a relative concept (Elmore et al, 1996: 74).

Schools and districts are not only assessed according to learner achievement. Schools are required to fulfil process requirements which entail the completion of plans and submission of various administrative documents to the central office. While these process requirements of the accountability system are sometimes perceived as a burden by school administrators, however they acknowledge that they ensure adherence to policies and help to eliminate corruption.

Part of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA)⁵ was the introduction of a new accountability system. Elmore et al described it as “one of the most complicated, assessment and accountability systems” (1996: 73). Their system differs from that introduced in Mississippi as schools are the primary locus of accountability. Schools are assessed on the basis of their improvement over a specified period of time. Acceptable performance is determined in relation to an absolute, fixed standard. The goal of the accountability system is that every school and district must be at least proficient in twenty years. Incentives are offered to schools and teachers in the form of cash rewards.

The approaches used in these two states differ in terms of approach and emphasis, although the introduction of performance-based accountability systems appears to have promoted greater awareness of school and district performance and has spurred people on to introduce changes and make improvements. Elmore et al report that level 1 districts have introduced changes in their operations and one interviewee reported that people “rallied to save schools” (1996: 79).

⁴ Elmore et al write that “in order for a school district to be level 3 (satisfactory level), its students must have on average at least 70 percent of the answers correct on criterion-referenced measures and cannot fall below the thirty-second percentile for standardized, norm-reference measures; the district must also pass 100 percent of the process regulations” (1996: 70).

⁵ KERA was an ambitious effort to introduce a systemic reform that stipulated performance standards for learners and ensured that all education policies were complementary

However, the introduction of these systems has not been without problems. In both instances, state intervention in poorly performing schools and districts is falling short of what was expected. Resource constraints have also made it difficult to implement these new systems. Elmore et al (1996) note that reviews of districts have been “on paper” and superficial. Concerns were also expressed about the fact that poorer districts are at a disadvantage with respect to the new ranking system. There is a close correlation between districts with 1 and 2 rankings and the number of children receiving free lunches, the economic base of the district and the amount of money spent per child on instruction.

Other forms of accountability systems include the public ranking of schools and publication of league tables. In the United Kingdom, some researchers advocate that schools be assessed on the basis of the “value added” by schools. Rankings are based on achievement scores controlling for socio-economic background and learners’ prior achievement.

If the lessons learnt in other countries were to be applied in South Africa and a school or district accountability system introduced, the following would be required:

- i. the introduction of standardised tests at multiple levels to assess performance
- ii. sufficient resources and state (provincial and national) capacity to implement the accountability system (e.g. knowledge of the curriculum, assessment measures suited to each grade level to be tested, computerised systems for collating, analysing and monitoring learner performance by learner, class, school and subject over time).
- iii. the development of incentives and sanctions. Accountability systems must have ‘high stakes’ in order to be effective and meaningful.
- iv. Sufficient resources to intervene meaningfully in districts and schools which perform poorly. (e.g. training and development or management systems in Type I schools and Inset provision in Type II schools).

5.2 Taking good educational practice to scale

One of the criticisms of the school improvement movement is that it creates pockets of excellence in schools which are not transferred to the majority of schools in the education system. One of the greatest challenges in educational reform is that of taking the good practices introduced by isolated projects to scale (Elmore, 1996). Districts have a role to play in identifying instances of good practice when they emerge and developing strategies whereby good practice can benefit greater numbers of schools.

5.3 District initiated and conducted school improvement programmes

Districts can either conduct general improvement or capacity building programmes for all schools or can choose to conduct specialised projects for a few schools which experience particular problems. Often district improvement strategies focus on building teacher or school capacity. Massell and Goertz (1997) list the following as being the major foci for capacity building by districts:

- i. building teacher knowledge and skills
- ii. guiding curriculum and instruction
- iii. using data to make decisions concerning improvement goals and the allocation of resources
- iv. empowering schools with skills which they require to manage their affairs
- v. targeting low performing schools and students. (adapted from Massel and Goertz, 1997: 2)

The most common approach used by districts to improve teacher knowledge and skills, is the provision of short courses and workshops conducted by district personnel. However, research has shown that effects of “one-shot” workshops are often short-term and marginal (Massel and Goertz, 1999: 5). Training needs to be supported by follow-up activities and on-going reflection and development. School-based support is a more person-intensive way of offering training opportunities to teachers, but has the benefit of teacher having the opportunity to receive feedback on their classroom practice. In the United States some districts have appointed in-school staff development co-ordinators.

Earlier, in the discussion of the features of effective districts, mention was made of the use of data to drive decision-making. School reform can be promoted by providing schools with accurate information on learner performance and assisting them to interpret this data to identify areas of poor performance. This however, does not automatically lead to the identification and implementation of strategies to remedy the problem.

The empowerment of schools cited above relates to efforts to enable schools to be more autonomous and practice site-based management. Capacity building can take the form of training in specific management skills and in the management of change.

An example of a development project conducted by a school district is afforded by the Schools Make A Difference (SMAD)⁶ project in the United Kingdom conducted by the Fulham and Hammersmith LEA which appointed a project manager and animateur to conduct the project. Money allocated to participating schools for development activities was provided by the LEA. It is only possible for the district to conduct such ambitious projects if it has the human and financial capacity to do so. LEA or district-conducted projects are usually done in conjunction with another organisation or an academic institution. In the Lewisham Schools Improvement Project the Local Education Authority worked in partnership with the London Institute of Education.

⁶ The project design was based on whole school development and the identification of school projects by participating schools. Each school was required to develop a project budget which was reviewed by the project team. In order to access grants, the project expenditure had to be in line with the project’s aims and mission. Each of eight participating school was awarded approximately £ 67 500 for development activities. This project is one of the few school development projects which was evaluated by an external evaluator. Despite the fact that the evaluator felt that the project succeeded in achieving its objectives, it was not possible to quantify the extent of improvement (Myers, 1995).

5.4 Creating supporting conditions for development activities

One of the characteristics of an effective district is that its ethos supports continuous improvement and development. Glickman and Pajak (1989)⁷ report that their studies show that the superintendent and central office are key figures in stimulating and facilitating efforts to improve instruction. The purpose of the district should be to promote, guide and facilitate educational improvement. Schools which are able to do this with little State assistance should feel that the district will support their efforts, while failing schools require far more direct intervention by district personnel. Part of creating a supporting ethos is to ensure that all district activities work in tandem to support educational improvement, for example administrative systems should function effectively in order to free up staff to conduct development work. There should be sufficient staff to work with schools and assist them. American studies show that in effective districts or one where there has been significant improvement in schools, district staff were able to spend a considerable amount of time in schools. Myers and Stoll (1998) write that LEA officials should act as ‘critical friends’ to schools, helping them to reflect on their activities and suggest improvements. The district should stimulate dialogue about instruction-related matters and have mechanisms to provide support to schools on request.

The implementation of school development projects is facilitated when district staff are aware of the importance of these programmes and act in manners which enable them to operate in schools. If programmes require teachers to work longer hours than their contracts stipulate, or if they need to be released from teaching to complete development activities – the district should be able to broker solutions with project managers and ensure that the interests of the teachers and learners are served. Other supporting mechanisms include the institution of reward or incentive systems for teachers or schools which successfully complete an improvement programme.

Many school improvement projects are conducted by non-governmental organisations, higher education institutions, private organisations and groups which promote and implement particular school improvement “packages”. In addition to creating an improvement focus in the district, district officials can offer more direct support to improvement programmes operating in schools. In some American programmes, districts are expected to provide financial assistance to enable schools to affiliate to a project (Comer’s School Development Programme charges a district affiliation fee) or to dedicate personnel to supporting the implementation of the programme (e.g. the appointment of a district co-ordinator for a programme). The effect of district support was noted by Levin (1998) who wrote that one of the factors which promoted programme success was the presence of supportive school districts. District support was reflected in the extent to which district staff understood the programme and were aware of the role of the principal in the project’s implementation and took exposure to the programme into account when determining staff allocations to participating schools (Levin, 1998: 826).

⁷ Glickman and Pajak studied three school districts which demonstrated improvements in student achievement sustained for three consecutive years. The three districts were located in urban and rural Georgia in the United States and ranged in size from five to seventeen schools.

In the absence of resources to offer direct support to these projects, the district can play a facilitating or networking role, making schools aware of existing programmes and facilitating access to them. Low-cost strategies for offering support to externally conducted programmes include ensuring that officials are aware of which programmes are operating in their schools, the focus of different programmes and their relative success. Schools can be made aware of these programmes through normal communication channels or through a special improvement expo where projects can promote their activities.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR DISTRICT DEVELOPMENT AND CONCLUSIONS

1. A single development approach is not appropriate for all districts. Development initiatives and programmes should be appropriate to the needs of districts. This requires that information should be collected on the level of functioning of each district before a development programme is initiated. This may be the ideal point at which to institute a district accountability programme which collects data on district performance. Districts can be classified according to their developmental type (which would require the use of more qualitative data) or their level of functioning (an assessment which would favour the use of quantitative data). Thereafter appropriate improvement strategies can be devised for each type of district.
2. District development initiatives should also follow the logic of the “inside-out” (district by district) and “outside-in” (policy driven, system-wide initiatives). The two approaches should work together to provide a framework for promoting district improvement by ensuring accountability and creating pressure for improved performance. District improvement programmes which work closely with individual districts should offer the support mechanisms to effect improvement – thus providing the supporting mechanisms for change as well as the pressure to effect improvement.
3. An important dimension of an “outside in” approach to district improvement would be to ensure that legislation and policy frameworks clearly stipulate the responsibilities of districts, their decision making powers and relationship to other levels of the educational system. Efforts should be made to ensure policy and programme coherence between different levels of the system and between different divisions / departments within the department of education (e.g. curriculum, teacher development, educational management development etc). Policies and development programmes should be mutually supportive and not conflict with one another. These policies should aim to resolve current disputes and confusions concerning the locus of control for particular functions.
4. In line with the approach that one development strategy is not appropriate for all districts, it may not be appropriate to expect all districts to perform the same functions. Just as the South African Schools Act allocates certain core functions to school governing bodies, but also allows governing bodies to apply for additional functions, perhaps a similar approach should be taken with respect to determining the powers and functions of districts. Those districts which have the capacity to manage more functions should have the opportunity to apply for greater discretion and decision-making powers, while those districts which are

neither instructionally nor operationally effective should only be required to carry out a limited range of functions. Instituting such a system would require that regional divisions and provincial departments of education are able to accurately assess the capacity and current competence of district offices.

5. The way in which districts are structured (staff composition, organogram, geographic area and number of schools served) will be determined by the functions which the district is expected to perform. It therefore makes sense to develop various models for district structure instead of having a single model to be followed by all district offices in the country or in a province.
6. Districts form an intermediate layer of the education system made up of interlocking layers, institutions and stakeholders. District development therefore cannot take place in isolation from the improvement of other parts of the system. District improvement should be linked to the systemic will to allocate management functions and powers to districts and the creation of a supportive policy and management environment.
7. One of the criticisms of school effectiveness research has been that drawing up lists of features or characteristics of effective schools has not been particularly useful in creating effective schools or transforming low performing schools into high performing schools. Relatively little empirical work has taken place to establish the features of an effective school district in South Africa. If research is undertaken to determine the features of effective districts, care should be taken to ensure that resulting benchmarks for district performance should be relevant, realistic and attainable. Performance indicators should be based both on a vision of how system planners would like to see districts performing and on a realistic assessment of current performance. In addition, research on effective districts should be linked to designing intervention strategies for districts which are under-performing.

APPENDIX ONE STRUCTURAL ARRANGEMENT OF DISTRICTS

The following section reviews some of the factors which influence the way in which districts are structured. The general principle which is followed is that form follows function! The basis on which districts are structured should be determined by the function which the district is expected to serve.

One of the factors which contributes to the effectiveness with which an organisation fulfils its function is the way in which it is structured. The term “district structure’ covers notions of internal, organisational structure, the powers which a district can exercise and notions of the physical area and number of schools over which a district has authority.

A brief review of international descriptions of district structural arrangements reveals that each country has adopted a slightly different approach. It should also be noted that there is not a great deal of comparative literature on the internal structure of education systems. Much of the information used in this paper was derived from papers specially commissioned for the Centre for Education Policy and Development – South Africa (Godden and Coombe, 1996). Malcolm (1999) writes that “research and evaluation studies of different structural models [referring to district structures] are not widely available. They tend to be internal education department documents and/ or NGO reports, often without comprehensive evaluation data” (Malcolm, 1999: 35).

One of the motivations for examining the ways in which districts are structured in other parts of the world was to consider whether these arrangements suggested any models which could be adapted for application in South Africa. Malcolm (1999) conducted a literature survey with a similar purpose and came to the conclusion that “international literature cannot provide ‘tested models’ that can be simply imported and implemented. The structure that is appropriate depends on the context, including facilities, resources, infrastructure and overall management capacity” (Malcolm, 1999: 35). Instead, it is useful to consider the historical origins of district-level structures in different parts of the world and to consider factors or issues which can be considered when developing a local framework for structuring districts.

Historical origins of educational districts

It would appear that district structures have different origins in different parts of the world. In some countries district-level administrative units were inherited from colonial powers (e.g. India, Zimbabwe), while in others power was devolved to local structures as part of a process of democratisation (e.g. Chile). In the United Kingdom local control of education is rooted in historical precedent. Borough councils responsible for education were instituted in the 1800s. In the United States the education system is structured in such a way that it frustrates efforts to centralise control (Fuhrman, 1993). Here school districts pre-date the formation of state or federal agencies, having been introduced with an Act of Massachusetts General Court in 1647 (Franklin, 1996: 167). Elmore indicates that the way in which school districts are currently arranged was in response to the need for greater standardisation and co-

ordination which emerged in the early twentieth century (1993: 101). In each of the countries cited above, district-level structures have slightly different functions and powers.

Educational districts in South Africa existed in both homeland and the various racially-defined South African education departments. Following the installation of a democratically elected government in 1994 and dissolution of homeland authorities, the education system was restructured in order to incorporate the different racial departments and homeland structures. Pre-existing district structures were incorporated into the new education system. Since 1994 there has been considerable debate on the form and function of district offices.

Shifting power – from the centre to the periphery ... and back again?

In the past few decades there has been an international trend to devolve the control and management of education from a central authority to state / provincial and regional (sub-state or sub-province) units. The prevailing attitude towards centralisation or decentralisation will influence the way in which districts are structured and the powers allocated to districts.

The decentralisation of management (and sometimes policy functions) has also been accompanied by moves to provide schools with greater autonomy and to grant to them management functions previously held by State bureaucratic organs. The late 1980s and 1990s saw the rise in popularity of “site based management” and what has been termed the “self-managing school” (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988). The rationale for devolving power to district and provincial structures is that it will improve the quality of schools by ensuring that management structures are ‘closer to the action’ and able to be more responsive to local needs and problems. Joyce, Calhoun and Hopkins (1998) write that “in the process of moving toward the individual school as the unit of education and the unit of change, little thought was given to what that movement would mean for the district or for school-district relations” (1998: 214). Districts were again the neglected layer of the system.

In South Africa a similar process of educational decentralisation has taken place. The promulgation of the South African Constitution and South African Schools Act (SASA) (1996) marked a radical departure from previous ways of managing and structuring the education system. Provinces were given the power to make and implement policy concerning schools education, in line with national frameworks. The SASA instituted a devolution of power to schools and school governing bodies. The process of devolution has been entrenched by legislation concerning the funding of public schools and the fact that schools have far greater financial control over their budgets and expenditure than before. Schools have also been given the power to determine a school vision, mission, development plan and policies on various issues including admissions, religious observances and language matters.

The decentralisation of authority to provinces and schools has implications for the way in which districts operate. As in other parts of the world, little consideration was given to the changing role of the district in a more decentralised education system which has led to confusion and uncertainty about the role and authority of the district office. The introduction of a more decentralised system has coincided with a move

from a monopolistic system (where one group held almost absolute power over the education system) to one which is more stakeholder-based and which promotes co-operation and consultation requires that the way in which districts are managed reflects and supports this change from one mode of operation to another.

Despite the introduction of legislation which allows for greater self-management and greater authority over school funds, it is likely that the prevailing situation in schools will change little as they do not have the internal capacity or environmental support to manage these functions adequately. Districts therefore need to understand the extent to which schools are able to translate policies into reality – this requires a detailed knowledge of the functioning of schools within the district's area of operation.

Weiller (1990) notes, somewhat cynically, that decentralisation of power is often in the state's interests as it allows for any conflict to be directed at local structures and not at the central government or central regulatory authority.

Moves to increase participation in education and allow greater local control have coincided with greater public interest in schooling and attention being given to the relative performance of learners on international ranking systems (e.g. the TIMSS studies on Mathematics attainment). In 1980 the famous *Nation at Risk* report was published in America which cited problems related to education as being one of the reasons for the United States losing ground in global economic stakes. In the United Kingdom, the Labour government emphasised that education should ensure economic global competitiveness (Lwin, 1999). The effects of globalisation on education have resulted in "market forces" being applied to education with schools being ranked, parental choice being encouraged in the selection of schools, and schools being required to act in a more entrepreneurial manner, taking risks and excelling in order to attract good students. These pressures have led to schools being increasingly competitive with one another with respect to student enrolment and the type of educational experience offered. Individualism and inter-school competition poses additional challenges for districts which need to ensure adherence to national standards, the implementation of policy, considerations of equity and the provision of quality education to all citizens – particularly to the poor.

Despite the assumed canon that decentralisation is good and centralisation is bad and anti-democratic, there have been moves in both the United Kingdom and United States to reduce local control of education and increase the extent to which central bodies determine curriculum, set standards and monitor the quality of education. In both New York and Chicago the management of the education system has undergone a process of decentralisation and subsequent re-centralisation in the late 1990s. Greater centralisation of functions ensures greater political coherence in the management of education by not allowing local politics to influence, direct or undermine educational reform. It also allows central bodies to set common standards for attainment with specified content and performance standards for all learners (this is the foundation of standards based and systemic reform in the United States which gained popularity in the 1990s) (Fuhrman, 1993; Elmore, 1999). Finally, recentralising powers and removing authority from local groups and schools offers government organs greater powers to intervene in schools which do not meet accountability and performance standards. In the United Kingdom, the powers of the LEA were significantly reduced in the early 1990s. One of the key functions of the

LEA with respect to ensuring educational quality was that of inspecting schools. This function was transferred to a quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation – OFSTED – which operated at a national level.

The extent to which power and responsibility for the quality of educational outcomes is decentralised will have a significant influence on the way in which districts are organised, both in terms of their size and number of schools with which they work and the internal organogram of the district.

Factors which influence district structure

District structure is first determined by the function it must perform, which is in turn influenced by local needs and conditions. A review of international literature reveals that there are a range of strategic and technical factors which influence the way in which districts are structured. Strategic considerations include the power and functions of districts within the education system, the availability of resources and local capacity to fulfil the functions allocated to districts. Technical issues include factors which influence the determination of the geographical boundaries of districts and the number and type of schools which they serve. It is worth considering some of these factors as many districts and provincial departments of education are currently undergoing some form of restructuring and reorganisation.

The will of central authorities to decentralise management functions to districts

The political will of government to devolve power to school districts to manage education within their given geographical area determines what functions are allocated to districts. Unless there is real political will to devolve authority and responsibility to districts, districts will be toothless, administrative bureaucracies, unable to respond to crises which arise and unable to make policy decisions. It is important that there is congruence between the expected functions districts are to perform and the powers allocated to them.

Pretorius⁸ reported that studies conducted in the Eastern Cape, revealed that although there was a professed desire to grant district structures greater power and authority, this did not always translate into action. District structures remained powerless to resolve problems which were regularly referred to more senior bureaucratic structures, which meant that problems took longer to be solved and districts were perceived as unresponsive. If school districts are to be effective, a real commitment is required from central government structures to devolve decision making authority to districts and to support this move by instituting internal policies and procedures which reinforce the devolution of power to districts (e.g. establishing regular, effective communication mechanisms to facilitate the transfer of information from district to provincial structures, putting in place legal mechanisms which enable districts to take action and by allocating clear roles to district offices and delineating areas of operation and responsibility for different tiers of government).

The corollary to the argument in favour of the devolution of power to district levels is the need for there to be sufficient capacity at these levels to exercise this authority.

⁸ Prof Pretorius participated in two studies of the internal efficiency and effectiveness of the Eastern Cape Provincial Government. The reports of both studies are confidential and therefore cannot be quoted directly in this paper.

Availability of resources

A second factor which influences district structure is the availability of resources. The functions and powers allocated to districts will to some extent be influenced by resources available. In Malawi, district offices were created and the number of Primary Education Advisors increased. The main function of district officials was to build the capacity of teachers and school principals in addition to serving a lesser administrative function. The main impediments to this reform were a lack of resources and management capacity (Malcolm, 1999: 33). Advisors often did not have access to vehicles to enable them to visit schools; accommodation, materials and equipment were often inadequate and communications technology did not work. Malcolm notes that “the expenditure on one resource (Primary Education Advisors) was not able to be matched by expenditure in other areas (transport, materials, training, management)” (Malcolm, 1999: 33). He also notes that communications technology is also important if the devolution of authority is to be effective – communication between different levels of the education system and the speedy transfer of data is aided by the presence of computers, faxes, telephones and modems.

Resource utilisation

Allied to the need to have adequate material resources is the need to determine strategies for making the best possible use of these resources – material and human. It is no use appointing skilled people to positions where their skills are not adequately used. In Malawi, district inspectors spend a great deal of time collecting enrolment and attendance data from school. The data are handwritten, collected by hand and analysed by hand (Malcolm, 1999: 34). This is time-consuming and low-level work for people who have the capacity to be engaged in more challenging developmental work. An essential aspect of creating a district structure is to have a sound human resource deployment plan which considers the type of people who are needed to fill particular positions, the tasks which people are expected to undertake and how different posts relate to one another (so that there is not an overlap in functions or any serious gaps in district capacity). A human resource plan should also consider organisational induction processes, internal skills development and employee performance appraisal.

Local capacity

When determining what structure will be most appropriate, system planners should consider whether there are sufficient people available to fill the posts which will be created (Mphahlele – 1999 – reports that in many rural districts posts remain unfilled). The skills capacity of incumbent appointees should also be considered – do they have the necessary technical knowledge and skills to fulfil the function for which they have been appointed? If they do not have the necessary skills, what can be done to remedy this? Superior administrative structures should also consider how they will introduce measures to assess whether district personnel require capacity building programmes and to institute skills development programmes where necessary.

The influence of superior bureaucratic structures on district structures

In Chile the management and administration of schools, curriculum and professional development was devolved to municipalities as part of a democratisation programme. Espinola-Hoffman (1996) notes that some problems were encountered in this process as municipalities reproduced cumbersome bureaucratic procedures associated with central control. The way in which functions are allocated to different divisions is

often mirrored at a local level – if the provincial department of education has human resources, provisioning, curriculum and educational management divisions – it is likely that districts will have similar divisions.

District size

Franklin (1996) writes that in America the general principle is that a district should not be so large that it becomes unresponsive to the needs of learners. Despite this principle, district size varies quite dramatically. In California there are 1000 school districts which serve enrolments of between ten and more than 600 000 students (Franklin, 1996: 166). In contrast, India (a country with the second largest population in the world) there are 496 educational districts. (Singh, 1996:139). These districts are sub-divided into blocks which are smaller administrative units which incorporate village education committees. In this case, the district is further removed from schools than in the United States. Although these structures operate at slightly different levels, the comparison between California and India provides some indication of the variety of structural arrangements covered by the term “district” and the extent of difference between districts within a country or state. Clearly population density and resource availability influence the size of bureaucracy which can be supported by a country.

Relationship with other social services

In India, educational districts are structured in such a way that their boundaries are co-terminous with other social welfare services administered by the State. District education officers (the most senior district official) report to a District Collector who is the head of civil administration in a particular area. In the United Kingdom, the head of the local educational authority (LEA) is one of a number of “heads of service” who report to a Chief Executive. In most areas in England and Wales, educational boundaries are co-terminous with those of other social services, except for health.

The relationship between educational districts and other social services is important as schools and educational districts require the co-operation of other social services (e.g. social welfare, health, sanitation, public works) in order to ensure that schools function effectively. If the district boundaries of these different services are not congruent with one another, then it is quite possible that education officials in a single district will have to negotiate with service providers in several different districts in order to ensure the provision of essential services to schools. This increases the probability that services and programmes will not be co-ordinated and different procedures and protocols may undermine the speedy delivery of services to schools.

Type of schools which are served

In some places districts are structured according to the type of schools which are served. In some urban areas of the United States, homogeneous school districts have been formed which serve only one type of school - elementary or secondary schools. It makes sense to group together similar schools which are likely to experience similar problems (relating to instructional matters, discipline) and which implement the same curriculum and are likely to implement similar improvement programmes (eg. Success for All, Roots and Wings and other school improvement “packages” which have been developed for schools). The potential for inter-school co-operation and assistance is probably greater in homogenous districts. In other areas, and particularly

so in rural areas where there is a far lower density of schools, unified districts exist which serve primary and secondary schools.

Developmental needs of schools

In New York an educational district was created based on the developmental needs of a group of schools. In 1999 a special educational district, termed the “Chancellor’s district”, was formed which incorporated twelve failing schools which were in danger of being closed down and reconstituted. These schools were grouped together in order that they may receive special, intensive developmental attention. In these schools the principals were replaced and if no improvement was noted after a number of months, they were replaced again. The Success for All reading improvement programme was introduced in all schools. The formation of the Chancellor’s district was successful in improving the educational performance of these schools. The district had far reaching powers to intervene in schools and insist on the introduction of particular programmes and change strategies.

Political considerations

It is unlikely that all the above factors will be considered when determining district structure. Many of the practical considerations may be ignored, while political considerations determine the final structure of district-level structures. This is illustrated by the processes followed during the creation of new district structures in the Gauteng Province in 1995, when care was taken to ensure that each district included a range of schools which had previously been administered by different departments. Efforts were made to ensure that district structures were created in such a way that they “broke any existing allegiances with previous departments” (interview with Swarts, GDE). Several years hence, the political objectives influencing district structure have been met and the GDE⁹ has initiated a process of restructuring districts based on enhanced delivery of services to schools and greater congruence with municipal boundaries.

⁹ Gauteng Department of Education

APPENDIX TWO: FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOL DISTRICTS

1. Facilitating or supporting conditions

Murphy and Hallinger found that district effectiveness was promoted when there was labour peace between teacher unions and employers, support from the school board and community acceptance of the district's activities (1988: 176). Creating community support is one of the six key activities identified by Coleman and LaRocque (1991) in developing a positive district ethos.

2 Ethos and focus on instructional issues

Organisational ethos and culture has been the subject of extensive inquiry in effective schools research and has been the focus of a number of school improvement projects. Ethos or culture refers to shared values and beliefs which influence the way in which an organisation operates. Vision, focus, commitment and work ethic are all included in the term ethos.

One of the key factors influencing district effectiveness appears to be the extent to which it prioritises teaching and learning-related issues – the core business of any educational institution or system. Effective districts made the improvement of teaching and learning a top priority and paid attention to issues relating to curriculum and instruction (discussed below). There was also a strong commitment to improving student performance, as evidenced by systematic improvement efforts and district operations which would support this goal.

Dauids (1989) found that goals, vision and attitude played a large part in shaping effectiveness. Effective districts also appeared to be share a vision related to instructional performance – even if it were as simple as “putting children first”. Instructional and curricular goals drove the operations of the entire district, these goals may be set in collaboration with school principals. Rosenholtz (1989) notes that although goal setting took place in both ‘stuck’ and ‘moving’ districts, in ‘stuck’ districts it took place in an unfocussed way while in ‘moving’ districts goals centred on continuous improvement (Fullan, 1992:).

Commitment is a common theme in research on effective districts (Coleman and LaRocque, 1991; Rosenholtz 1989). Rosenholtz (1989) found that in “moving” districts there was a high degree of teacher commitment, while Coleman and LaRocque list “eliciting commitment” as one of the key factors which promote a positive district ethos (1991: 4). They write that commitment requires the internalisation of organisational values and goals and a willingness to contribute efforts to organisational goal development and attainment (1991: 92).

Murphy and Hallinger (1988) note that in the districts which they studied, all viewed problems as issues to be solved and not as obstacles or barriers to action. District superintendents adopted a range of problem solving behaviours – no particular approach or style was dominant.

3 Dominant functions of effective districts

As noted above, effective districts prioritise activities that are related to learner instruction. One of the recurrent features of effective districts was the emphasis

placed on accountability. Districts were accountable for their own performance and instituted self-monitoring mechanisms to assess internal operations. Districts studied by Murphy and Hallinger (1988) were described as having an “internal focus”, with a significant proportion of their time being devoted to examining internal operations. At the same time districts are also accountable for the quality of schools under their authority.

All researchers comment on the role which effective district play in monitoring school performance. Murphy and Hallinger note that districts devoted more time to monitoring technical core activities and inspecting outcomes than was expected, district staff reported that at least 10 % of their time was spent monitoring school sites. School performance ought to be assessed with reference to some general norm or standard, such as the districts instructional goals which may refer to a common standard to be attained or improvement targets. This ensures that all schools are assessed according to a common framework, related to learning outcomes (Coleman and LaRocque, 1991: 34). Typical measures to ensure accountability include classroom observation, on-site support and the public ranking of schools according to learner achievement. Murphy and Hallinger (1988) report that district superintendents were involved in supervising and evaluating school principals. The use of accountability systems as a means to effect school improvement is discussed later in this paper.

Both Coleman (1991) and Murphy (1988) comment on the use of quantitative data in decision making in effective districts. School performance on standardised tests is used as a means to review schools’ performance. It is recommended that district officials discuss the results with school principals and staff and together devise strategies for improving performance. Districts also require accurate data about the schools which they serve, student populations and particular problems experienced in different areas, this means implies that a sound data collection, analysis and review process be in place.

4 Curriculum and instructional focus of districts

Murphy and Hallinger (1988) found that in “instructionally effective districts” the district set curriculum and learning goals which drove their development activities. Within a particular district, there was a high degree of curricular standardisation – schools shared similar curricular, there was a preferred approach to instruction which was clearly evident and there was a common core of key textbooks. This may be less relevant in South Africa where districts and provinces do not have the authority to set curricular standards as happens in the United States. However, of interest is the fact that beginning teachers and teachers new to the district were offered in-service training in the preferred method of instruction.

5 District leadership

One of the characteristics of an effective district was that its offered instructional leadership to the principals and teachers in its schools. The head of the district played an important part in setting the tone for the district through influencing the norms and practices of subordinates, setting vision and devoting the time to key activities. Effective superintendents modelled type of behaviour demanded of schools, whether it related to methods of collaboration with colleagues or standards of accountability (Coleman and LaRocque, 1991: 150). Murphy and Hallinger (1988) also note the

importance of strong instructional leadership by superintendents, particular in matters related to curriculum and instruction, “setting school system goals, selecting district-wide staff development activities and in pressing for district-school goal co-ordination and in supervising and evaluating principals”(1988: 178).

6. Staff relations and human resource development

In all three studies of effective districts, teacher and principal professional development was a common feature. Rosenholtz found that “moving districts specifically cultivate and select principals whose foremost concern is student learning and who are skilled at the instructional leadership necessary for attending to continuous improvement (1989: 185). Principals were also provided with in-service training opportunities and were expected to be continuous learners (Fullan, 1992: 208). Teacher selection was guided by the district’s instructional goals and did not simply rely on local availability – as was done in “stuck” districts. ‘Moving’ and ‘stuck’ districts also differed in the ways in which they dealt with problems relating to staff - stuck districts tended to transfer problem teachers, rather than to address the issue. Moving districts tried to help teachers improved and only considered termination of employment as a last resort. Rosenholtz writes that successful superintendents “seek out and satisfy teachers’ professional needs while stuck superintendents conspicuously ignore them” (1989: 204).

7. Organisational dynamics

Murphy and Hallinger (1988) describe the districts studied as “rational systems” with little evidence of bureaucratic rigidity. Despite the trend towards school-based management and greater school autonomy, they found a high degree of district co-ordination and control over school-level activities (1988: 178). They write that the greatest control was exerted over issues relating to the attainment and inspection of educational outcomes, however schools were granted greater autonomy over the way in which they implemented decisions and decided how to allocate inputs.

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