Levels of Leadership: Effects of District and School Leaders on the Quality of School Programs of Family and Community Involvement

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Abstract

Purpose: This study tests key constructs of sociocultural and organizational learning theories with quantitative methods to better understand the nature and impact of district and school leadership and actions on the quality of programs of family and community involvement. **Research Design:** Survey data from a "nested" sample of 24 districts and 407 schools are used to measure theoretical constructs of district *assistance* to schools and *shared work* on partnership program development. Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) analyses explore the independent and simultaneous contributions of district leadership and school teamwork on the implementation of basic structures and advanced outreach in partnership programs. Also, gap analyses compare supplementary data from 220 schools that had consistent district leadership for 3 years to 106 schools without this support. **Findings:** HLM analyses show that principals' support for family and community involvement and schools'

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reports of district assistance contribute significantly to schools' basic program implementation and to advanced outreach to involve all families in their children's education. Over and above school measures, district leaders' direct facilitation contributes to the quality of the school programs. Gap analyses indicate that schools with consistent district leadership take more basic and advanced actions to establish and improve their partnership programs. **Conclusions:** This study—with a large sample of districts and schools, appropriate quantitative methods, and a content focus on partnerships— provides strong empirical support for the importance of sociocultural and organizational theories in studying school improvement. Implications for improving district and school policy and practice are discussed.

Keywords

The pendulum of opinion swings back and forth on the importance of district leadership for school improvement. Some have labeled district leaders as irrelevant, peripheral, or inadequate managers of school reform, whereas others report that district leaders are essential for improving schools (Cuban, 1984; Desimone, Porter, Birman, Garet, & Yoon, 2002; Fullan, 2007; Leithwood & Prestine, 2002; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008; Smith & O'Day, 1991; Spillane, 1996). The consensus of recent research is that district leaders are responsible for creating a culture of reform with all schools and must not allow one school to improve while others decline (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Coburn, 2003).

This perspective is reflected in federal education policy on parental involvement, which places dual demands on districts and schools nationwide. Section 1118 of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) requires districts to *assist all schools* in developing programs to involve families in ways that support student success (Part a, 2, B). NCLB also continues a long-standing requirement for federal, state, and district reviewers to *monitor schools for compliance* with regulations for receiving Title I funds (e.g., have a parent involvement policy, conduct annual meetings, and provide information to parents on state tests and children's programs and test scores; Cowan, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

The two responsibilities for districts to monitor programs for compliance *and* guide program improvement require different leadership, skills, and time.

Most districts draw on a long history of monitoring programs with checklists to record whether or not school activities are in compliance with legislation. Research is needed, however, on whether and how districts respond to the new and more difficult demands to guide and assist schools in improving the quality of parental involvement programs and to link involvement with student achievement and success in school.

Theoretical Perspectives

This study draws on three theoretical perspectives on leadership development and partnership program development to frame its questions and analyses about district leaders' influence on schools' partnership programs.

Theories of Leadership Development: Sociocultural Learning Theory and Organizational Learning Theory

Social and organizational learning theories include key constructs that may help explain how district leaders' expertise on partnerships and assistance to schools affect the quality of school-based programs of family and community involvement (Honig, 2008; Stein & Coburn, 2008). It is important to learn whether and how district leaders' actions to organize leadership on partnerships, to develop personal relationships with school teams, and to provide direct assistance increase the abilities of school teams to conduct and sustain effective programs of family and community involvement.

Sociocultural learning theory focuses on how social exchanges between and among colleagues affect the organization as a whole. The theory extends tenets about individual learning (Vygotsky, 1978) to explain how groups within organizations can work together to gain knowledge, exchange ideas, and take action to develop a "community of practice" or "culture of collaboration" so that the whole organization works to attain specific organizational goals (Knapp, 2008; Wenger, 1998).

Sociocultural learning theory applied to educational policy emphasizes the importance of interpersonal interactions and *shared work* by district leaders and school colleagues to increase expertise at all levels. One key construct is *assistance* (Honig, 2006, 2008), which also is explained in related terms as "lateral capacity building" (Fullan, 2007) and "loose and tight coupling" (Rorrer et al., 2008). The expectation that districts and schools build knowledge together to improve all parts of the organization is dramatically different from the belief that district leaders should send top-down or command-and-control directives to schools and then check for compliance.

Districts may hire facilitators to assist schools in developing and implementing educational programs. These individuals, sometimes called "boundary spanners," are expected to move between the district and their assigned schools to help educators obtain resources, improve teaching, and improve school programs (see a review of this literature in Honig, 2008). Research revealed that most boundary spanners in education worked at the margins of their districts. They were, typically, unassociated with district leaders, minimally trained, poorly supervised, weakly evaluated, and hired for the short term (Finnigan & O'Day, 2003; Honig, 2006). Researchers concluded that these problems limited the effectiveness of the facilitators and raised questions about how to structure the role of external experts for more significant and long-term results (Louis, 2008).

Most studies explored whether and how boundary spanners' assistance helped schools improve curriculum and instruction (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006) or business partners (Honig, 2003, 2006). The theory should apply, too, to developing effective programs of family and community involvement.

This study draws from sociocultural learning theory to test whether district leaders' assistance to and joint work with schools' teams improved partnership program development. In this study, the district facilitators who guided schools on family and community involvement were, by design, part of the district leadership team. The facilitators gained expertise on partnerships and spoke for the superintendent to encourage principals, teachers, and parents to improve their school-based programs of family and community involvement. We expected that the prior problems with boundary spanners would be solved if facilitators were permanent staff members with strong institutional support for their work in assisting schools to implement programs that fulfilled district policies on parental involvement.

Organizational learning theory asserts that organizations improve when leaders gain expertise, share knowledge, plan actions, conduct evaluations, gather evidence, make sense of data, and identify best practices (Elmore, 2004; Huber, 1991; Senge, 1990; Supovitz, 2006). In learning organizations, district and school leaders work together to align policies and programs and to identify and evaluate the human, fiscal, and physical resources that enable schools to implement policies and improve practice. In applying organizational learning theory in this study, we tested whether and how longitudinal data on district assistance to school teams helped improve school-based partnership programs.

The two leadership development theories are linked (Honig, 2008; Weick, 1995). Both perspectives recognize the importance of building knowledge,

conducting discussions and debates, negotiating final plans and actions, and working together to improve policy and practice. In combination, the theories suggest that district leaders may assist schools and, through shared work, schools may help district leaders work more effectively. If both districts and schools also collect, analyze, interpret, and apply data and other evidence to improve policies and practices, then districts and their schools should become unified learning organizations that work to meet shared goals. The social exchanges and interpersonal interactions that are at the heart of sociocultural learning theory are strengthened by the data, which are at the heart of organizational learning theory.

Honig (2006, 2008) combined and tested the two theories to represent the "nested" nature of schools within districts. Her work with a small number of districts showed that the two theories of leadership development were stronger in combination than alone in changing how district and school leaders worked together to improve curriculum and instruction, and to find and use community resources for student learning.

The present study examined key constructs of the two leadership development theories with data collected from many districts and their schools. Quantitative methods were applied to better understand the effects of simultaneous, coordinated actions and shared work of district and school leaders on the quality of schools' partnership programs. Measures were made of district assistance to schools, joint work in establishing leadership, organizing teamwork, writing plans, implementing practices, and evaluating progress on partnerships to test whether district leaders contribute to the quality of school-based programs that fulfill district policies on partnerships.

Theory of Partnership Program Development: Overlapping Spheres of Influence

There are many aspects of leadership development for effective organizations, so it is necessary to specify the *content* for leadership (Knapp, 2008). In this study, the content of leadership development focuses on district and school programs of school, family, and community partnerships.

The theory of partnership program development—*overlapping spheres of influence*—argues that schools, homes, and communities are the main contexts for children's education and that greater collaboration by the people in these environments benefits children's learning and development (Epstein, 1987, 2011). Goal-linked involvement activities implemented by district and school educators, parents, students, and community members should reduce the distance and dissonance among home, school, and community. More

positive, purposeful activities should increase the quality of school-based partnership programs.

A framework of six types of involvement helps schools, families, and communities to communicate and cooperate in selecting and implementing practices to activate the theory of overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 1995). The six types of involvement are (a) *parenting*—helping all families understand child and adolescent development and sustain caring and supportive home environments across the grades, (b) *communicating*—establishing two-way exchanges about school programs and children's progress, (c) *volunteering*—recruiting and organizing parent help at school, home, or in other locations, (d) *learning at home*—providing information and ideas to families about how to help students with homework and other curriculum-related learning, (e) *decision making*—having parents from all backgrounds serve as advocates for their own children and representatives and leaders on school committees, and (f) *collaborating with the community*—identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs and students' experiences.

The theory of overlapping spheres of influence transforms family involvement from an "external" factor to an essential component of school and classroom organization (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). With this view, district and school leaders must take responsibility for framing policy, setting goals, assisting schools, and evaluating progress on partnership program development. Within schools, an Action Team for Partnerships (ATP)—a committee of the School Improvement Team—provides a firm and official structure for planning, implementing, and evaluating a school-based program of partnerships, using the framework of six types of involvement to engage families and the community in ways that support goals for student learning and development (Epstein et al., 2009).

District and School Partnership Program Development

Prior studies with data collected separately from districts and from schools in the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) explored factors that affected the quality of school-based and district-level partnership programs. Studies of schools found that those with well-functioning ATPs, strong support from principals, and positive ratings for the assistance received from district leaders were more likely than comparable schools to have higher quality programs of family and community involvement (Sanders & Epstein, 2000; Sheldon, 2005, 2008; Van Voorhis & Sheldon, 2004).

Studies of districts found that district leaders who directly facilitated their schools' ATPs were more likely than comparable district leaders to report that their schools were making more progress with family and community involvement programs (Epstein, 2008). Although the separate studies of districts and of schools were informative, they could not determine the actual influences of district leadership on school partnership programs. Schools are nested within districts. Therefore, studies that aim to test the effects of district leadership on school partnership programs need to conceptualize district facilitation and collect and analyze data to reflect this configuration.

Study Plan

The theoretical constructs should be studied with two kinds of data: (a) nested data of schools within districts to represent assistance, shared work, and the transference of expertise from district leaders to school teams (Honig, 2008) and (b) longitudinal data to measure the flow of information designed to improve the quality of schools' partnership programs over time (Elmore, 2004). District leaders and school teams need time to organize, implement, evaluate, and share best practices; discuss challenges and solutions; observe other programs; and improve plans. In developing programs of school, family, and community partnerships, leaders must organize basic program structures and plans that include activities for the six types of involvement to create a welcoming school climate and to engage families and the community with students in reading, math, and other subjects and goals for student success. They also must take advanced actions based on knowledge gained over time to involve more families and improve the quality of school-based programs.

This study builds on and extends the early studies of boundary spanners that were based on small samples of districts and schools (Honig, 2006). It also corrects problems raised in separate studies of schools and districts on partnership program development (Epstein, 2008; Sheldon, 2008). Here, we conduct quantitative analyses of data from a sizable sample of districts and their schools that are working to improve partnership programs, and we use longitudinal data to document change over 3 years. We posed three research questions.

1. How do *school factors* affect the implementation of (a) *basic structures* of school-based programs of family and community involvement and (b) *advanced outreach activities* to involve families who are typically uninvolved or "hard to reach"?

2. How do *district factors* affect the quality of schools' basic program implementation and advanced program outreach?
3. What are the longitudinal effects of district leaders' direct assistance to schools on the development of school-based partnership programs?

The three research questions reflect expectations suggested by the underlying theories. Based on sociocultural learning theory, we expect that critical school factors that encourage interactions and shared work, such as principals' support for partnerships and district leaders' assistance on partnership program development, will affect the quality of school-based partnership programs and the extent of advanced outreach to involve all families in the schools and in their children's education. Based on organizational learning theory, we expect that district leadership on partnerships that emphasizes evaluations, including collecting and making sense of data on the development of programs of family and community involvement, will help schools continually improve their partnership programs.

Survey data were collected in 2006 from districts and their schools in NNPS at Johns Hopkins University. Many sites join NNPS in response to federal, state, and local policies and requirements to conduct effective programs of family and community involvement. Policies, including NCLB,[1] require districts and schools *to* improve parent involvement but do not tell *how* to organize and implement excellent programs and practices.

NNPS fills this gap with professional development training, tools, research-based guidelines, and ongoing assistance to district and school leaders for partnership program development (Epstein et al., 2009). In NNPS, each district must have a leader for partnerships who, as an expert facilitator, serves in the "assistance role" represented in the underlying theories of leadership development. Each school must have an ATP that develops its capacities to write and implement an annual plan for involving families to create a welcoming school climate and to support site-specific goals for student success.

At the end of each year, district leaders and their schools in NNPS are sent an *UPDATE* survey to evaluate their work and progress. NNPS developed reliable scales and measures to assess district and school progress on "essential elements" that affect the quality of partnership programs from one year to the next (Epstein, 2011; Van Voorhis & Sheldon, 2004). *UPDATE* surveys also ask members to report changes in personnel and contact information to NNPS for communications during the next school year. Because *UPDATE* functions as a tool to keep NNPS membership records current, respondents are guaranteed that their information will be kept confidential and that no

names will be used in any reports on the data. The annual surveys are entered with unique code numbers for each site to merge data from schools and districts and to merge data collected over time for longitudinal analyses.

Districts and schools join NNPS with the same goal in mind—to strengthen their partnership programs. This limits selection bias but does not change the fact that district leaders move at different speeds in establishing their offices and assisting their schools with the tools and guidelines they receive from NNPS. School teams take different amounts of time to welcome district leaders, obtain training, and take action to plan and implement their programs. These variations made it possible to study whether and how leaders' actions affect the quality of district and school programs over time.

Sample

Survey data to address Research Questions 1 and 2 were from a sample of 407 schools in 24 school districts in 15 states.[2] District leaders for partnerships and members of school-based ATPs completed the annual evaluation surveys on the nature, progress, and challenges of their partnership programs. All district leaders and 89.6% of their schools' teams responded to the 2006 *UPDATE* surveys used in this study.[3] In 2006, there were enough districts with schools in NNPS to measure the key constructs of sociocultural and organizational learning theory and to conduct analyses of the effects of district leadership on the quality of school-based partnership programs.

Schools in NNPS were located in large urban (32.6%), small urban (22.0%), suburban (29.2%), and rural (16.2%) areas. The majority of schools (76.0%) served elementary students, and the rest were middle and junior high schools (14.6%) or high schools (7.4%). Schools with mixed grade levels (2%) were excluded from the analyses. Most schools (64.3%) received some Title I funds, and within these schools, on average 56.9% of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. On average, 34.2% of students were African American, 45.7% were White, 12.8% were Latino or Hispanic, 5.2% were Asian American, and a small percentage of students were from other backgrounds. Across schools, an average of 8.5 languages other than English were spoken at home by students' families, ranging from only English to more than 100 languages. The schools enrolled an average of 580 students, with school size ranging from fewer than 50 to more than 5,000 students. As a whole, there was important variation in the demographics of the sample, reflecting the diversity in the nation's schools, with proportionately more elementary and fewer high schools and with more African American and fewer White students than schools across the country.

Measures

Dependent Variables

Two measures of the quality of implementation at the school level are the outcomes of interest in this study: basic program implementation and advanced program outreach.

Quality of basic program implementation. This 13-item scale (α = .92) measured whether and how well schools organized the basic components of a partnership program. The items were scored from 1 (*did not do*) to 4 (*did very well*) to reflect low to high implementation. They assessed whether schools established an action team, wrote an action plan, implemented activities for six types of involvement, implemented involvement activities linked to school improvement goals, evaluated the activities that were implemented, and conducted other basic organizational activities. Schools averaged 3.04 on this scale ($SD = 0.64$), indicating that most teams viewed their work on the basics as "OK," with clear variation among the schools in the sample. Some school teams were just starting program development, whereas others were further along in their work on partnerships.

Advanced program outreach. This nine-item scale (α = .86) measured whether and how well a school implemented activities to solve challenges to reach families who are, typically, hard to reach and to improve the implementation of activities for six types of involvement. The items were scored from 1 (*not yet working on this challenge*) to 4 (*solved this challenge*) to reflect low to high attention to specific challenges. The items were averaged to indicate the extent to which schools were working to get information from workshops to families who could not attend, communicating with families who did not speak English at home, involving major demographic groups of families in school decisions, recruiting and training volunteers, and addressing other challenges that often limit family and community involvement. Schools averaged 2.57 on this scale ($SD = 0.60$), indicating that most were making fair to good progress in addressing the various challenges, whereas others were not yet focused on increasing outreach to engage uninvolved families.

Independent Variables

School Variables (Level 1)

Principal support. This nine-item scale (α = .91) measured how strongly the school principal supported the work of the ATP for family and community involvement. The items (scored from 1 to 3 for *no*, *some*, and *a lot of support*) asked whether and how strongly the principal showed support by providing

time for team meetings, encouraging family support for involvement activities, encouraging all teachers to support the work on partnerships, allocating funds for family and community involvement activities, and offering other support for the team and for the program of family and community involvement at the school. The average sum for this scale was 23.9 (SD = 3.84), indicating that most principals supported their ATP's work to some extent but varied in the strength of active support on these items.

School reports of district support. This seven-item scale (α = .86) measured reports by schools' ATPs on the extent of assistance they received from their district leaders for developing school-based partnership programs. The items (scored 0 or 1) asked whether or not school teams received support from their district leaders in workshops on partnerships, funding, recognition, evaluations, ideas for best practices, and in other ways. The average sum on schools' reports of assistance from their districts was 4.91 (SD = 2.07), indicating that most ATPs acknowledged some support but showed considerable variation in schools' experiences with district leaders' assistance.

District Variables (Level 2)

District leadership and facilitation. This eight-item scale (α = .72) measured reports from district leaders on the number of actions they took to organize their offices and to assist schools' ATPs directly in developing their partnership programs. The items were scored 0 or 1 for whether district leaders wrote a leadership plan, identified a budget, facilitated school teams, conducted quarterly cluster meetings for teams to share ideas, reminded schools to replace departing team members, conducted end-of-year celebrations to share best practices and improve next plans, and performed other leadership and assistance actions. The average sum of district leaders actions was 4.71 (SD = 2.16), indicating that most district leaders provided some direct assistance to schools but varied in the number and kinds of actions to guide school teams.

Background measures. All analyses controlled for demographic variables, including grade level of the school (*elementary* = 1, *secondary* = 0) and poverty indicators of Title I status and percentages of students receiving free and reduced-price meals at the school and district levels. In prior studies of partnership program development, the grade level of the school was a significant explanatory variable, whereas the poverty levels of the school and district did not significantly affect the development or quality of partnership programs (Epstein, 2008; Sanders & Simon, 2002; Sheldon, 2008). They are included in this study because they remain variables of interest in studies of parental involvement.

Figure 1 shows the research model that guided this study and the connections of key variables that were tested. The figure shows the demographic variables
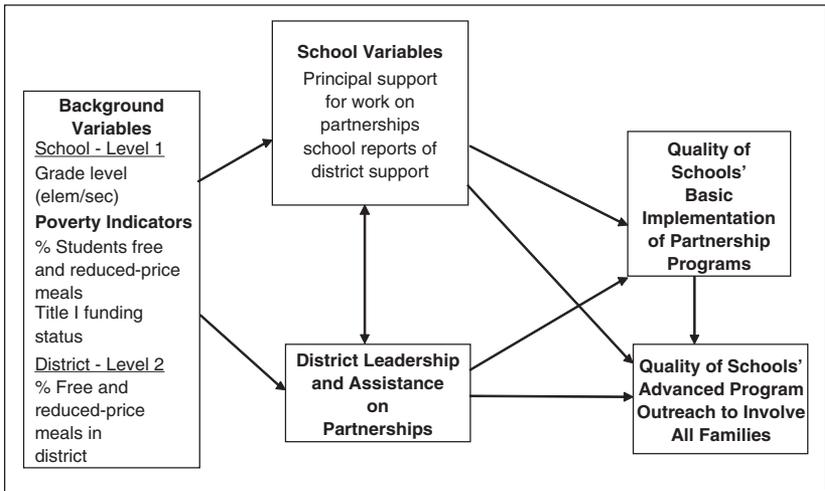
Figure 1. Hierarchical linear modeling model: School and district effects on the quality of implementation and outreach of school-based programs of school, family, and community partnerships

that were controlled in all analyses and the school and district factors were tested for their impact on the quality of schools' basic program implementation and advanced outreach to involve more families.[4]

Method

Using HLM 6, we analyzed two-level models that permitted simultaneous attention to the relationships of key explanatory variables at the district and school levels. HLM accounts for the fact that schools within a district are guided by the same policies and leaders and are likely to be more alike in many ways than schools selected at random. HLM techniques, which adjust for the impact of clustered errors (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002), produce less biased estimates than less rigorous methods for studying school and district effects on the quality of partnership program implementation and outreach. Thus, HLM analyses should yield more accurate estimates of the effects of school (Level 1) and district (Level 2) actions on the quality of school-based partnership programs.

To address the research questions, we analyzed a series of HLM models focused on the two dependent variables—the quality of *basic program*

implementation and the extent of *advanced outreach* to all families. First, we estimated a fully unconditional model with no predictors to identify the within- and between-district variance for each outcome. Then, we analyzed conditional models that tested the relationships of school-level variables and district-level variables with each outcome. The statistical model, including control variables, is represented as follows:

$$\text{Level 1 between-school equation: } Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j} \text{ (School Reports}$$
$$\text{of District Support)} + \beta_{2j} \text{ (Principal Support)} +$$
$$\beta_{3j} \Sigma \text{ (Background Measures)} + e_{ij}$$

$$\text{Level 2 between district equation: } \beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} \text{ (District Leadership}$$
$$\text{and Facilitation)} + \gamma_{02} \text{ (District Poverty/\% Free Lunch)} + \mu_{0j}$$

$$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10}$$

$$\beta_{2j} = \gamma_{20}$$

$$. \; . \; . \; .$$

$$\beta_{5j} = \gamma_{50}$$

Here, Y_{ij} is the average implementation score for school i in district j and β_{1j}, β_{2j}, and β_{3j} represent effects of school-level variables on the selected outcome. Also, γ_{00} represents the average quality of school program implementation across districts; γ_{01} and γ_{02} represent the effects of district-level variables.

In all models, the intercept was defined as random, slopes were fixed, and continuous measures were grand-mean centered so that each Level 1 coefficient represented that average effect across all schools. Significant coefficients for these variables would indicate that school-based actions and experiences affected the quality of basic program implementation or advanced outreach of schools' partnership programs to involve all families. Significant coefficients for the main variable of district leaders' direct assistance to schools would indicate that district leadership had an independent effect on the quality of the basic organization and advanced outreach of schools' partnership programs.

Similar models were run for both dependent variables—basic program implementation and advanced outreach. An additional HLM model was tested to examine influences on schools' advanced outreach efforts to involve all families after accounting for the quality of basic program implementation. This analysis represented the fact that, temporally, plans and actions to develop and

implement a basic program are likely to occur before schools address challenges to reach out to all families.

Results

Initial HLM unconditional analyses were conducted to determine the within- and between-district variance for each outcome of interest. This simple test showed that more than 18% of the variance in basic program implementation and 15% of the variance in advanced outreach to involve all families were between districts. There was, then, enough between-district variance to explore the relationships between district characteristics and the two outcome variables.

Basic Program Implementation

Analyses tested a series of models to identify the effects of key variables on the two outcome measures. First, the background variables of school grade level and poverty level of students explained about 5% of the within-district variance in the quality of basic program implementation (not shown). Table 1 shows the results of HLM analyses of school-level (Model 1) and district-level (Model 2) factors on the quality of schools' basic program implementation, controlling for the background variables. The table reports unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

In Model 1, with background variables controlled, the two school-level variables explained an additional 25% of the within-district variance on basic program implementation for a total of 30% of variance explained. These results suggest that principals' support for partnerships and the schools' ratings of the helpfulness of district assistance are more important than the demographics of the school for explaining differences in the quality of the basic implementation of school-based partnership programs.

Model 1 indicates that elementary schools reported higher quality implementations of basic partnership program components than did secondary schools ($\beta = .19$, $p < .001$). With grade level accounted for, schools had stronger program implementations if their ATPs reported stronger support from their principals ($\beta = .07$, $p < .001$) and more assistance from their district leaders ($\beta = .05$, $p < .001$) for their work on partnerships.

Separate analyses of each of the two school-level independent variables in Table 1 indicated that principal support for partnerships explained an additional 21% and school reports of the helpfulness of district explained an

Table 1. School and District Effects on the Quality of Schools' Basic Partnership Program Implementation

	Model 1		Model 2	
School variables (Level 1)				
Intercept	2.99	(0.08)	3.01	0.07
School reports of district support	0.05	(0.01)***	0.04	(0.01)***
Principal support	0.07	(0.01)***	0.07	(0.01)***
District variables (Level 2)				
Quality of leadership and facilitation			0.03	(0.01)***
Background variables				
School: Grade level (elementary or secondary)	0.19	(0.04)***	0.19	(0.04)***
School: Title I funding status	0.10	(0.07)	0.09	(0.07)
School: % free or reduced-price meals	−0.003	(0.001)**	−0.00	(0.00)
District: % free or reduced-price meals			−0.00	(0.00)
Variance component				
Within-district variance	0.255		0.244	
Between-district variance	0.016		0.014	
R^2 Level 1 (%)	29.77		30.00	
R^2 Level 2 (%)	79.81		83.00	

Note: Unstandardized hierarchical linear modeling regression coefficients are reported. Standard errors are in parentheses.
**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

additional 10% of the within-district variance, after accounting for background variables (not shown). Although both measures are important, principal's leadership for partnerships is a stronger explanatory variable for the implementation of schools' basic programs implementation.

Model 2 in Table 1 added the district-level variable. Schools had higher quality basic program implementation if their district leaders reported more organized leadership and more direct assistance to schools' partnership teams ($\beta = .03$, $p < .01$). The measure of district leadership and facilitation explained

an additional 3% of the between-district variance, after accounting for background and school-level variables. By including school and district reports and characteristics, Model 2 explained 30% of the within-district variance and 83% of the between-district variance in the quality of basic program implementation identified in the unconditional model.

Advanced Program Implementation

Table 2 reports the results of HLM analyses of school and district influences on schools' advanced outreach to involve all families. Background variables alone explained about 1% of the within-district variance (not shown). Model 1 indicates that, regardless of grade level or poverty rates, schools implemented more advanced outreach actions if their ATPs reported stronger principal support ($\beta = .05$, $p < .001$) and more positive assistance from their district leaders ($\beta = .06$, $p < .01$) for their work on partnerships. The school-level variables added 24% to the explained within-district variance over background variables alone.

Separate analyses of each school-level independent variable indicated that, more than background variables, principals' support for partnerships and schools' reports of the helpfulness of district assistance explained 17% and 12% of the within-district variance, respectively, in schools' advanced outreach to involve all families (not shown). This shows that both school-level measures are important, but principals' support for partnerships has stronger explanatory power for schools' advanced implementation activities.

Model 2 in Table 2 adds the district-level variable and shows that schools conducted more advanced outreach if their district leaders reported that they did more to directly assist their schools on partnership program development ($\beta = .04$, $p < .001$). Model 2 explained an additional 12% of the between-district variance, after accounting for the background and school-level variables, for a total of 62% of the between-district variance in schools' outreach to involve all families that was identified in the unconditional model.

Model 3 extends the two-level model by including the quality of the schools' basic program implementation as an additional explanatory variable at the school level to better understand whether and when schools addressed advanced challenges to involve all families. The quality of basic program implementation serves as a proxy for a longitudinal measure of partnership program development by representing the order in which most schools work on partnerships—starting with the basics before moving on to more difficult challenges.

Model 3 indicates that, over and above the positive effects of principals' support and district leaders' assistance, schools that implemented more basic

Table 2. School and District Effects on Schools' Advanced Outreach to Involve All Families

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
School variables						
Intercept	2.54	(0.06)	2.56	(0.06)	2.57	(0.06)
School reports of district support	0.06	(0.02)***	0.06	(0.02)***	0.04	(0.01)**
Principal support	0.05	(0.01)***	0.05	(0.01)***	0.03	(0.01)**
Basic program implementation					0.40	(0.01)***
District variables						
Quality of leadership and facilitation			0.04	(0.01)***	0.03	(0.01)**
Background variables						
School: Grade level (elementary or secondary)	0.08	(0.06)	0.10	(0.06)	0.01	(0.01)
School: Title I funding status	0.07	(0.06)	0.06	(0.06)	0.01	(0.01)
School: % free or reduced-price meals	−0.004	(0.001)**	−0.003	(0.001)*	−0.00	(0.00)
District: % free or reduced-price meals			−0.00	(0.00)	−0.00	(0.00)
Variance component						
Within-district variance	0.232		0.233		0.194	
Between-district variance	0.027		0.021		0.028	
R^2 Level 1 (%)	25.27		25.07		37.57	
R^2 Level 2 (%)	50.38		62.42		50.60	

Note: Unstandardized hierarchical linear modeling regression coefficients are reported. Standard errors are in parentheses.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

partnership program components were significantly more likely to address advanced challenges to involve all families by improving the quality of activities for the six types of involvement ($\beta = .40$, $p < .001$). Model 3 increased the percentage of within-district variance by 12.6%, from 25.0% to 37.6%. District leadership and facilitation remained an important influence on schools' advanced outreach efforts ($\beta = .03$, $p < .05$), even after the quality of schools' basic implementation of program components was included in the equation.

It is important to note that the school-level measures of principals' support and teams' ratings of district assistance remained significant predictors of advanced outreach, even after accounting for the quality of schools' implementation of basic program structures. This suggests that these factors are of ongoing importance for improving and maintaining schools' partnership programs over time.

In these analyses, grade level did not influence schools' advanced outreach to involve all families. After accounting for principals' support and district leaders' assistance, elementary, middle, and high schools worked on challenges to involve all families at about the same pace. Tables 1 and 2 also indicate that school and district poverty levels measured by the percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price meals and the presence or lack of Title I funding had no consistent effects on the quality of basic program implementation or advanced outreach.

Supplementary Data Analyses: Long-Term Effects of District Leadership on School Programs

The HLM analyses were supplemented with analyses of *UPDATE* data collected from schools in NNPS from 2005 to 2007. These data addressed the third research question and shed light on the coefficients in the HLM analyses by providing details on specific actions taken for partnership program development when consistent work was conducted by school teams and district leaders over 3 years.

The supplementary data were from a reference group of 220 schools in 28 districts that had worked with NNPS for at least 3 years and that provided *UPDATE* data in 2005, 2006, and 2007. Data also were from a comparison group of 106 schools that provided 3 years of school-level data to NNPS but that did not receive consistent district support guided by NNPS during that period. The comparison schools were in districts that were not members of NNPS or that worked on partnerships for 1 or 2 years.

In these data, school teams reported whether they conducted specific practices to establish a basic partnership program (i.e., wrote an action plan, identified a budget for partnerships, and implemented activities for the six types of involvement). They also reported examples of advanced outreach to involve more or all parents (i.e., communicating with all families in various languages, preparing teachers to help families become involved with homework, and sharing best practices at the end of the school year). Finally, the teams reported their experiences over 3 years in obtaining support from district leaders on partnerships (i.e., district leaders met with their principals about partnership
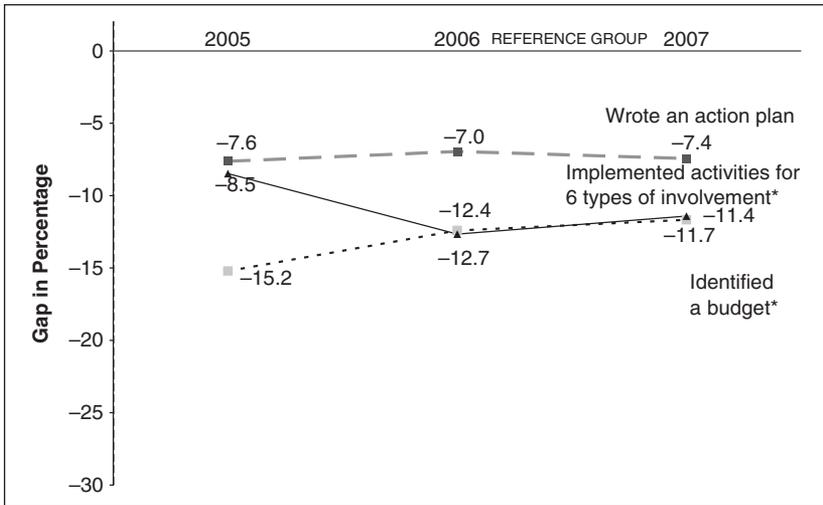
Figure 2. Gaps in basic actions for partnership program development in schools with and without consistent district attention
Gaps for 2007: *$p < .05$.

program development, provided funds for partnerships, and offered other technical assistance, including training workshops on partnerships).

Gap analyses were conducted to identify differences between the two groups of schools on the kinds of activities they conducted and the assistance they received. In gap analyses, the reference groups' scores on actions taken were averaged and set at zero. Figure 2 shows that, compared to the reference group of schools with district assistance for 3 consecutive years, lower percentages of comparison schools conducted basic partnership program implementation activities. For example, the graph shows that, in 2007, district-supported schools were more likely to write a One-Year Action Plan for Partnerships and significantly more likely than comparison schools to identify a budget for partnership practices and implement activities for the six types of involvement. In 2007, from 7% to 12% more reference group than comparison schools conducted these basic steps in program development.

Figure 3 reports the gaps between the reference group and comparison schools on some advanced outreach activities. The gap widened or remained large between the two groups of schools on whether teachers communicated with families about their children's homework and on whether schools
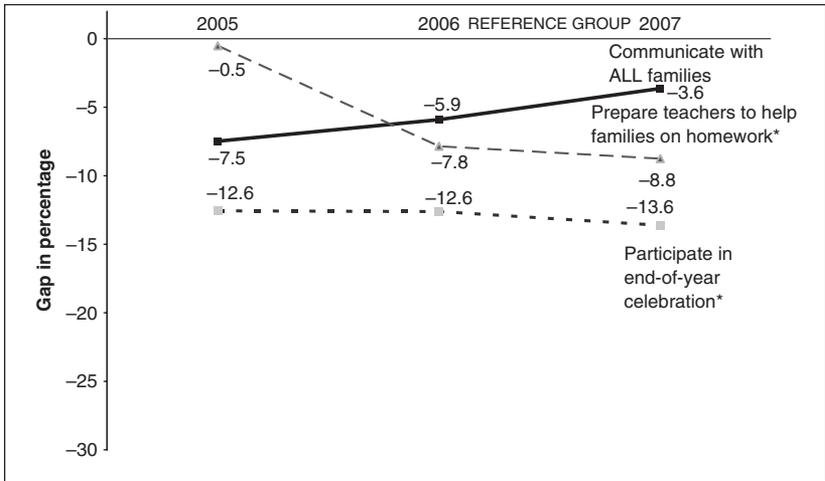
Figure 3. Gaps in advanced actions to meet challenges in schools with and without consistent district attention
Gaps for 2007: *p < .05.

participated in end-of-year celebrations to share best practices with other schools. The former action requires teachers to use new approaches to inform and involve families with children on homework. Without district leaders who gathered and shared new information, comparison schools' communications with parents about homework weakened, whereas district-supported schools' outreach on homework increased. Similarly, end-of-year celebrations are typically organized by district leaders who have responsibility for convening groups of schools. Without district leadership, school teams were limited in sharing best practices with other schools.

In contrast to these outreach activities, schools without consistent district leadership closed the gap in working to communicate with all families. The requirement for all schools in NCLB ("ensure that information . . . is sent to parents . . . in a language that parents can understand"; Section 1118, e, 5) may have influenced all schools in this sample to connect with diverse families, whether district leaders worked with the schools or not.

Figure 4 serves as a reality check for Figures 2 and 3 with items that refer to school teams' reports about specific ways that district leaders assisted their work on partnerships. About 25% more reference group than comparison schools reported that their district leaders provided technical assistance
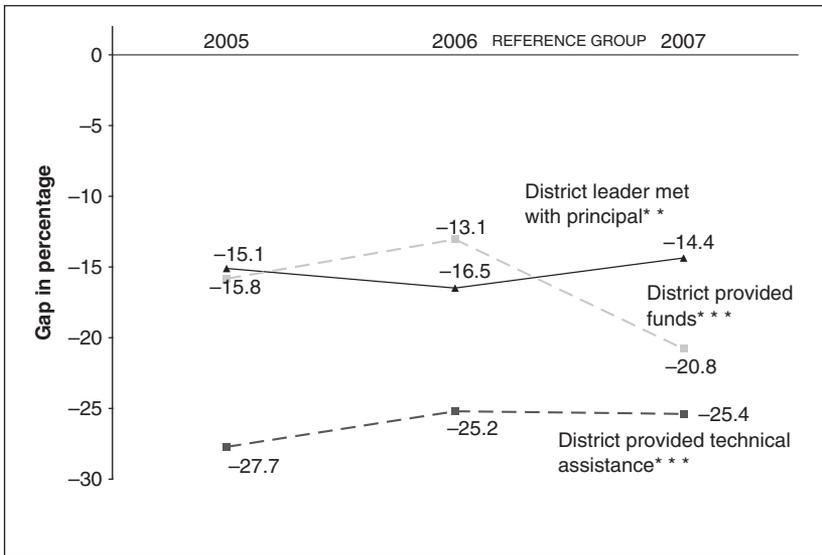
Figure 4. Gaps in reported assistance from district leaders by schools with and without consistent district attention
Gaps for 2007: **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

on partnerships. Specifically, district leaders in NNPS for 3 years were significantly more likely than other district leaders to provide schools with funds for partnership programs and conduct meeting with principals to increase school-based support for the ATP. Figure 4 shows the largest gaps between reference and comparison schools were on actions to create a "culture of partnerships" with all schools in the district.

Taken together, Figures 2 to 4 show that when district leaders provided support on partnerships for at least 3 years, schools' ATPs were more likely to implement more basic and advanced activities to involve families and communities than did schools without consistent district-level attention. It should be noted that all schools in NNPS—even those that joined without their districts—received handbooks, tools to plan and evaluate their work, and monthly communications with information and guidelines from NNPS. Thus, with or without their district leaders' assistance, all schools were expected to plan their work, implement basic structures, improve outreach, and continually improve the quality of their partnership programs. The data indicate,

however, that schools *with* district leaders who assisted them over 3 years were significantly more likely to complete program development tasks than schools without consistent district leadership on partnerships. These graphic patterns help explain the results of the HLM analyses in Tables 1 and 2 with examples of specific activities that school teams and district leaders conducted to develop and improve school-based partnership programs.

Summary and Discussion

This study tested key concepts of theories of leadership and program development for school improvement by exploring the impact of school-level actions and district-level assistance on the nature and quality of school-based programs of family and community involvement. Prior research on partnership program development analyzed data collected separately from schools and from districts. The previous studies showed that schools acknowledged the importance of district support (Sheldon, 2008), and district leaders who conducted more facilitative actions reported that their schools were making better progress in program implementation (Epstein, 2008). Such data, however, cannot tell if district leaders' assistance directly affected the quality of school-based partnership programs.

The innovative combination of sociocultural and organizational learning theories suggested that the connections of district and school leaders should be understood as a multilevel learning system (Honig, 2008; Knapp, 2008). Prior tests of the combined theories used observational and interview data with a few districts and schools to explain how shared leadership and shared work led to improvements in teaching and learning. This study aimed to extend the initial studies by using appropriate quantitative data and multilevel methods of analyses to test the usefulness of the combined theories for explaining district and school work on another school improvement component—programs of family and community involvement.

HLM analyses identified simultaneous, significant, and independent school-level and district-level influences on schools' implementation of basic structures of a partnership program (e.g., form a team, write a plan) and on advanced actions to meet challenges to involve all families (e.g., share best practices, connect with parents on homework). At the school level, principals' support and schools' acknowledgments of district assistance on partnerships contributed to both outcomes of interest. At the district level, the extent of district leaders' direct facilitation of schools' ATPs contributed to the quality of schools' programs, over and above the influence of school-level measures.

The best-specified HLM model revealed that schools with stronger basic program implementations were significantly more likely to address advanced challenges to reach all families and to improve practices for six types of involvement. These results supported the likely temporal order of actions and influence—that is, strong basic program implementations are likely to precede and contribute to advanced outreach to involve all families. The results also informed the work of district leaders by suggesting that if they assisted schools to complete basic steps in program development, their schools would be ready to move forward in meeting challenges to involve more (or all) families.

This study also confirmed the basic assumptions of organizational learning theory that the flow of information and the use of evaluative data by district and school leaders should lead to program improvements. All parts of an organization are expected to "get smarter" if they use data as the basis for discussions, debates, decision, and next steps.

In this study, gap analyses showed graphically that schools in districts that provided assistance on partnerships and conducted evaluations of progress for at least 3 years conducted more basic and advanced partnership activities than did schools in districts that did not give consistent attention to partnership program development. Schools that were supported over time by their districts were more likely to write plans for family and community involvement, identify a budget, and implement activities for the six types of involvement for basic partnership program implementation. They also were more likely to recognize and report that their district leaders provided funding, technical assistance, and opportunities to share best practices with other schools. The patterns of results provided evidence of what Honig (2008) called a "developmental trajectory" in school improvement. Here, consistent assistance from districts and persistent work by school teams produced more specific activities for family and community involvement over time.

The results suggest how the theoretical constructs of shared leadership, shared work, and the use of evaluative data might promote partnership program improvements through active teamwork, principals' support, and attention to equity issues.

Active teamwork. This study extended the concept of *teamwork* in shared work. In the early studies of sociocultural and organizational learning theories, shared work pertained mainly to the work that district leaders and school principals did together to improve teaching and learning. Here, shared work refers to the interactions of district leaders with school teams of principals, teachers, parents, and others—all working to improve schools' programs of family and community involvement. When school teams rated district assistance as

more helpful and when schools were assisted by district leaders consistently for 3 years, the school teams did more to organize their partnership programs and conducted more advanced activities to involve all parents in their children's education.

Schools' ratings of the helpfulness of their district leaders' assistance reflect their *receptivity* to district assistance (Honig, 2008) and their readiness to conduct shared work with district leaders on partnerships. Valued district assistance and time to work together should increase team members' interactions and discussions of goals, challenges, and accomplishments and should lead to program improvements, as evidenced in this study.

Principals' support. Sociocultural learning theory assumes that as district and school leaders work together toward a shared goal, their interactions and exchanges will reveal each partner's knowledge and skills. New and useful ideas, then, will be applied to and improve program plans and practices (Honig, 2008; Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2009; Knapp, 2008; Portin et al., 2009). This study suggests that these paths of influence were at work to improve partnership programs. For example, from the measure of principal support, we learn that active principals encouraged the school team to meet regularly, write plans, and evaluate their efforts and encouraged other teachers and all families to participate in the planned involvement activities.

Principals' active support for family and community involvement remained a significant predictor of the quality of school-based partnership programs, even after district leadership was taken into account. The results suggest that district leaders' assistance on partnerships supported, but did not usurp, principals' leadership of their schools.

More equitable partnership programs. It is important to note that school and district poverty levels measured by the percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price meals did not predict the quality of basic partnership program implementation or advanced outreach to involve all parents. These findings confirm prior studies and fieldwork that showed that leadership and actions on partnerships were more important than demographics in affecting whether and which districts and schools developed and improved programs of family and community involvement (Epstein, 2008; Sanders, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Sheldon, 2005, 2007, 2008).

These results are important because districts and schools nationwide are becoming more diverse economically, racially, culturally, and linguistically (Fortuny & Hernandez, 2010), and educators are struggling to communicate with all families. Schools in this study served highly diverse populations of students and families, and most were in high-poverty communities. Yet they

were able to establish basic program structures and increase outreach to all families *if* their districts provided direct assistance on partnerships, *if* their principals supported family and community involvement, and *if* school teams rated district assistance as helpful at the school level. These interactions and exchanges take time, however, but it appears that—in time—district and school leaders learn new skills and gather ideas from each other and turn that information into actions to improve their school programs.[5]

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Studies

Although this study produced new knowledge on patterns of leadership for partnership program development, there were limitations to the data and analyses that should be addressed in future research. Even with a larger sample than in prior studies, the number of districts with schools in this study was limited. This restricted HLM models to a few key variables. Specifically, school-level analyses included only two key variables, and district leadership and facilitation were represented as a single factor of correlated measures that, in fact, differ in application. That is, *leadership* on partnerships refers to the organization of the district leader's office and responsibilities and *facilitation* refers to the district leader's attention to and interactions with individual school teams. Future studies with larger samples of districts and schools will be able to separate these two factors of leadership and facilitation for even more informative multilevel analyses of the impact of district leaders' actions on school programs.

The HLM analyses also were limited because the data from districts and schools were cross-sectional. We used a proxy for schools' starting points by accounting for the quality of basic program implementation, which typically precedes actions of advanced outreach to involve all families. In addition, supplementary longitudinal data collected separately from districts and schools were used to examine the influence of actions taken over time for improving partnership programs. The results of these analyses were provocative. Future studies with a larger sample of districts and their schools will need longitudinal data to test more complex, better specified multilevel models and to confirm or resolve the temporal order of actions in program development and the long-term impact of district leadership and school teamwork on program quality.

This study was, by design, limited to analyses of survey data, which, like all research methods, has strengths and weaknesses. Here, data from multiple reporters in districts and their schools permitted the multilevel quantitative analyses needed to extend prior qualitative studies of the usefulness of sociocultural and organizational theories for explaining district and school efforts

in school improvement. Nevertheless, the self-reported survey data would be more credible if confirmed by site visits with independent observations of district leaders' work, by school teams' meetings, and by in-depth individual or focus group interviews with purposeful samples of district leaders, school principals, teachers, and parents to confirm, refute, or call into question the survey results. Such studies could, for example, explore how district leaders' assistance and principals' support for partnership affected the attitudes and resulting actions of educators and parents. See Sanders (2008a, 2008b) for supporting qualitative studies of how a subsample of districts in this study worked with their schools to use data to improve their partnership programs and to include parent liaisons on school teams for more effective outreach to parents.

This study focused on how district and school factors affected the development of schools' programs to involve families and the community. More complex data sets will be needed to examine the impact of these programs on parents' responses and interactions with students and on student learning and success in school. Studies of the results of partnerships on student outcomes require longitudinal measures of student attitudes and achievements at the school level that can be linked to valid measures of the quality of schools' basic program implementation, schools' advanced outreach, and parents' participation. Such data could support three-level HLM analyses of the impact of programs on student outcomes with schools nested in districts and students nested in schools.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study supports the conclusions of other recent studies that district leadership is a vital resource for schools to improve teaching and learning (Honig et al., 2009; Portin et al., 2009). Here, results indicate that district leadership is a persistent and significant variable for helping schools implement basic structures of partnership programs and increasing outreach to involve all families in children's education. The findings suggest several policy-related actions that all districts and schools can take to increase the quality of leadership for developing effective programs and practices of family and community involvement.

1. Designate a district leader for partnerships to assist all schools in fulfilling the district policy for partnerships and in continually improving their programs of family and community involvement. Most districts and most schools have policies and mission statements on family and community involvement, but not all districts have designated leaders for partnerships to assist every school to enact the district policy. This study confirmed that district leaders for partnerships

played important roles in whether and how well schools developed site-based partnership programs. A designated leader who becomes expert in understanding and managing partnership programs sends a clear message that family and community involvement is an official district policy that must be enacted in every school. Schools assisted by effective leaders implemented stronger basic partnership programs and addressed more advanced challenges than schools that worked alone.

Early studies found that "boundary spanners" held marginal positions in districts and lacked support from the superintendent and colleagues that might have strengthened their legitimacy in assisting schools (Honig, 2006). This study focused on district facilitators who had official collegial support and who were required to collect and use data to evaluate their own and their schools' progress on partnerships each year. These leaders for partnerships made significant contributions to the quality of their schools' programs of family and community involvement, even after the schools' progress in establishing the basic program structures were accounted for.

2. Strengthen district leaders' skills in facilitating schools on partnerships. Professional development and experience matter. Although all districts joined NNPS to improve their partnership programs, leaders for partnerships varied in how much and how well they assisted schools in developing knowledge, skills, and programs of family and community involvement. This variation permitted the HLM and supplementary data analyses of the impact of district leadership on the quality of school programs. The district leaders' expertise also may have affected whether school teams welcomed assistance and saw the value of the district leaders' guidance.

The study showed that district and school leaders who worked on partnerships for at least 3 years increased the number, kind, and quality of specific actions to organize programs of family and community involvement. Targeted professional development in NNPS for district leaders may have helped them improve their knowledge and skills. The data from school teams showed that when they received assistance from their districts for at least 3 years, they not only recognized and reported the district leaders' work but also conducted more activities to organize their programs and to reach out to involve more families in their children's education.

3. Strengthen principals' support for partnerships. HLM analyses showed that, at the school level, principals' support for partnerships consistently, significantly, and positively influenced schools' basic program implementation and advanced outreach to involve more parents. School teams' reports confirmed that district leaders who provided consistent support were more likely to meet

with their principals to strengthen support for the teams' work and for the school's partnership program. It seems that when district leaders for partnership gain expertise on partnerships and, in effect, speak for the superintendent about the importance of family and community involvement, more principals support their ATPs and work with others to strengthen and sustain activities that engage all families in their children's education (Sanders & Sheldon, 2009).

4. Extend concepts of distributed or shared leadership. This study helped to open the "black box" of shared leadership—also called distributed, democratic, collaborative, participatory, and transformational leadership (Leithwood, Mascall, & Strauss, 2009; Mayrowitz, 2008). The key constructs of socio-cultural and organization learning theories explored in this study—*assistance*, *shared work*, and *ongoing program evaluations*—illustrated how leadership may be shared across district and school levels to help improve partnership programs.

Most studies and discussions of shared or distributed leadership have been descriptive (Spillane & Diamond, 2007) or focused on how principals shared responsibilities with teachers for improving curriculum and instruction (Heck & Hallinger, 2009). This study provided initial empirical evidence that district leaders and school teams of teachers, principals, parents, and others contributed, simultaneously, to the implementation of basic and advanced structures and actions for developing school-based programs of family and community involvement.

5. Facilitating partnership program development is not the same as monitoring schools for compliance with federal funding requirements. In this study, direct assistance by district leaders for partnerships helped school teams organize and conduct their own partnership programs and practices. This kind of capacity building contrasts sharply with typical monitoring of school programs. Traditionally, district monitors checked whether or not schools conducted a list of required practices. The monitors may or may not have had the knowledge, tools, and strategies needed to guide schools to improve their programs over time. By contrast, district facilitators are expected to have and gain content knowledge, access to tools and materials, and other expertise on how to help schools improve the organization of their partnership programs and outreach to families. The study suggests that district leaders no longer should monitor schools only for compliance with NCLB requirements for federal funds for parental involvement but also must take the challenge outlined in NCLB and in state and district policies to guide and assist schools to improve the quality of their partnership programs.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. No Child Left Behind (2002), Section 1118 on Parental Involvement, refers to the district's (local education agency [LEA]) written policy and describes how the LEA must "(B) provide the coordination, *technical assistance, and other support* necessary *to assist participating schools* in planning and implementing effective parent involvement activities to improve student academic achievement and school performance" (italics added).
2. The U.S. districts and schools in the sample were located in 15 states: California, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Utah, Virginia, and Washington. The districts, located in urban, suburban, and rural communities, included from 6 to 45 schools that were members of the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) in 2006.
3. Districts with at least six schools that were members of NNPS in 2006 responded to the district *UPDATE* survey on the nature and extent of their leadership on partnerships and facilitation of schools. About 47 (10.4%) of 453 schools were nonrespondents, including 2 schools that closed or merged. In some schools, principals changed, team leaders moved, or schools faced other challenges. In 2006, schools that returned *UPDATE* had renewal fees waived in return for the data they provided. Schools that did not evaluate their programs either paid a $200 renewal fee to continue membership or were dropped from the network. Evaluating progress is one essential element of program development and indicates that a school team wants to continue working on and improving their program in the next school year. District leaders are asked to remind and assist their schools to complete their program evaluations each year. As in all aspects of leadership, some are more effective than others.
4. Few cases had missing data. A total of 28 schools (6.9% of the sample) were missing the measure of poverty (percentage free or reduced-price lunch). We imputed the average for the sample for these cases. Also, 4 schools (0.98%) were missing the Title I status and 11 schools (2.7%) were missing their school level (elementary or secondary). We imputed the mode of the sample for these cases. We also

included a dummy variable in each case to test whether schools with data differed from those with missing data. They did not.

5. See evidence of how these processes work in economically advantaged and disadvantaged districts and schools that serve families with diverse cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds in Hutchins, Maushard, Greenfeld, and Thomas (2010) and on the website of the National Network of Partnership Schools (www.partnershipschool.org, in the Success Stories section).

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