Networks in New York City: Implementing the Common Core

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to report findings from an exploratory study of the early implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards in New York City by a sample of charter management organizations (CMOs) and Children First Networks (CFNs). Using the existing literature on policy implementation—specifically the concepts of boundary spanners and mutual adaptation—this research investigated the role of networks as they facilitated the implementation of the new standards. We conducted in-depth interviews with leaders in both types of networks. The interviews focused on the strategies used to implement the Common Core and the challenges faced in the process. Our findings included evidence of varying capacity among CFNs and CMOs. More decentralized networks expressed greater difficulties with the transition, and the existence of a distinct network-level department with exclusively instructional responsibilities facilitated the adoption of the standards.

Keywords
common core, implementation, network, charter schools, charter management organizations, New York City

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Under former Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s tenure (2002-2013), New York City (NYC), home to the largest public school system in the nation, was the site of extensive education reform and experimentation. Widely cited as a forerunner in the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), New York had already—and not without controversy—administered Common Core-aligned assessments in 2013 (Garland, 2013; Wingert, 2013). To support the accelerated roll out, New York relied on networks, such as Children First Networks (CFNs) and charter management organizations (CMOs), to bring schools up to speed (Wohlstetter, Smith, & Farrell, 2013). These networks have been the primary vehicle for Common Core implementation in NYC, serving as critical intermediaries between policy makers and street-level bureaucrats: the principals and teachers in schools (Lipsky, 1971; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). In line with the “third stage” of implementation research identified by Odden (1991b, p. 4), this study describes how two CFNs and two CMOs facilitated early implementation of the Common Core in an effort to uncover how different network structures work to advance large-scale institutional change.

Not restricted to NYC, networks have become increasingly prevalent in school districts across the country. Broadly defined as a group of organizations working together to solve problems and issues of mutual concern that are too large for any one organization to handle on its own, networks in education refer to multiple schools collaborating to have a larger impact on student achievement than individual schools working in isolation (Mandell, 1999; Wohlstetter & Smith, 2000). There is enormous variety in the scale and purposes of school networks. In this study, we focused on networks of roughly 10 or more schools that collaborated in the implementation of new educational policies—in this case, the Common Core. Early iterations of school networks appeared in Los Angeles in the mid-1990s in response to the Annenberg Challenge. Called school families at the time, the networks in Los Angeles were used to implement literacy reforms across the school district (Wohlstetter, Malloy, Chau, & Polhemus, 2003). Since 2004, networks in New Orleans have occupied an expansive role, charged with taking control of failing public schools as the city pursued a portfolio model of school management.

Relative to more hierarchical systems, such as traditional, top-down, central district bureaucracies, the school network is a relatively new model of educational governance. Whereas district bureaucracies tend to emphasize their verticality, centralization, and stability, networks are meant to improve on this model by stressing their more horizontal form of organization, decentralization, and flexibility. Networks are designed to interrupt the traditional bureaucratic mode of school management in an attempt to
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provide greater school autonomy, more responsive support structures, and decentralized mechanisms for the implementation of new policies and programs. Although networks represent a promising mode of educational governance, they carry a unique set of challenges. As Goldsmith and Eggers (2004) suggest, networks are particularly prone to difficulties regarding the alignment of goals, clarity of oversight, communication breakdowns, fragmented coordination, and capacity shortages. Indeed, the networks we studied struggled with all of these challenges as they attempted to implement the Common Core.

Following Honig’s (2006a) call to investigate how contexts (or what she calls “place”) shape implementation of school reform, our study used the existing implementation literature as a lens to investigate how networks facilitated implementation of the new content standards in NYC. We selected two CFNs and two CMOs in an attempt to represent the diversity of organizational forms within each type of network. Our choices reflect Honig’s notion that “variation in implementation is not a problem to be avoided but part and parcel of the basic operation” of complex, large-scale, institutional reforms (p. 21). Below, we provide a summary of the NYC educational context, followed by a brief overview of the relevant policy implementation literature from which we generated our research questions. Next, we describe our research methodology and present our findings. Our findings describe and compare the strategies used by two CFNs and two CMOs as they worked to implement the Common Core across their member schools. In particular, we describe the ways that these different networks occupied boundary-spanning roles and the extent to which these networks involved teachers and principals to promote “street-level” ownership of the new policy. Finally, because our study is exploratory in nature, we end with preliminary conclusions and identify hypotheses for further research.

**The Common Core in NYC**

The CCSS are a set of national content standards for Grades K-12 in mathematics and English/language arts (ELA) designed to increase rigor and ensure that all students are prepared for college or a career. The CCSS initiative was led by two groups, The Council of Chief State School Officers and The National Governors’ Association, which jointly finalized the standards in 2010. From that point, the CCSS saw rapid expansion. By 2013, 45 states and the District of Columbia had adopted the CCSS. Predicated on principals of federalism, adoption of the CCSS was voluntary (although heavily incentivized by the federal government by way of the competitive 2010-2011 Race to the Top grants and the 2013 No Child
Left Behind waivers), and states that did adopt the new standards were able to augment them with up to 15% additional content. In New York State, the augmented standards are referred to as the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS).

Although the demands of the Common Core forced many states and localities to develop new structures and strategies to implement the standards, many began by repurposing existing resources. The CFNs in NYC, which emerged shortly after New York State established mayoral control of NYC schools, have been especially instrumental to this end. Former Mayor Bloomberg’s reforms fundamentally restructured the city’s educational landscape: 32 local school boards were eliminated and superintendents were stripped of traditional authority to consolidate power in the central district office while simultaneously increasing principal autonomy (Hill, 2011). CFNs were designed to provide support to the newly empowered schools. Turning traditional accountability “on its head,” CFNs were primarily accountable to their member schools rather than to the central office of the NYC Department of Education (DOE; Wohlstetter, Gallagher, & Smith, 2013). Each spring, principals could elect to remain with their current CFN or they could switch to any other network. There are now nearly 60 networks, organized into clusters of about 11 networks each. Typically, network teams are composed of about 15 staff members, including achievement coaches who provide direct instructional support to schools as well as budgetary, human resources, and facilities assistance (NYC Department of Education, 2013).

In some ways analogous to CFNs, non-profit CMOs also provide instructional and operational support to their member charter schools. Operating more than 40% of the charter schools across NYC (NYC Charter School Center, 2014), CMO networks serve to use more resources and provide a larger scale to expand and sustain charter schools that adhere to a similar mission and vision (Berends, 2014; Wohlstetter, Smith, & Farrell, 2013). Advocates suggest that they have “more leverage than individual charter schools, and yet more nimbleness than traditional school districts, to replicate ‘what works’” (Farrell, Wohlstetter, & Smith, 2012). New CMO-operated charter schools can take advantage of existing network support infrastructure that is unavailable to independent charter school start-ups. Although they are exempt from many of the regulations that stem from the DOE, CMOs in NYC nevertheless function as intermediaries between the city’s central office and individual charter schools. Situated in the middle, they, like CFNs, have become a new intersection between policy makers and the schools they govern. They are therefore essential to the processes of policy implementation.
Implementation: Boundary Spanning and Mutual Adaptation

For our research, we draw from two primary strands in the implementation literature. First, we use boundary spanning as a frame to make sense of how school networks operate within the context of Common Core implementation in NYC. Second, we use the concept of mutual adaptation to pose questions regarding the extent to which networks involved street-level bureaucrats in implementation at the ground level.

*Boundary spanners* are defined as intermediary personnel or intermediary organizations that operate at the boundaries of multiple organizations (e.g., between the central office and individual school sites). Boundary spanners form relationships and build networks that span across a range of organizations, connecting a multitude of actors. These relationships and networks can serve to build capacity at the local level by leveraging relationships and resources that are otherwise underutilized (Honig, 2004; Honig, 2006a). In this respect, boundary spanners can serve to disrupt the “top-down, command-and-control” model, which researchers have argued is insufficient for sustained implementation (Crowson & Boyd, 1993; Honig, 2006a; Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984).

Boundary spanning organizations perform two major functions. First, they act as information gatekeepers. They sift through information coming from the central office, prioritizing what is most important for school-level staff and clarifying the central office’s intent. Second, boundary spanners serve as a clearinghouse for the discourse occurring outside of the traditional chain of information. They reach out into the environment for new ideas and strategies, sharing that information with their member schools (Honig, 2006b). Boundary spanners are often the members of educational bureaucracies that most frequently and consistently interact with teachers and principals and are therefore integral to the implementation process at the most basic level (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977).

Asymmetries between policy design and eventual implementation are attributed to a phenomenon called *mutual adaptation*, a process through which local actors modify policies to meet unique local needs and circumstances (McLaughlin, 1976; Odden 1991a). In education research, the mutual adaptation literature highlights ways that policies are interpreted and adapted into local contexts, showing how the scope, pace, and depth of implementation differs from district to district and school to school. This research underscores the importance of micro-level and bottom-up aspects of implementation, placing *street-level bureaucrats* at the center of inquiry. Street-level bureaucrats are individuals—such as teachers and principals—who immediately
interact with the public and, in effect, put the final stamp on a given policy. They interpret policies through the lens of their occupational demands and are often the key to an initiative’s success, failure, or fizzle (Lipsky, 1971).

The concept of mutual adaptation conceives of implementation as the product of an interconnected, complex, and dynamic system (Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2010; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Lemke & Sabelli, 2008; Little & Houston, 2003; Supovitz, Fink, & Newman, 2014). According to McLaughlin (1990), a critical feature of mutual adaptation relates to the extent to which street-level bureaucrats take command of a particular aspect of a policy and thereby “make it their own” through creativity, innovation, and design. Because individual actors can feel like they come to “own” a policy—rather than feeling like it was merely “handed down”—the mutual adaptation process improves the prospects that a given policy will be sustained over time (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978). Along with involvement in the design aspects of policy adaptation, McLaughlin also stresses that relevant institutions must aim to build capacity in street-level bureaucrats to achieve greater implementation fidelity.

**Study Methods: Research Questions and Data Sources**

The foregoing elements of the implementation literature research informed our inquiry into how networks facilitated early implementation of the Common Core in NYC. Accordingly, this multi-case, qualitative study was guided by the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** As intermediaries, to what extent did the networks adopt the role of boundary spanner between policy makers and street-level bureaucrats (e.g., teachers and principals) during the early implementation of the Common Core?

**Research Question 2:** To what extent did networks aim to involve teachers in the development of curriculum and instructional materials related to the Common Core to promote street-level “ownership” over the policy?

**Research Question 3:** How did networks work to build street-level bureaucrats’ capacity to implement the Common Core?

**Research Question 4:** What were the challenges that networks and their member schools faced in the implementation of the Common Core? What challenges remain?

To address our research questions, we used data culled from a broader, long-term research project that examines Common Core implementation
in NYC. The CFNs in our study were chosen by the NYC DOE based on criteria identified by the research team. Both CFNs in this study are middle of the pack in terms of DOE performance, neither particularly high performing nor particularly low performing. Both CFNs provided instructional and operational support for about 30 member schools. Each CFN had one network leader, five to seven achievement coaches, and five to seven operational team members. Using semi-structured interview protocols, we conducted interviews across three points in time with the network leader and three achievement coaches at each CFN: 2011-2012, 2012-2013, and then again in the fall of the 2013-2014 school year. We interviewed at least one achievement coach for ELA, mathematics, special education, and English language learners (ELL). Our questions aimed in particular to elicit the strategies that were used to adjust to the new Common Core policies.

Although most CFNs follow a similar organizational model, CMO organizational models can vary significantly. We chose two CMOs that typify some of the variance. The first CMO in our study, which we call “Empire” (pseudonyms used throughout), maintained a prominent national presence. There were two national offices and a range of regional offices in select major cities. Empire in NYC boasted relatively high student achievement numbers compared with the city’s charter sector as a whole. The regional office, which was responsible for 13 member schools (half the number for which CFNs are responsible), was comprised of a CEO; managing directors for elementary, middle, and high schools; and multiple departments responsible for, among other things, human resources, recruitment, fundraising, and curriculum and instruction (C&I). The C&I department housed the instructional specialists for ELA, mathematics, literacy, special education, and ELL. We interviewed a central office team member, the director of the regional C&I department, and the director of the national C&I department.

The other CMO in our study, which we call “Liberty,” was smaller than Empire and did not have a national presence. Although Empire operated schools in NYC for nearly two decades, Liberty’s first school opened less than 10 years ago. Liberty managed 10 schools in the city but had imminent plans to expand to 4 other regions within the next 5 years. Liberty’s home office was comprised of a CEO, 3 managing directors (1 each for elementary, middle, and high school), and 13 instructional specialists in areas such as ELA, math, special education, literacy, and ELL. At Liberty, we interviewed all three managing directors as well as the CEO. As was the case at Empire, the interviews with Liberty each lasted approximately 60 minutes, and the protocol we used mirrored the protocol used for the CFNs with only minor alterations.
Findings

Research Question 1: Networks as Boundary Spanners

Each year, the NYC DOE issued a set of “Citywide Instructional Expectations” (CIE). As the name implies, the CIE outlined district objectives, established targets, and prioritized district policy initiatives. Although the chief function of the CIE was to clarify district aims, the CIE were so voluminous that parts of the document sometimes had the opposite effect. Consequently, a major role for the CFNs was to serve as boundary spanners between the district and member schools, specifically as gatekeepers to help administrators and teachers unpack and prioritize elements found in the CIE. As one network leader suggested, “A lot of the work of the networks now is around providing support to our schools in the instructional initiatives that the central department of education has picked as priorities.” In this respect, CFNs worked directly with school administration to help prioritize the initiatives. CFNs often made decisions based on the specific strengths and weaknesses of individual schools. One network leader said this was the network’s biggest strength: “That’s why the schools love us. They’re like, ‘Thank you. Someone’s telling us what to do. We just want to be told what to do. We don’t have time to figure it out.’”

Along with clarifying district expectations, CFNs occupied the role of boundary spanner by facilitating the bi-directional flow of information between the central office and their member schools. CFNs thus served as an integral component of the feedback loop within the district. CFN team members relayed complaints and reported difficulties that school-level personnel were experiencing regarding the Common Core so that the district could adjust goals and policies accordingly. CFNs performed an accountability function as well, which occasionally put network members in difficult positions. Although CFNs are primarily accountable to schools (which can opt out of an unsatisfactory network at the end of the year), their intermediary position in the flow of information complicated and perhaps compromised that relationship. One network leader explained the problem this way: “[Central] will call, and they ask me, ‘Is this principal going to make it?’ or ‘Do you think this principal should be removed?’ So I’m their friend, but behind their back, let’s just say, I think they should be removed.”

As boundary spanners, CFNs also reached outward into the broader educational community to locate and modify instructional materials and curriculum modules that could be used by their member schools. In this respect, the CFNs served as a clearinghouse for sharing resources and knowledge across their schools. Sharing across schools had grown increasingly important as the
network responsibilities shifted in light of the increased demands and tight timeline of the Common Core.

Before the Common Core, the CFNs would consult schools and school leaders on a more case-by-case basis to help schools develop and achieve their own customized instructional goals. With the introduction of the new standards and the CIE, however, schools did not have as much freedom to formulate their own goals. As such, CFNs had to create a much more focused and cohesive technical assistance apparatus. Part of this work required CFNs to build new Common Core-aligned rubrics and assessment tools that could be applied equally across all schools. In other words, previously customized curriculum and instructional tools became more standardized in light of the Common Core. Here is how one network leader described the process:

The first thing we did was, we took the Citywide Instructional Expectations and turned them into standards. And then we identified indicators related to each of the standards. There’s a standard for strengthening student work in literacy. There’s a standard for strengthening student work in math. There’s a standard for strengthening teacher practice. From there, we developed a rubric that would assess where the school was for each of those things. Have they developed a task? Have they embedded that task in a well-sequenced unit? From that, we collected work samples from the school and we started to level where they were. We had to learn to norm our tasks to the new rubric.

The networks worked with the already-created Inquiry Teams at each school to develop and refine the new diagnostic tools. In 2007-2008, the DOE required that each school establish an Inquiry Team, comprised of teachers and administrators, to perform student diagnostics utilizing student data to identify instructional challenges. The CFNs used this infrastructure to pilot new Common Core-aligned rubrics.

As the CMOs in our study were not part of the district’s institutional scheme in the same way as CFNs, their boundary spanning function revolved primarily around serving as a clearinghouse for curriculum and instructional materials that could be shared across their respective member schools. This function did not obviate the need for centralized objectives. The home office at each CMO in our study was responsible for outlining a set of targets much like those identified in the district’s CIE. In addition, much like the DOE’s model, leaders from both CMOs placed, at least rhetorically, a premium on decentralization and school autonomy. As one managing director at Liberty said, “The bottom line comes from the main office. How to get there comes from the schools.” This formulation, however, signaled an important distinction between the CFN model and the CMO model. In the former, the DOE
issued the CIE and defined specific objectives, and the CFNs served as a support structure to help individual schools meet those objectives. In the CMO model, on the other hand, the central office issued instructional expectations (“the bottom line”) and served as the support structure to help schools achieve those goals (“how to get there”). This model tended to promote greater coherence among the CMOs in comparison with the CFNs.

These similarities should not, however, shroud an important distinction between the two CMOs in our study: Empire maintained a distinct C&I department, whose members were responsible solely for the organization’s policies on curriculum, teaching, and learning. Empire therefore appeared far more responsive to the Common Core than either Liberty or the CFNs. First, in concert with the regional managing directors and the national office, the C&I department was able to generate a cohesive set of CMO-wide instructional expectations: a scope and sequence along with Common Core-aligned assessments. The assessments, according to one member of the C&I department leader,

... are getting more and more granular in the way we look at [student achievement data], like we’re drilling down and we’re looking at our proficient readers, and then we’re looking at our kids who are still learning to decode, and we’re getting a much more precise understanding of where our kids are at.

The respondents we interviewed at Empire signaled that they had been building the new scope and sequence since the creation of the Common Core: “From the start, we fully embraced the Common Core. We think its increased rigor naturally aligns with our goals.” Along with new assessments, the C&I department was additionally working on new curriculum materials, which were also developed in concert with a similar C&I department at the national office. The organizational capacity to generate new curriculum, assessment, and instructional materials and serve as a network-based clearinghouse for those materials is a feature that set Empire apart.

Liberty, by contrast, admitted that they were, as one central office administrator put it, “a step behind.” They were not clear about how they intended to remediate the identified gap; nor was there an indication that Liberty had started developing new strategies specifically in light of the Common Core. Our interview data suggested that network leaders had not embraced the new standards like the leaders at Empire. Two of the network leaders we interviewed indicated that that they did not find anything particularly new or more rigorous about the Common Core: “We haven’t changed our assessments as a result of Common Core because we believe our [reading and math assessments] ... were already at the right level of rigor for our kids.” Another
network leader implied that the new standards constituted just another iteration of the same old policy, and significantly diminished its import:

The Common Core New York City tests did not identify new areas or substantively change our thinking. It just highlighted what we already knew, what we needed to focus on. When people think about the Common Core stuff, everybody knew already how bad it was going to be. But it’s just like now we really, really, really have to do it, instead of just, you know, really have to do it.

It was striking to find, amid all the fervor elsewhere, such a diminished role for the Common Core at Liberty. One feature of Liberty’s model could be relevant: In contrast to the other network models we explored, Liberty did not have a separate team or department that worked to identify specific curricular objectives. Whereas the DOE issued the CIE for NYC and where the C&I department identified objectives for Empire, the managing directors at Liberty had both high-level curriculum design and day-to-day operational/instructional responsibilities. Liberty’s institutional model in this regard was less well-equipped to define curricular objectives given that the leaders were responsible for so much more.

**Research Question 2: Street-Level Ownership**

Three years after the introduction of the new standards, New York State’s EngageNY.com and the DOE’s Common Core Library—two clearinghouses for Common Core-aligned curriculum and instructional materials—remained sparsely populated. The lack of materials was a consequence of two specific policy decisions. First, New York State allowed only open-sourced materials to populate the library. Although well intentioned, this decision effectively deterred for-profit publishers from adding a wider array of materials. Many publishers were unwilling to share their materials for free. Second, in NYC, the DOE placed primary emphasis on the new assessments to be associated with the Common Core rather than on the development of curriculum. The central office sets targets, and school-level educators, under the premise of expanded school autonomy, were expected to develop curriculum and instructional materials largely on their own.

In practice, the district policies engendered considerable freedom for schools and teachers. This freedom, however, came with significant responsibility. The district tasked schools and teachers with writing an entirely new Common Core-aligned curriculum. By definition, therefore, the policy structure and the CFN model in NYC necessarily involved teachers in the design of the new Common Core-aligned curricula (a practice the literature suggests
can enhance the long-term prospects that a policy will be sustained). Nevertheless, though the teachers were offered the opportunity to participate in curriculum design, there were limited support structures in place to assist teachers in that task.

The CFNs were not designed to produce curriculum; they had neither the personnel nor the expertise to help generate Common Core-aligned curricula for upwards of 30 member schools. As one network leader explained, “Our job is to support the schools in implementing curriculum and sharpening and refining their teaching practices and aligning their assessments, but we can’t write curriculum overnight. That’s impossible.” Along with a lack of resources, time constraints figured prominently as well. The teachers we spoke to were not offered additional planning periods, and teaching up to six classes a day often left time for little else. Teachers were consequently forced to subordinate many tasks that had previously taken priority. As one achievement coach said,

That’s why we’ve seen a lot of suffering with teaching, because they are too busy doing everything else. There’re only so many hours in a day. Unfortunately this administration does not get that, that there’s only so many hours and the more balls you toss up in the air, eventually the balls all fall. Another ball’s going to fall because I can’t juggle 20 balls.

While teachers were heavily involved with writing curriculum for their respective schools, school leaders—not the teachers—often solicited CFN advice for this task. In fact, we uncovered few instances in which teachers maintained consistent and direct contact with CFN team members. Instead, the network team was far more likely to interact with the school leadership first. Then, the achievement coaches would target their technical assistance according to the weaknesses and objectives identified by the school leadership.

A school’s AP will e-mail me, “Hey, I need help with developing the professional development plan for the next three months of what we’re going to do. Can you come in for a couple of hours and we’ll flesh things out together?” Another AP said, “Hey, can you come in? I have a dysfunctional teacher team in the third grade and nothing seems to be working. Can you facilitate with them and get that ball rolling?”

Once the achievement coaches developed an actionable plan, they involved teachers in a variety of ways: through “lunch-and-learn” professional development sessions, through collaborative curriculum design in specific areas, in-class observations, and feedback. Nevertheless, achievement
coaches reported no instances in which teachers reached out to them directly without the school leadership serving as an intermediary. Our data also revealed similar patterns with respect to professional development. The CFNs in our study regularly utilized a “coach the coaches” model, where training would target school leaders, a practice we describe more fully in the next section.

Among the CMOs, Liberty placed a larger emphasis on a “coach the coaches” model. As such, Liberty’s leaders described a very top-down approach to governance (despite their emphasis on autonomy for schools). The managing directors rarely indicated that they interacted with teachers directly. Curriculum development was reserved specifically for the instructional specialists, who were also in charge of teacher professional development. The managing directors focused primarily on professional development for the school leaders and the instructional specialists, who in turn worked more closely with teachers. A leader for the middle schools explained the theory of action this way: “As I coach those people, the communication cascades down. The principal and the elementary curriculum specialist and the special education manager are all cascading that information down to the teachers.”

Another managing director for the elementary schools used slightly different language to describe the same picture:

> Teachers have not been involved with much, just because it is me working with principals and with department chairs. I would say that the framework of setting the bottom line and discussing how to make it happen has trickled down.

The trickle-down effect only involved teachers after leaders identified a common vision. The leaders then involved teachers to norm practices based on that vision:

> Whether it is analyzing a lesson plan or an assessment, that happens in department meetings, at grade-level meetings—it happens across the board. That’s the way that we involve teachers, reflecting on their own practice and how to keep pushing it.

In short, at Liberty, teachers were mainly involved during those times that they were being coached or were being challenged to reflect on their own practices.

Empire, on the other hand, more frequently cited the ways in which teachers were directly involved with sharing and designing new Common Core-aligned curriculum for their network. The regional C&I department leveraged
the national C&I department for curriculum design and development. The national C&I department established an instructional design team, which was comprised of teachers, principals, and regional leaders. The role of the team was to develop new Common Core-aligned curriculum that shared a common Empire vision that would cohere with practices across the network. In addition, “star teachers” were invited to present their Common Core-aligned curriculum and strategies to the design team, who then augmented and replicated the curriculum for sharing across the network. Empire also utilized their network-wide online sharing platform, which they described as “the Facebook of teaching.” Teachers were encouraged to upload lesson plans, curricular units, and teaching strategies, through which others can comment and share new ideas. The curriculum models developed by the “star teachers” were featured prominently on the sharing platform.

Nevertheless, Empire also noted that not all teachers wanted to be involved. The director for the national C&I department described how their strategy emerged in response to the results of a CMO-wide teacher survey:

[Teachers said they] were tired of recreating the wheel, quote unquote. So, they were actually craving recommendations from us in terms of curriculum. They’re spending a lot of their time planning lessons, writing curriculum. They want a recommended scope and sequence, units of study, so—you know they want recommended curricula, they want recommended assessments. They want to focus more of their time on the teaching and learning aspects of their job and less time on creating materials. That was one of the things we found that was very eye opening.

Although Empire’s model of high-level curriculum design was arguably more inclusive of its classroom educators, it too largely subordinated teachers to central administrators. Although teachers’ discretion over their style of instruction presumably varied considerably from school to school (with some granting significant autonomy), the decisions regarding structure and content bore relatively little teacher imprint in any of the networks we studied.

**Research Question 3: Building Capacity**

The CFNs, in their attempt to bring nearly 30 schools and hundreds of teachers up to speed with the Common Core, placed a larger relative emphasis on a “coach the coaches” model in which network staff guided principals and other school leaders who then, in turn, trained the teachers. The principal solicited help based on the areas he or she deemed most in need of improvement, and the network formulated its professional development based on
these requests. One CFN staff member described the process this way: “Last year when the roll out of the Common Core began, we prepared the principals so that they could prepare the teachers. So we provided extensive PD for the principals.” In short, the primary mode of network professional development frequently started and ended with the principal.

In addition to regular network meetings with principals, CFNs held events organized around specific topics, both instructional and non-instructional, for groups of school leaders. According to one network leader, “There’s a series for assistant principals, there’s a series for math coaches, there’s a series for literacy coaches, there’s a series for guidance counselors, etc.” These meetings provided a venue for the dissemination of Common Core information, resources, and strategies, differentiated by subject and audience. These leadership events were especially useful for helping school leaders gain more clarity on Common Core objectives, particularly as they were defined in the CIE. Similarly, CFNs utilized these meetings for helping school leaders better understand new elements in the CFN-developed rubrics. CFNs would introduce key Common Core objectives to school leaders, who would then share those objectives with their teachers.

To be sure, professional development was not solely geared toward school leaders; CFNs also provided some on-site guidance at individual schools. These sessions were designed and run by a small group of achievement coaches. Occasionally, all teachers at a given school attended the sessions, but more frequently the sessions involved grade/subject teams selected by the principal for specialized instruction. In a few instances, achievement coaches were assigned to individual teachers who may have been struggling. Sometimes the achievement coaches observed a lesson and then gave immediate feedback after the class was over. One coach described her work: “My schedule is like that of a teacher. I go into schools, providing instructional support: lesson plans, modeling a lesson for them, classroom management, things like that.” She said that she provided individualized services for three specific teachers at a school. Additional responsibilities and time constraints, however, prohibited an expansion of such customized support to more teachers.

In addition, CFNs utilized third-party professional development, which provided a space for educators throughout the network to interact. In the spring of 2012, just as the implementation of the Common Core was beginning, one CFN arranged for teachers to attend workshops provided by the Office of Achievement Resources in the NYC DOE. In another case, network staff assisted schools as they applied to attend a Cluster Intensive, in which teams from multiple schools worked together on interdisciplinary units, incorporating both science content and literacy strategies. Although helpful
for attendees, such sessions were relatively rare and did not constitute an integral part of the CFN strategy.

The professional development opportunities provided by the CMOs, by contrast, were more consistently directed at teacher needs. The C&I department at Empire facilitated regular meetings with teacher groups from multiple schools to discuss instructional concerns related to the Common Core:

We facilitate content teams throughout the year: This year we’re doing that more than we did last year. That’s something I think is important—to build professional learning communities. Especially in middle school because there’s only one reading teacher for fifth grade so they have no other fifth grade teacher to talk to unless we get them together. So six times this year they’re getting together in physically the same place talking about these shared units and shared assessments.

At Liberty, network staff held teacher-led meetings once every 6 weeks. During these meetings, a teacher gave a brief presentation about his or her students’ work, followed by a debriefing session in which peers offered feedback. This served as a way to coordinate the details of Common Core-alignment across different classrooms. Moreover, Liberty also held weekly workshops every Friday conducted largely by instructional specialists, which helped increase the frequency of specialist/teacher interactions in comparison with the CFNs.

Empire and Liberty, to a greater extent than their CFN counterparts, provided network-wide professional development for their member schools. Empire held occasional “weekend retreats,” during which the C&I department explored specific instructional and pedagogical topics often tied to the Common Core. Both CMOs made extensive use of third-party workshops. Empire sent a number of its teachers to attend NYC DOE events and hired consultants from other educational organizations. Liberty sent some of its teachers to Empire’s professional development, expanding opportunities for its staff and fostering CMO-to-CMO communication.

An important distinction between Empire and Liberty is worth highlighting. As we outlined in the sections above, Empire’s distinct C&I team figured prominently in their Common Core implementation strategy. Empire had managing directors that were in charge of assisting school leaders with their administrative and operational responsibilities. They also used C&I directors to assist school-level personnel with their curriculum and instructional responsibilities. Although both Liberty and Empire used instructional specialists who specialized in areas like content,
literacy, and special education (similar to the achievement coaches in the CFNs), Liberty afforded their instructional specialists significantly more autonomy than Empire. Because Liberty’s managing directors maintained both operational and instructional responsibilities, however, they were far more likely to delegate professional development responsibilities to the specialists. Therefore, as indicated above, Liberty’s managing directors conducted sessions generally directed toward the specialists according to the “coach-the-coaches” model. The managing director for middle schools explained the process:

The specialists have to produce their own PD for the teachers, which I then review and give them feedback. We do the same thing for the instructional feedback that [the specialists] provide the teachers. Typically, they blind copy their correspondence with teachers and submit a coaching video once per week.

Without operational or administrative responsibilities to consume their attention, Empire’s C&I department could focus specifically on teaching and learning. Therefore, the C&I department was much more likely to participate in and lead professional development sessions directly with teachers. In this respect, Empire had both C&I leadership and the same team of instructional specialists we found at Liberty and the CFNs.

Significantly, because of their more specified role, the C&I department had the opportunity to spend much more time in individual classrooms than the managing directors at Liberty. The leadership layer at Empire thereby furnished additional personnel who could provide immediate feedback for teachers following an observed lesson. Furthermore, workshops were consequently coordinated with instructional specialists according to direct field observations rather than through secondary reports, as we saw at Liberty. Finally, this model to some extent mitigated a silo effect as the instructional specialists at Empire could adhere to a more coherent vision generated by the C&I department. At Liberty, however, because professional development was generated by individual specialists more or less autonomously, the network had yet to form a coherent Common Core-driven teacher-training model.

**Research Question 4: Challenges**

NYC’s implementation strategy placed greater emphasis on Common Core-aligned assessments, largely delegating to schools the task of creating a curriculum framework with units and lessons plans. The dearth of curriculum materials posed significant challenges for the CFNs as they worked with their
member schools. City and state resources were both low on content and, in the case of the DOE’s Common Core Library, underpublicized. As an achievement coach reported:

Most of the teachers aren’t even using [The Common Core Library]. Even when we introduce it as a centerpiece of PD, they’re like “Oh, the Common Core Library. I didn’t know about that.” But even then, it doesn’t have much traction. Ultimately, we end up using something else.

The second problem was that the district saddled schools with the responsibility for curriculum development without providing sufficient support. As one network leader said, “The district is asking teachers to write curriculum, but they have not provided the structure and time to do this work. It’s not part of the contract. When can teachers possibly find time?”

The CFNs’ leadership and achievement coaches said they worked extensively to remediate the deficiencies. They knew many teachers who were stressed and unable to keep up with the added demands. They tried, as much as possible, to generate new materials and unit lessons that teachers could pilot and utilize. But there were two main problems with this strategy. First, the CFNs were not designed to develop new curriculum; they were to support teachers in implementing whatever curriculum was already available and being utilized. Generating expansive and cohesive curriculum was not part of their role as technical assistance providers. However, even if they were trained to develop curriculum anew, CFNs were already stretched too thin.

Additionally, network staffs were overextended by geographical distance. CFNs were not clustered by neighborhoods or regions; schools self-selected into particular networks, choosing based on educational philosophies or personal relationships. CFNs therefore had member schools stretching across multiple boroughs throughout the city. A CFN leader described the breadth of his network:

The schools are located from the tip of Lower Manhattan up to the South Bronx. We’ve got schools in Battery Park and Tribeca. We’ve got a bunch more running up the East Side in District 2—from the Lower East Side to East Harlem. We go up the West Side to Midtown, one school on the Upper West Side, two schools in Central Harlem, and about five schools in the South Bronx.

The network leader emphasized that a considerable amount of time was spent traveling between sites, and the expense of traveling throughout the city consumed resources that might otherwise be appropriated differently. To adjust, CFN leaders frequently scheduled their meetings at schools based on
proximity to one another rather than each school’s relative needs. Other network leaders, however, praised the self-selection model and said that the large geographic dispersion was a minor inconvenience rather than a major hurdle.

Nearly all CFN leaders we interviewed said they did not have sufficient time to support all of their member schools adequately. According to one interviewee:

I just think the issue is time. I’m not always capable of being in the schools the way that I want to be. What I end up doing is drive-by’s for the sake of sustainability. With 30 schools, there’s very little sustainability in terms of contact with our schools.

The typical size of CFN teams was about 15 staff members. It was not possible to have each content specialist responsible for a set of schools; nearly all network members needed assistance with ELA, mathematics, special education, and ELL, especially during the early implementation of the Common Core. Time constraints proved paramount. One network leader said he tried to dissuade other schools from joining his network:

Last year, we were at 28 [schools], and I made efforts to keep other schools out. It’s a real challenge serving and showing up and being present for that many schools. I mean, in most suburban districts, the whole district is about ten or twelve schools. We’re just one network among many, and we’re serving 28.

Although network leaders disagreed about the cause, there was broad consensus that CFNs’ staff were being pushed beyond capacity.

Alternatively, the CMOs we studied had around the same number of network personnel but served only about 10 schools each. Although many of our interviewees readily acknowledged the disparity between the extent of their responsibilities and the time in which it had to be done, no CMO leader faulted the number of schools as a reason for the extreme amount of work. Moreover, both Empire and Liberty clustered their schools in contiguous neighborhoods of NYC, minimizing travel complications.

Instead of issues with respect to time and geography, the CMOs primarily cited concerns about their current organizational structure. Liberty’s elementary, middle, and high schools reported to separate managing directors. Although these managing directors then communicated extensively with one another, one such leader said that the three educational levels were becoming isolated from one another, which made communication and collaboration unnecessarily difficult:
I would say that we’re pretty disjointed right now. In terms of curriculum, elementary, middle, and high are very silo-ed. We are going to need to advance ourselves until it all connects and we can make one coherent story from K-12.

The CMOs we studied also had difficulty finding the right balance of authority and relative autonomy within their networks. The challenges often involved how much freedom to afford school leaders and teachers. There were always trade-offs between maintaining mission-oriented cohesion across the network and allowing teachers the professional autonomy to take command of their own practice. Both Empire and Liberty represented this particular situation as a tension, unlikely to be resolved completely:

It’s an interesting dynamic. Because on one hand, people want to be told what to do. “Just tell me what to do and I’ll do it.” Right? People are looking for the clarity and the answers. But on the other hand, when you roll out—“This is what we’re doing and this is how I want you to do it”—people push back because they don’t agree. So what are the things that we are going to roll out and say “This is how you have to do it” and what are the things that are negotiable? I think that answer changes from year to year and based on the stances that leaders are currently taking. I think we have not yet figured out how to get comfortable with the level of uncertainty associated with the entrepreneurial spirit and wanting to cultivate it here.

Empire’s leadership learned through teacher surveys that too much school-level autonomy was not always a good thing. Teachers needed significant support so that they could focus on what they were hired to do: teach. But the issue was complicated because the central office could overreach. A managing director at Liberty described the central challenge as follows:

When we don’t involve the teachers, they complain that they’re left out. But then when we do involve them, they complain that they don’t have enough time for everything. “Just give us the curriculum,” they say. It’s hard to know what to do.

The same network leader, however, recognized that, “you want people to be fully engaged and invested in their work.” She therefore stressed that Liberty would continue to encourage teacher entrepreneurship.

**Conclusion**

Given that policy reforms like Common Core are “grander” and “more complex” than ever (Odden, 1991b, p. 4), highlighting new challenges and
expanding new avenues for future research is a key component of contemporary implementation research (Honig, 2006a; Odden 1991b). Accordingly, we conclude our article with a discussion of the different organizational and implementation challenges that we uncovered during our research. Although our research questions were geared initially toward understanding the roles networks occupied and the strategies they used, our findings show that early implementation of a new reform is much more about the complexity in how networks negotiate and define new roles and how these organizations refine and revise optimum strategies necessary to advance a new reform agenda. In this respect, our research not only confirmed the salience of “context” and “place” (Honig, 2006a, p. 18), but it also revealed how different networks worked to establish local organizational and governance “contexts.” In other words, context and place, conceived in this case as a particular network type, is not an already-established given; rather, it changes and evolves as implementation proceeds.

For example, each network we investigated struggled with balancing school-level autonomy and network cohesion. To the extent that boundary spanners are meant to disrupt the top-down, command-and-control model of hierarchical administration by enhancing the decision-making authority of school-level actors, our sample of CFNs and CMOs struggled to navigate this tension in the face of a highly centralized reform such as the Common Core. The new content standards functioned to standardize some degree of instruction across all schools. As networks stressed school-level autonomy, it grew increasingly difficult to manage such significant curricular shifts across each of their member schools. Among the networks we studied, Empire least resembled a boundary spanner as traditionally defined. If we conceive of a spectrum between bureaucracy and network design, Empire, more so than the other networks we explored, adopted more bureaucratic characteristics. With the capacity and structure to both set and implement standardized policy, it used its more centralized, hierarchical operation to considerable effect in this scenario.

Because the Common Core as standards called for more cohesion throughout the networks, teachers in turn called for more unified curriculum recommendations to avoid “reinventing the wheel.” The CMOs were better able to respond to that call than were the CFNs, and Empire in particular was able to excel. The organizational design of the CMOs was decisive. Sharing practices across member schools was never prioritized as a key element of the CFN model, which served a large set of unique schools. Conversely, the CMOs were established precisely to generate and maintain a cohesive identity and mission across their member schools. When the CMOs were therefore called on to incorporate the new standards, they were much more prepared for the task.
The differences can be illustrated this way. The CFNs operated according to a hub-and-spoke model. Imagine the CFN team in the center, and each school represents a satellite at the perimeter. The CFN network team interacted with schools mostly on a school-by-school basis, and so, by design, generating cohesion across their member schools was inhibited. As a consequence, member school leaders rarely interacted, either directly or through the CFN intermediary (except for at the occasional quarterly CFN-wide professional development session, which were only attended by a fraction of the member schools). By contrast, the CMOs we studied represented more of a spider web model, where actors across the network tended to interact with far more regularity. Empire, especially, used their Internet platform to facilitate sharing ideas and practices across the network. Thus, where the CFN model tended to keep schools in silos, our two CMOs tended to promote openness and communication.

Although pursuing school autonomy is a laudable goal, we wonder if the CFN model pushed school autonomy too far in one direction at the expense of sharing important curriculum materials and promising practices that could have benefited educators throughout the network. To be sure, CFN leaders acknowledged that, in light of the Common Core, they were working to promote more cohesion and sharing across their network (the new rubrics were designed to do just that). But, as we found, geographic dispersion hindered their aims. Unlike the CFNs, the CMOs in our study tended to be clustered geographically. In addition, although the CFNs averaged nearly 30 member schools, the CMOs averaged about 10. Moreover, CFNs, which face accountability pressures from both the central office and principals, were constrained in their responsibility to implement new common standards among schools with varying levels of capacity for change. This dynamic favored already high-performing schools that were more adept at identifying and acquiring scarce network resources. The CMOs experienced a similar dilemma in implementing the Common Core. The network that adopted more centralized curricular and instructional authority was better prepared to tackle key challenges early on compared with the network that championed school-level entrepreneurialism. Future research could more thoroughly investigate the impact of network size, geographic dispersion, and multiple lines of accountability (to schools and to the central office)—particularly with respect to policies like the Common Core that call for a relatively high degree of cohesion.

In addition, the leaders at the CFNs and at Liberty shared dual capacities: operational and instructional. The leadership at Empire established a distinct C&I department. The C&I department’s sole responsibility was to develop curriculum and promote Common Core-aligned teaching and learning.
practices across the network. The key distinction is that Empire maintained an additional leadership apparatus that was responsible for neither operational nor administrative issues. Thus, their focus could remain solely on the new curricular reform and assisting teachers in implementing the new standards. We believe that because Liberty’s leadership did not contain a distinct department for C&I, they could not always commit the focus that they otherwise might have desired. The issue was compounded by the fact that Liberty was scaling up at a rapid pace. Even more than usual, therefore, leadership was focused on administrative and operational issues. This might explain why Liberty was, with respect to Common Core implementation, admittedly “a step behind.” Further comparative research could investigate where it is desirable for network team members to maintain dual responsibilities and where it is most desirable to create separate departments.

Even though the implementation literature stresses the importance of involving teachers and other school-level actors in policy design to facilitate a stable and sustainable process of mutual adaptation, standardized curriculum policy in particular may resist that kind of decentralized approach. Network leaders described how many of their teachers did not want the responsibility of designing curriculum because the task seemed more onerous than gratifying. Several jurisdictions, including Utah and Washington, D.C., approached curriculum development by identifying and incentivizing “star” educators, relieving them of their school-site responsibilities for a time and convening them to develop curriculum and instructional materials for use by school districts and schools. Such an approach is not all that different from Empire, which deployed top teachers as well as network staff at the regional and national levels to set curricular goals and produce instructional materials that their counterparts in classrooms could use if desired.

The network structure, manifested in both CFNs and CMOs, is relatively new to the education sector. Yet although networks might yield potentially positive outcomes, they remain significantly understudied. A number of unanswered questions remain. In the face of a highly centralized and centralizing reform such as the Common Core, what is the appropriate balance between school-level autonomy and network cohesion? In a system with more fluid lines of accountability, what roles can networks as boundary spanners play to induce more cohesion when necessary? When district support structures are stretched thin across dozens of schools spanning many square miles in a dense urban environment, how can networks devote appropriate resources to those schools that are most in need but are least able to identify their deficiencies and actively seek the necessary support? When overworked and often overwhelmed teachers seek ready solutions to avoid “reinventing the wheel,” what effect will the lack of teacher involvement in high-level
curricular decisions have on the Common Core as they ultimately manifest in classrooms? Much like the landscape of NYC, the continued emergence of school support networks and the major reforms they are meant to bear will be as complex as they are full of promise.

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