

## School districts play significant role in reform

**C**RITICIZING SCHOOL DISTRICT bureaucracies has become a growth industry. Horror stories of mismanagement and waste abound, and less is often touted as more in these organizations. In the face of this anti-district rhetoric, it is important to recognize the growing number of scholars who are emphasizing the importance of the district in school reform, and the research base that examines the role of the central office.

“Bringing the District Back In: The Role of the Central Office in Improving Instruction and Student Achievement” (Report 65) builds on two previous CRESPAR reports on the roles of school boards and superintendents, and focuses on the dynamics of relations between the central office and its schools. Among the questions the report addresses are:

# *What contribution does the central office make to its schools to help them improve*

*classroom instruction and student achievement?*

# *How does recent research illuminate the connections between central office activity and student learning?*

Focusing on research since 1978, authors Martha A. Mac Iver and Elizabeth Farley look first at central-office studies chronologically, and then by type—case studies and comparative district studies, for instance. They also analyze how the functions of the central office affect instruction and achievement.

The findings show that the central office is neither irrelevant nor a detriment to school performance, nor is the adage that less bureaucracy means more achievement borne out. The literature does, indeed, reveal examples of ineffective central offices, but it also shows:

# Despite individual success stories,

most schools, especially those in high-poverty areas, cannot improve instruction and achievement without outside help—the district office being the most logical and available, though external partners can fill this role.

# Central offices do help schools build capacity for improving instruction and achievement, especially in advising them on good curriculum and teaching practices, recruiting principals and teachers, analyzing data, and providing administrative support so that good instruction can occur.

The authors conclude with a model of how the central office influences instruction and student achievement, as well as suggestions for further research related to that model. G