

The micropolitics of school district decentralization

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Abstract This case study of school district educational reform in the United States adds to the knowledge base of macropolitics of federal, state and local governing bodies and private sector agencies in formulating educational policies: It also contributes to our understanding the micropolitics of policy implementation. Middle managers' political acquiescence and resistance to district-wide decentralization and distributive leadership initiatives were studied using a longitudinal, ten-year (1998–2008) case study method. Middle managers were faced with a dilemma when the school district implemented a state sponsored decentralization policy that included adoption of distributed leadership and Total Quality Management (TQM). On the one hand, middle managers risked termination if they failed to implement legislated reform policies and the superintendent's directives. On the other hand, if they successfully implemented such policies their positions would become redundant. Initially responses of middle managers ranged along a continuum from acquiescence to resistance however as implementation of the decentralization initiative accelerated, middle managers' political resistance increased in scope and intensity. Findings from the case study discussed in this article that superintendent's success at implementation of district-wide decentralization policies is related to the nature and structure of micropolitics at the middle management level of the organization. In addition, findings suggest that internal evaluation processes used to assess the success of the district change process were compromised by micropolitics. Understanding that those who implement policy have the capacity to reshape and even prevent implementation as intended by officials at higher levels may contribute to reframing program evaluation methods as well as enhancing understanding of the politics of the superintendency.

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1 Introduction

For more than two decades educational reform initiatives in the United States have contributed to re-centering schools to focus on learning and teaching, as well as altering the ways schools are structured, governed and led (Björk 2001a). Widespread belief that leadership is central to successful implementation of large-scale school improvement (Murphy and Datnow 2003) has heightened interest in the role of superintendents in devolving decision making from middle managers to school-level principals and teachers. Scholars agree that implementing district-wide decentralization initiatives is often dependent on superintendents' success at balancing the need for achieving administrative efficiencies gained through centralization and program effectiveness generated through decentralization and distributed leadership (Murphy 1990). Efforts to alter decision making processes have heightened awareness of the inadequacy of our understanding of how middle management role incumbents respond to directives for large scale change (Sarason 1990) particularly when their roles are redefined and their positions are jeopardized. Conley (1996) observes that some middle managers "...seem to recognize the enormous challenges they face; others have not yet come to grips with the ways in which their roles may be changing...still others may acquiesce but resist change." (p. 105). Fullan's (2004) insight into linkages between the capacity of superintendents to redefine the purpose, nature, and structure of middle management operations of sustaining school system reforms is insightful. However while some scholars view the redefinition of middle-management roles as a routine human resource task other scholars observe that middle managers can reshape, resist and even undermine change initiatives if their positions are threatened (Björk 2005a; Blase and Björk 2009).

Although scholars acknowledge that assessing the capacity of organizations to support and sustain change is a prerequisite for accomplishing educational reform they are also aware that resistance of middle management to district-wide educational reform initiatives may compromise the ability of leaders to evaluate and improve change processes. In these circumstances what may appear to be a rather straightforward evaluation process involving the identification change goals and then assessing the extent to which they are achieved it may become a far more complicated process (Duke 2004). Brinkman (1987); suggests that although leaders may find it advantageous to get inside the program to understand what is going on Scriven (1993) and Weiss (1972) caution that disruptions to evaluations may mask the degree to which new policies, programs and practices have been implemented as well constrain corrective action.

2 Review of literature

The release of the report *A Nation at Risk* (1983) indicted schools for failing children and the nation's economy and launched an educational reform movement in the

United States unprecedented in its scale and duration (Björk 2001a). For over two decades such reform efforts have contributed to re-centering learning and teaching and changing the nature of school and district leadership. Release of other educational reform reports have also influenced the way schools were organized, governed and led (Björk et al. 2005). The *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002) underscored the importance of learning for all children and accelerated the pace of implementation of school reform initiatives to meet accountability demands related to the improvement of student learning. National and state initiatives compelled school district superintendents to shift their attention from managing district affairs to decentralizing decision-making and addressing all students' learning needs particularly for "at risk" students. Indeed, superintendents have been required to be managers, instructional leaders, change agents, skilled communicators, and adept politicians capable of maneuvering through precarious political landscapes in their districts (Björk et al. 2005).

2.1 Emerging concepts of leadership

The recent shift from management to a leadership focus in school administration has been nurtured by scholars who emphasize a distinction between these roles (Bass 1985; Burns 1978; Rost 1991). Their efforts contributed to a paradigm shift away from industrial-management to postindustrial leadership perspectives. Burns (1978) posits that transactional administrators view subordinates as being motivated by self-interests (i.e.) earning rewards, avoiding punishment, and generally complying with directives. In these contexts management is viewed as an essential dimension of hierarchical organization and, thus focuses on gaining efficiencies through centralizing the coordination of work to accomplish the *organization's* goals. Bass (1985) and Rost (1991) on the other hand view leadership as being distinctly different from management. They describe transformational leadership as working with and through others in accomplishing *shared goals* (Björk et al. 2005). Rost (1991) defined transformational leadership as, "an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes" (p.162). Kowalski (2006) notes transformational leadership occurs at a personal level through interaction among individuals and at an organizational level changing culture. Transformational leaders empower others, contribute to enhancing individual commitment and build a sense of community and shared ownership that sustains change processes.

During the past several decades, the confluence of national reform mandates, postindustrial leadership perspectives (Rost 1991), and interest in changing the culture of schools through decentralization and distributed leadership (Elmore 2000) have provided the impetus as well as strategies for implementing educational reform.

2.2 Macro and micropolitics

In general the term "politics" refers to decisions about the allocation of goods in society or an organization (e.g.) who gets what, when and how (Laswell 1990). The terms macropolitics and micropolitics refer to two broad dimensions of the politics of education and involve conflictual as well as cooperative processes including individual and group interests, power and influence, strategic interaction, values, and

ideologies (Ball 1987; Blase and Björk, 2009). In the United States, macropolitics of education describe the school district's external environment and its relationships at the local, state, and federal levels as well as interaction of private and public organizations within, between, and among these levels (Cibulka 2001). Scholars concur that nationally-initiated legislation including educational reform and interaction among private and public organizations have significant effects on politics at the district and school levels related to adoption and implementation processes (Blase and Björk 2009). Beginning in the early 1990's policy studies in education focused on reform implementation processes. For example, Boyd (1991) observes that evidence is mounting that most influential policy makers are those who actually implement legislation, individuals who may reshape or even resist the intentions of policies promulgated by those at higher levels. Given this, study of the micropolitics in schools and districts is a way to understand the differences between policy rhetoric and the reality of implementation, i.e., the "implementation gap" of educational reform (e.g., Mawhinney 1999).

Blase and Blase (2000) have persuasively argued that micropolitics is a critical aspect of many organizational structures and processes, and often constitutes the *central mechanism* through which major organizational outcomes related to school change and reform are produced:

An organization's political processes, for example, a school's formal and informal (e.g., organizational stakeholders and their power sources, interests, ideologies, and interchanges) as well as its political culture (e.g., patterns of interests, ideologies, decision making, power distribution) dramatically influence most school outcomes, including teaching and learning. The degree to which political processes and political culture account for a given outcome (e.g., decision, policy, program, practice, event) varies, of course, from one school to another and, over time, within the same school. (p.10).

In effect, micropolitical processes and structures make up a school or district offices "political culture" and account for both stability and change in school settings. It is evident that some political forces may work to maintain the status quo, while others serve the interests of change and reform (Ball 1987; Blase and Björk 2009). In most instances, externally-imposed educational reform initiatives must contend with existing internal political cultures that either protect the school's status quo or advance change (Ball 1987; Blase and Björk 2009). Blase (1998) notes that during periods of externally-imposed educational reform change dynamics including ambiguity, uncertainty, diversity and goal disparity tend to increase the level and intensity of political interaction within the school or district office (Blase 1998). As the intensity of political interaction increases and new micropolitical processes and structures emerge and become more visible.

During the past two decades, political studies suggest that micropolitics is ubiquitous and a natural occurrence to everyday life in schools and districts. Recognition that the roles of superintendents and district-level middle managers are crucial to successful program implementation (Björk 2005b) has heightened attention to their roles as democratic (i.e.) political leaders (Björk 2000). Their capacity to successfully handle the political dynamics of communities and school boards and to build community-based business coalitions have provided the

continuity necessary for successful implementation of many district-wide educational reform initiatives (Björk 2005a). Berends et al. (2003) found that superintendents were key to building political support needed to establish a professional climate essential to improving learning and teaching within schools as well as effectively communicating the purpose and status of change initiatives to the local community. Although superintendents are often viewed as pivotal actors in successful implementation of educational reforms, they may also use their position and political influence to impede progress (Björk 2005b). Hoffman and Burrello (2004) found that superintendents' needs for power and control compromised efforts to improve learning and teaching in low achieving schools and Bondy et al. (1994) reported that superintendents undermined efforts to empower teachers. Hargreaves (1991) reported that superintendents used their influence to give the appearance of collegiality (i.e., "contrived collegiality") among teachers and Smylie and Crowson (1993) observed that their giving a disproportionate level of power to principals engaged in developing site-based management in their schools undermined teacher empowerment and distributive leadership initiatives.

At the middle management level of the school district organization (i.e. central office) personnel are often viewed as bureaucratic functionaries. However, findings suggest that their position and expert knowledge enables them to facilitate restructuring processes and protect innovations from interference. In this regard, they are viewed as key to successful implementation of school reform (Björk 2001b). In contrast, studies also indicate that central office administrators impede school reform (Skrla et al. 2000; Rusch 2005; Honig 2003). Findings from these studies affirm that micropolitical processes are a normal part of organizational life and may intensify when educational reforms are externally imposed. Although studies demonstrate that superintendents and middle managers play key roles in district change initiatives, few studies contribute to understanding the *central mechanism* (i.e., micropolitical processes and structures) that contribute to the success or failure of educational reform initiatives.

3 Research methods

Qualitative research techniques, particularly those associated with longitudinal case studies, were used to gain an in depth understanding of the micropolitics of educational reform. These techniques produced first hand, contextually relevant knowledge (Cresswell 2008) during a ten-year period (1998–2008) of the perspectives (i.e., meanings, behavior) of individuals who participated in a decentralization initiative (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). Several data sources were used to reconstruct events including official documents (memoranda, letters, district-level reports), and informal and semi-structured interviews with key individuals including the superintendent, associate superintendent, program directors, principals, and teachers. Triangulation methods (Denzin 1970) increased the validity and reliability of data used to prepare descriptive narratives of events. The identity of individuals and places have been masked to ensure anonymity. This research approach proved a powerful way to develop the "analytical, conceptual, and categorical components from the data itself" (Filstead 1979, p. 33).

A constant comparative approach (Glaser and Stauss 1967) to review of the literature proceeded concurrently with the data collection; this enhanced the researchers' capacity to develop and refine analytical, conceptual, and categorical components as they emerged from data (Creswell 2008). Consequently, researchers engaged in a reiterative cycle of definition, data collection, analysis, and subsequent redefinition throughout the study. Micropolitics emerged as a major factor that hindered superintendent's success at implementing a district-wide decentralization initiative.

4 Case study: The micropolitics of decentralization

The Drayton County Public School District serves mid-sized, suburban city in the Southern eastern region of the United States of America. Of the 35,000 of students enrolled in the school district nearly 64% are African-American and come from low income families. During the last decade national commission and task force reports captured the attention of prominent businessmen and influential citizens. Such individuals recognized the link between the quality of the community's schools and the community's economic well-being and acknowledged that low student test scores may undercut efforts to attract new investment and business essential to economic growth in the county. Consequently, they initiated a broad-based, inclusive school improvement effort known as *the Drayton County Economic Compact*. The "Compact" laid out a comprehensive plan for improving the quality of instruction for all children in the district and provided the platform to move aggressively to adopt the states mandated Site-Based Management (SBM) Program to enable educators and parents in local schools to identify problems and to make their own decisions about corrective action. The Compact also provided the rational for revitalizing the County education system and grounding efforts to enlist reform-minded candidates from the business community as candidates in the upcoming school board election. The election seated two additional pro-reform members to the school board. One of the school board's most important post-election decisions was to hire Scott Bell as the new superintendent to develop and implement two key reform initiatives: Site-Based Management (SBM) and Total Quality Management (TQM) initiatives. The new superintendent recognized that the Drayton County School District, a highly centralized, bureaucratic system with 4,500 employees, was comfortable with its organization and time-honored ways of doing work; clearly, changes in organizational structures in decision making processes would be a challenge.

In order to lay a solid foundation for district reform initiatives Scott Bell met regularly with a key members of community constituent groups that helped to craft its education provisions. One of his first initiatives was to establish a District Leadership Team (DLT) to help guide the development of a comprehensive decentralization plan for the District. The DLT was composed of middle managers (i.e. "central office") staff members who reported directly to the superintendent. The major task of this group was to ensure that the district's structure and middle managers' roles were aligned to support new school level administrative and decision making responsibilities. It was clear that over time the roles of DLT members would shift from providing direct supervision and regulatory oversight to supporting principals by working with and through them to achieve district goals.

Although administrative accountability, decentralization, and site-based management had been openly discussed in the district for several years, Scott Bell said that his restructuring efforts “caught many veteran school administrators and central office staff unprepared”. As the number of district-level middle managers was reduced to reflect shifts in the devolution of administration to schools, some aligned themselves politically with influential individuals in the community, the school board, and members of the DLT to preserve their jobs. Other middle managers chose to resign, retire, or transfer to other administrative duties rather than alter the way they did work, and others forged ahead to support these change initiatives.

Middle managers’ reaction to decentralization varied. Although all three Associate Superintendents were committed to implementing SBM and TQM they reported directly to the Deputy Superintendent for Instruction who was reluctant to relinquish authority in decision making and governance matters to school principals, teachers, and parents. The district’s present organizational structure gave her complete decision making authority. Despite restructuring initiatives promoted by the superintendent one principal remarked that “in the future, nothing will happen without her consent.” Superintendent Bell was aware of this Deputy Superintendents’ and other middle managers’ reluctance to decentralize the District’s governance authority and shift decision making to the school level. He made it clear to all “that their job was to support decentralization, and if they didn’t they would lose their jobs.” Most middle managers realized that if decentralization were successful they would be out of work! Scott Bell was particularly troubled by the Deputy Superintendents lack of support for decentralization and explored his option of replacing her with members of the school board. They cautioned that she was tied closely to key political power structures in the community and that she would be difficult to remove. In fact, they cautioned that her ties were so strong any attempt to remove her could jeopardize his position as superintendent. Not surprisingly this increased the difficulty of implementing the district’s educational reform initiatives.

One of the most important elements of the District’s decentralization plan was to shift financial responsibility directly to school-level SBM councils. The District’s Chief Financial Officer, Albert Wehrley was committed to shifting financial responsibility to schools. He prepared the *Preliminary Budget Preparation Booklet* and distributed it at a district-level budget meeting. He explained that site-based councils and Building Leadership Teams (BLT) would be responsible for future school program and budget decisions and that these had to be directly linked to achieve reforms outlined in the *Compact*. Middle managers reported that many principals who were at that meeting had never attended a district-level budget meeting before. In the past principals received budget information from their supervisors on an “as needed basis.” Anne Mackey, an elementary school principal, commented, that “in the past all we did was consult with program directors and the Deputy Superintendent and make a few minor adjustments to our budgets. Now we’re being asked to develop our school budget ourselves and we are going to need help.” John Masterson, a district-level program director, was frustrated and said “We are being held increasingly accountable for delivering programs and yet we don’t have control over the money!” During the following months, many central office administrators watched as their program area budgets were shifted to schools prospects for maintaining their present positions were diminished.

Over the next several months principals met with their Building Leadership Teams (BLT) and struggled with district program planning requirements, developing program and school budgets, preparing staffing requests, and justifying how they would use allocated resources to support academic goals. In late July, a follow up meeting was held to ensure that school-based decision making, particularly decision making related to program planning and budgeting processes, were in place and operating efficiently. Mr. Bender, a middle management program director, listened to the budget analyst's description of budget preparation procedures, approval processes and deadlines. The next day he sent a memorandum to his staff and principals directing them to submit all program plans and budget requests to him for approval a week prior to the District Budget Office's deadline. Consistent with past practice, he asked that any requests that were different from the previous year's allocation must be accompanied by written justifications and signed by principals. This caused some concern among principals who called the District Budget Office for clarification on which budget submission procedures were correct. They wondered whether the District's or Mr. Bender's procedures would take precedent and when their respective budgets would be approved. The District's Chief Financial Officer (CFO), Albert Wehrley instructed his Budget Office to confirm what he said in both meetings as well as what was stipulated in the *Preliminary Budget Preparation Booklet*; i.e., "all school-based budgets were to be sent directly to the Budget Office." Although principals were aware that Mr. Bender's memorandum contradicted the District's SBM policy and the instructions of the CFO, they prudently avoided confrontation and gave Mr. Bender what he wanted. In instances in which budget information did not conform to Mr. Bender's expectations, his staff called principals for clarification before he approved their budgets and forwarded them to the Budget Office. In short, it was business as usual.

After nearly 4 years, SBM continued to be an issue for some middle managers. Superintendent Bell was pleased that most middle managers were committed to SBM, however, many chose to form alliances with the Deputy Superintendent and other middle managers who were supported by influential members of the school board and political community. These political ties constrained efforts by Scott Bell to terminate her and others so he could implement the district's decentralization plan as originally intended. Eventually, community commitment to reform waned. Furthermore, support by the school board weakened after three members, who were representatives of the business coalition that supported the *Compact*, declined to run for re-election. This left the school board election open to those who had deep roots in the community, ties to special interest groups, and links to the Deputy Superintendent who opposed the educational reform initiative. After the elections new members openly expressed their opposition to District decentralization (SBM) and expressed their desire to return to traditional, top down management practices. Dr. Bell said,

"I actually had board members come to me and say that I should be making more of the management decisions in the district." In addition, he recalled, "the board president changed from being involved in policy formation and supportive of SBM to becoming involved in the day-to-day affairs of the district and trying to micro manage the system. We had board members going

into schools talking to teachers, bringing information back to board meetings, and proposing policy based on one incident...Some board members became more vocal on who was hired, who got contracts...When everything became political, things started to unravel”.

Changes in board policies had a chilling effect on middle management administrators, principals, and Building Leadership Team (BLT) members who had been committed to the educational reform initiative. The Drayton Middle School principal said that,

“even though the board gave lip service to the need for reform and decentralization, recently they endorsed procedures that required schools to report to them through the central office hierarchy...there is a great deal of pressure to standardize schools so data would conform to reporting requirements. That is a controlling factor. So there’s a tendency of middle management to continue to standardize everything...I have done this so long, I have learned to play the game and survive. I do it even though it’s not consistent with what SBM is all about...what the central office says is, ‘we are here to serve and help you’, but, in their next breath they say, ‘this is how you’re going to do things.’”

Three years later and another round of school board elections, only three of the members of the original reform board remained in office. Changes in board membership continued to alter internal power relationships and changed relationships with the superintendent, and resulted in modified district decentralization policies. Several years later J.R. Holland, a middle school principal reflected, “when the power structure on the board changed, it had an impact on the district. We had to constantly figure out where we fit in and decide if what they said is what they meant. It takes time to figure it out and we are still in a period of uncertainty.” Superintendent Bell noted that there was a perceptible shift from initial expectations of the board to confine their work to making policy and allowing him carry them out. Over time the board openly expressed its desire for him to serve as a traditional “top down” manager; they also became directly involved in the day-to-day management (i.e., micromanagement) of the District. These changes caused considerable tension between the board and the superintendent. After serving 8 years as the Drayton County School District superintendent Dr. Bell resigned.

The board of education hired the Deputy Superintendent as interim superintendent on a one-year contract and subsequently offered her a standard 3 year contract. She had been a teacher as well as a principal in the district, Deputy Superintendent and then Superintendent. Many educators felt that her top down management orientation would be a good fit with perspectives held by the board of education. A decade after Drayton County Schools launched its reform agenda, the board of education had abandoned ideals expressed in the *Compact*, abandoned notions of decentralization and reinstated the same hierarchical structure and a management orientation that previously characterized the district. Middle managers who aligned themselves with the Associate Superintendent retained their positions. Others left. One principal reflected, “it’s pretty much in place, all set in stone. Each one of the different departments at the central office has rules and regulations and we all follow orders. That’s the way things are done.”

Even though a majority of board members said they supported the District's decentralization and distributed leadership initiatives (SBM), the way the district was organized and operated reflected a dramatically different reality. The board hired a superintendent who was politically aligned to very influential community interest groups. She embraced a traditional "top down" management style and thus redefined middle managers roles from providing support services to enacting supervisory oversight. One principal commented, "the bureaucracy is there and the mechanisms haven't changed. Even though you can suppress the norms and culture of an organization, when you take the lid off, they will come back. Even though we talk about decentralization and SBM we are asked to make it function as a bureaucracy."

5 Findings

During the past several decades superintendent leadership has emerged as an important element to successful implementation of large-scale school reform. Here the leadership role of one superintendent involved in a district-wide decentralization initiative using longitudinal case study methods we examined the Drayton County School District between 1998–2008. Events were analyzed using concepts from the macro and micropolitical literature. These concepts heightened understanding of the nature and complexity of superintendents work in reform contexts. We found that the influence of the external political environment as well as internal conflictual and cooperative processes involving individuals, political interest groups, power and influence added to the complexity of the District's problems. Blase (1991) argued that micropolitics is a critical aspect of many organizational structures and processes, and often constitutes the *central mechanism* through which major organizational outcomes related to school change and reform are produced. Clearly, micropolitical processes and structures contributed to understanding the school district's "political culture" and helped to explain middle managers behavior directed either towards maintaining stability or enacting changes in this school district setting.

The national educational reform movement in the United States was launched and sustained by reports released by national commissions and task forces. The reports created a policy environment in which the national government, state legislatures and departments of education, local communities and boards of education and school districts administrators were compelled to take corrective action to improve the quality of public schools. This reform environment was significant, not only in its magnitude and duration, but also in shifting emphasis from fixing one school at a time to redesigning entire school systems (Björk 2008).

Initiatives launched by the Drayton County Public Schools including decentralization (SBM), distributed leadership and Total Quality Management (TQM) reflected the complexity of the national and state policy environment. These initiatives were either advanced by national commission reports, federal agencies, the state legislature or were endorsed by a wide array of professors, practitioners, private entrepreneurs or political ideologues as highly promising interventional strategies. Macropolitics of education encompasses the school districts external environment as well as its relationships at the local, state, and federal levels as well as private and public sector organizations. The external policy environment of the

Drayton County Public School District involved relations and interactions between and among organizations including state agencies, local business groups, and national interest groups that shared a common interest in advancement of educational reform (Cibulka 2001). These entities influenced adoption of their reform agendas that included decentralization (SBM), distributed leadership and Total Quality Management (TQM) (Blase and Björk 2009). These influence patterns underscore the importance of understanding the how the macropolitical environment may influence decisions at the local school district level.

The study discussed in this article suggests that school boards, superintendents and middle management personnel directly involved in implementing legislated reform mandates are influential policy makers (Boyd 1991). Events observed in the Drayton County School District case study point out that individuals shaped and reshaped decentralization, distributed leadership and TQM programs to fit local needs. In addition, middle managers both advanced and resisted the intentions of decentralization policies formulated at higher levels (state legislature and local board of education). Such practices affirm Boyd's (1991) contention that those responsible for implementing reforms exercise considerable policy influence. Study findings also contribute to understanding the micropolitics of school district middle management and in particular explain discrepancies between policy rhetoric and the reality of implementation, what Mawhinney (1999) refers to as the "implementation gap" of educational reform.

Successful implementation of system-wide change is highly dependent on superintendents' ability to redefine the roles of middle managers and enlist their support in implementing district-wide decentralization and distributed leadership initiatives (Björk 2005b). Some middle managers acquiesce and support innovation however others protect their vested interests and resist changing their roles by engaging in micropolitics (Blase and Björk 2009). Research suggests that the capacity of superintendents to redefine the purpose and nature of middle managers' roles may, in fact, determine their ability to implement large scale reforms (Fullan 2004); other research indicates that little is known about micropolitics among middle managers and how they influence outcomes of change initiatives (Blase and Björk 2009). Micropolitics involves conflictive and cooperative processes that shape school and district offices "political culture" and in so doing, constitute the *central mechanism* through which organizational outcomes are decided. In general, political forces work to maintain the status quo and resist change in a school or school district and others serve the interests of change and reform (Ball 1987; Blase and Björk 2009). Micropolitical processes become more apparent during periods of externally-imposed educational change as the intensity of political interaction increases (Blase 1998). Events observed in the Drayton County School District case suggest that although the superintendent was involved in District Leadership Team (DLT) and collaboratively redefined the roles of middle managers, some acquiesced and supported the initiative and others resisted changes through micropolitical processes.

To illustrate, the District Finance Officer developed and implemented a system that gave greater discretion to principals in accessing and using district resources. However, program-level middle managers compromised the school budget initiative through normative review processes that existed under the Districts centralized, bureaucratic system. As the decentralization progressed, changes to middle managers'

roles intensified and resistance increased. Many middle managers who saw that both resistance and support of the superintendent's decentralization directives would jeopardize their jobs decided to align themselves with the Deputy Superintendent who was politically supported by some school board members. Over time they gained confidence as school board elections seated additional members who openly called for overturning the district's decentralization policy. Middle managers used thinly veiled resistance tactics including "routine" program reviews, making decisions for principals who missed deadlines to which they were not privy and department-level approval processes. Although these were not egregious instances of insubordination they did contravene the spirit and the intent of the decentralization policy and in time derailed it. As one principal observed, nothing had changed. Middle managers remained in control of district operations and their positions were secure.

6 Conclusion

Although the national debate on educational reform in the United States has dominated the education landscape for policy making for nearly three decades, understanding the success and failure of implementation is not well understood. Although we are aware that macropolitical processes involving local, state, and federal government agencies as well as private sector entities influence school and district educational reform policies (Blase and Björk 2009) our understanding of micropolitical process at the school district middle management level is in a nascent stage of development. Although superintendents' leadership role is central to implementation processes, their success and failure may be largely determined by middle managers' level of support or resistance. Middle managers are strategically positioned in the school districts organization's structure to mediate implementation of school board policies and superintendent directives. When they perceive reform policies as threatening their positions in the organization and future well-being, they may act to protect their interests by undermining implementation efforts. In the Drayton County case study it was evident that as implementation progressed, the level of resistance to change accelerated and the intensity of political interaction increased, making new micropolitical processes more visible (Blase and Björk 2009). Micropolitical processes included building political alliances within the community's political power structure to alter the nature and direction of implementation as well as overturning policy decisions. Boyd's (1991) notion that those who implement legislation may be influential policy actors is insightful. Middle managers occupy strategic positions in the organization and may reshape and even resist intentions of policies promulgated by officials at higher levels. Micropolitics of middle management help explain the "implementation gap" (Mawhinney 1999) and illuminate political issues that superintendents' face in implementing district educational reform initiatives. Findings from this study also suggest that micropolitics of district middle management limited the superintendent's capacity to collect evaluation information on the implementation of new policies, programs and practices as well as interfered with his ability to take corrective action at administrative, school board and community levels. Although evaluation

information may be improved by attaining greater details about implementation processes as suggested by Brinkman (1987) those efforts may be compromised by middle management staff whose job security is threatened and who are prepared to protect their interests by undermining implementation, evaluation and improvement initiatives. These circumstances not only may undermine normative program evaluation and improvement processes but add a new dimension to the notion of accountability for educational reform that was discussed by Scriven (1993).

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