

Districts' Use of Research to Support Struggling Schools

AYPF Forum - 2/4/13

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Making the Hippos Dance



Spoiler Alert - Evidence

- Data and research: interchangeable and treated with skepticism
- Educators rarely diagnose problems of low performance or consider evidence in support of improvement strategies
- Use of evidence for improvement is superficial, with educators relying on less credible evidence
- School/district climates do not support use of research or collaboration necessary for organizational learning

Spoiler Alert - Networks

- “New” ideas and practices are least likely to reach lowest-performing schools
- Weak internal connections and high levels of distrust are exacerbated by pressure of accountability policy sanctions

Spoiler Alert – Networks (cont.)

- Central offices play an important role in supporting (or constraining) the work of schools
- Higher levels of trust results in exchange of best practices and ability to bring about complex change across a system
- Movement of evidence is highly reliant on “brokers”

Our work

- 5 year longitudinal study (2008-2013)
- 1 mid-size and 1 large urban district (currently expanding to 2 more large districts)
- Over 900 educators involved (survey/interview) at school and district levels
- Funded by W.T. Grant Foundation and Spencer Foundation

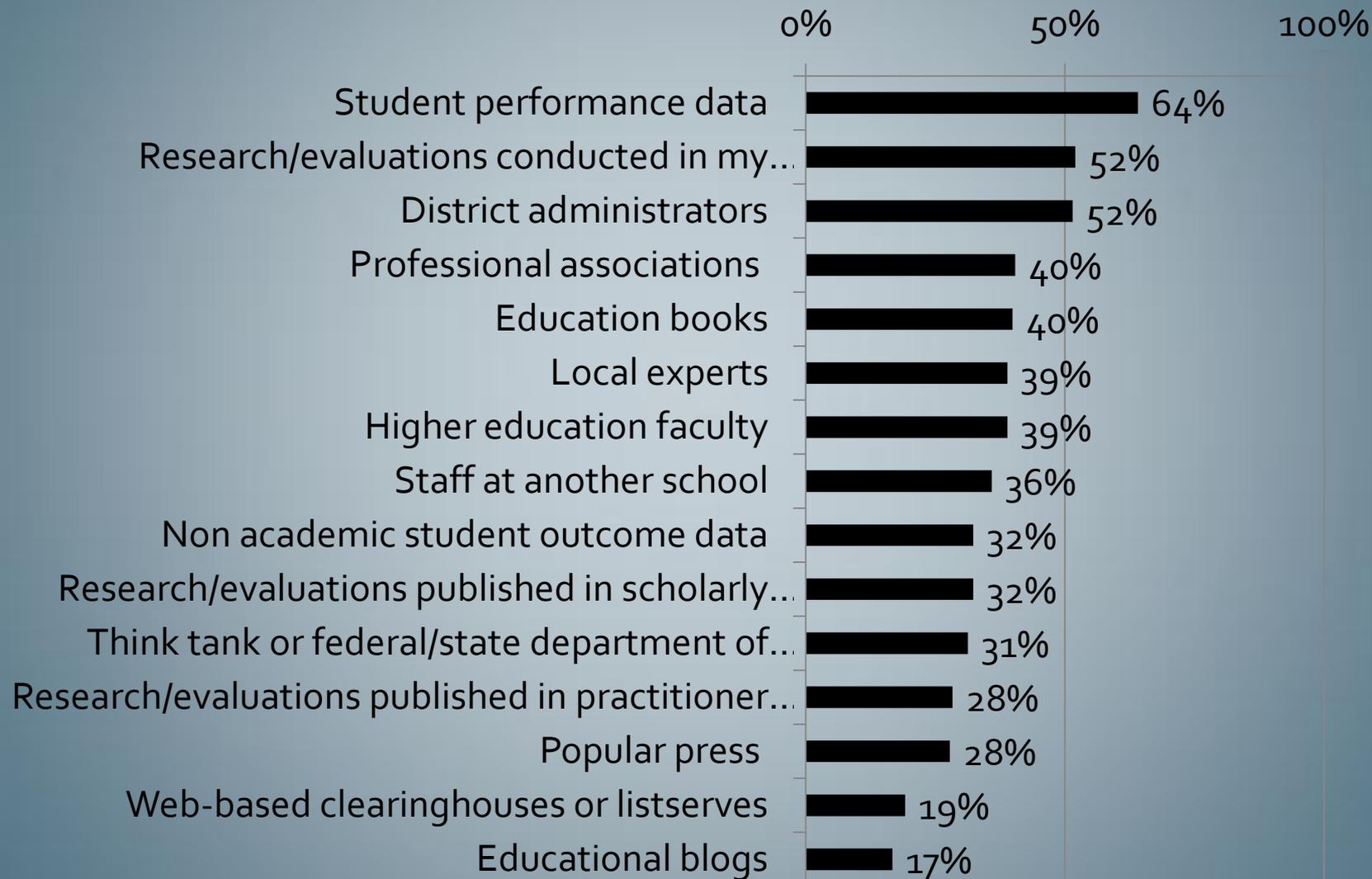
Moving Information



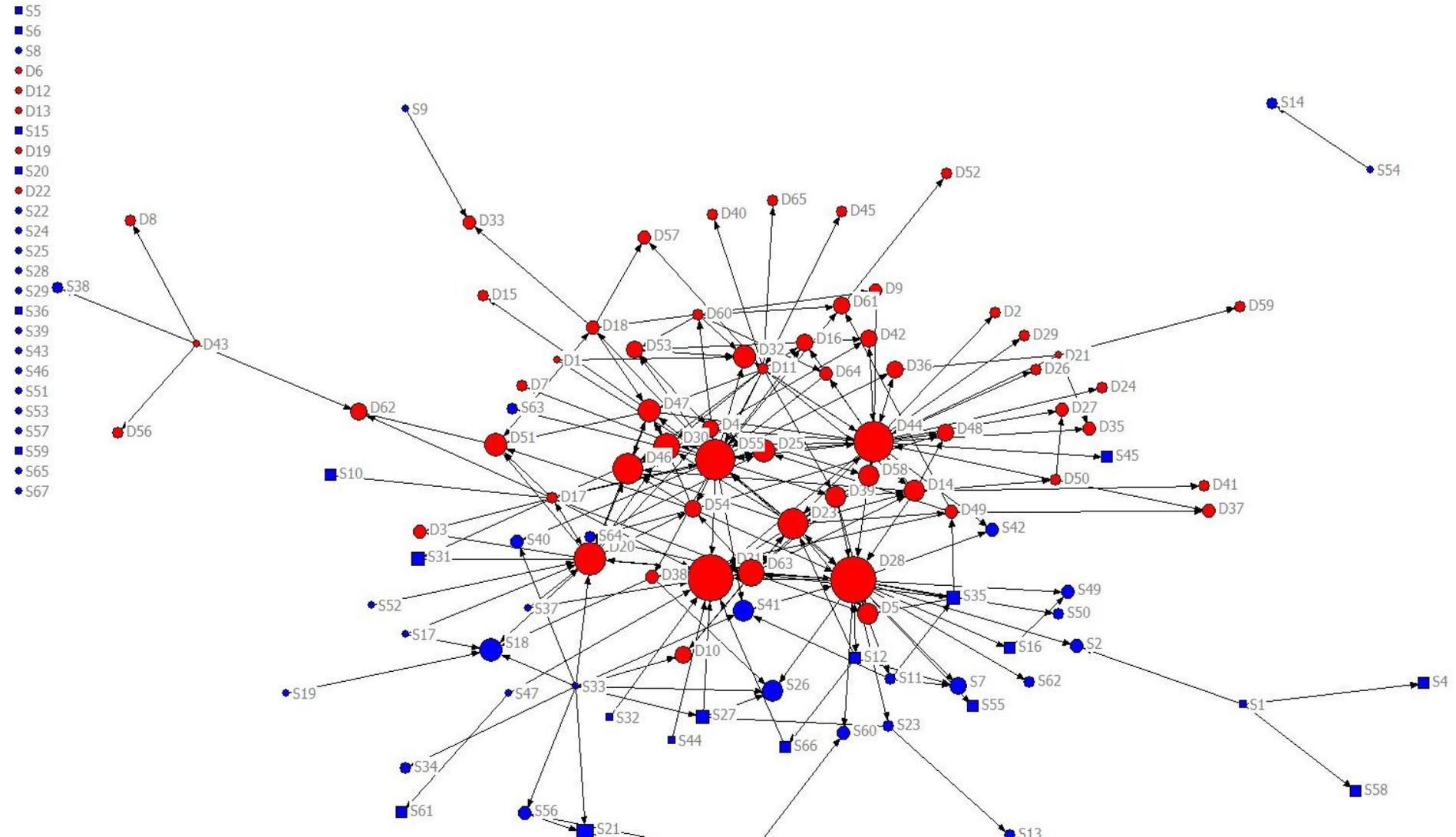
Finding: Narrow View of Evidence

“When I think of evidence in school improvement I think of statistics. I think of drop out rates. I think of test scores. I think of the GPA of students and how that’s factoring in. I don’t necessarily agree that those are the best way to show but I think that if you’re looking for an objective way in a numbers based kind of No Child Left Behind manner then that’s pretty much what you’re looking at.”

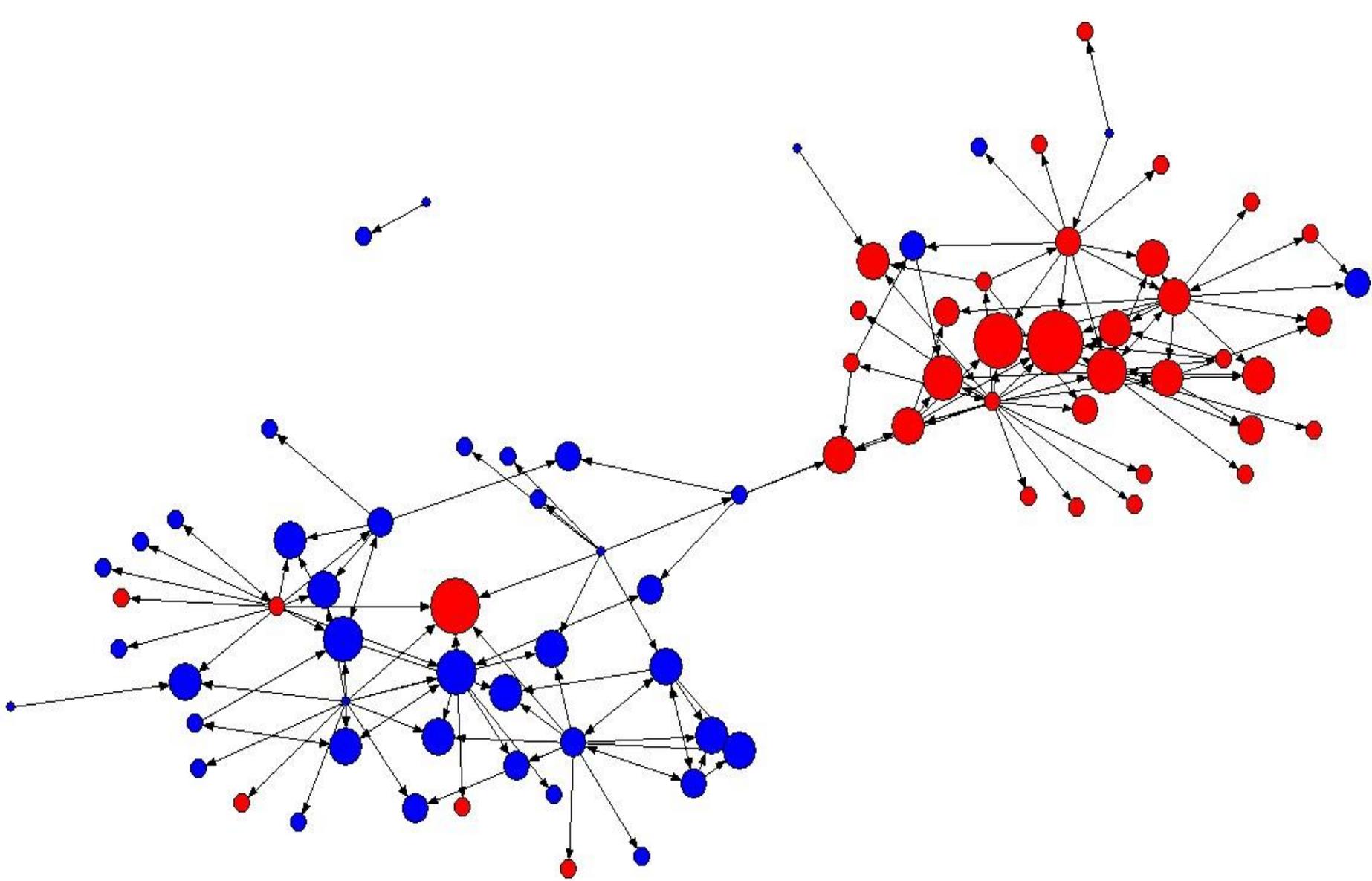
Finding: Types of Evidence Used



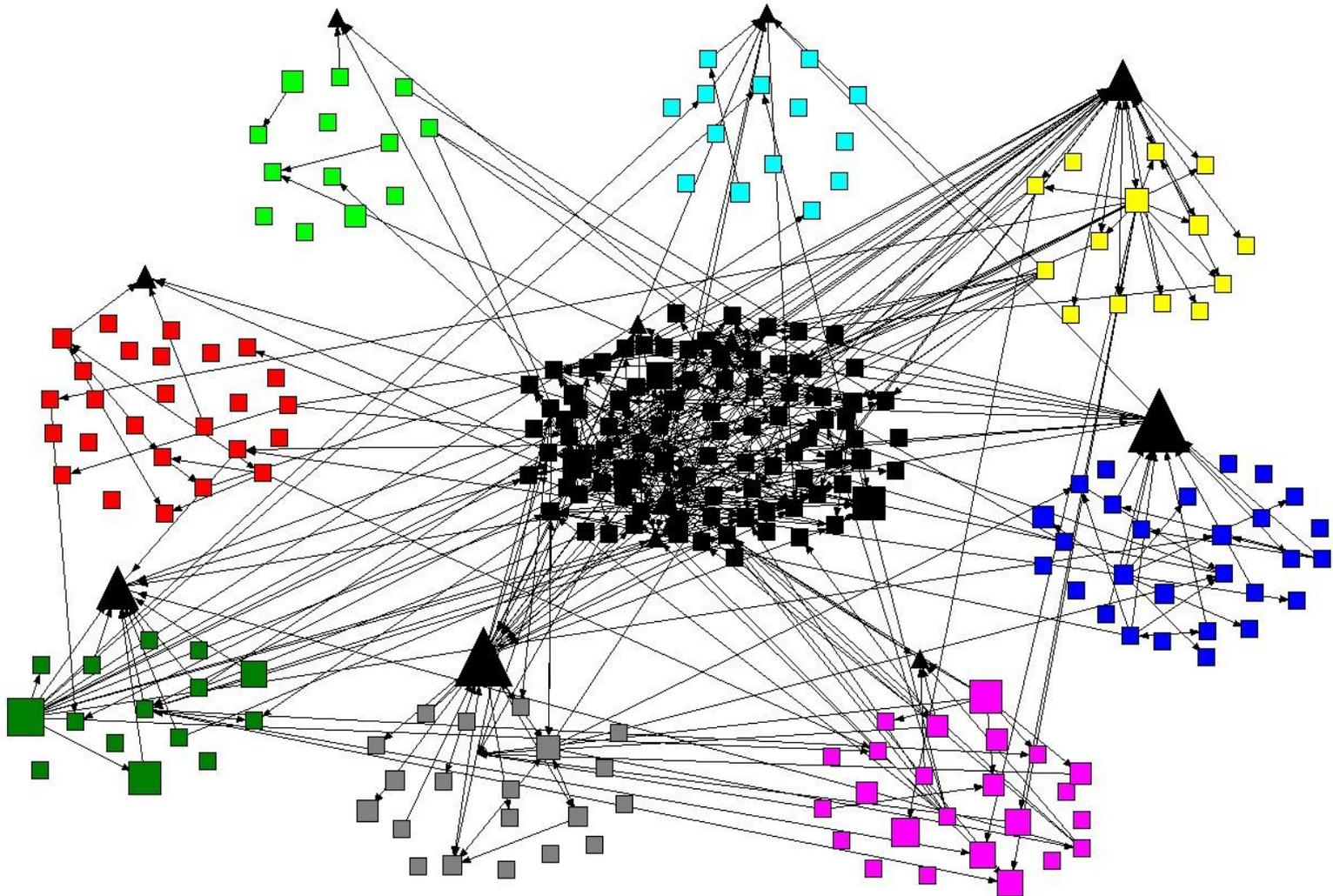
Finding: Weak Ties; Isolation of Leaders in Low-Performing Schools



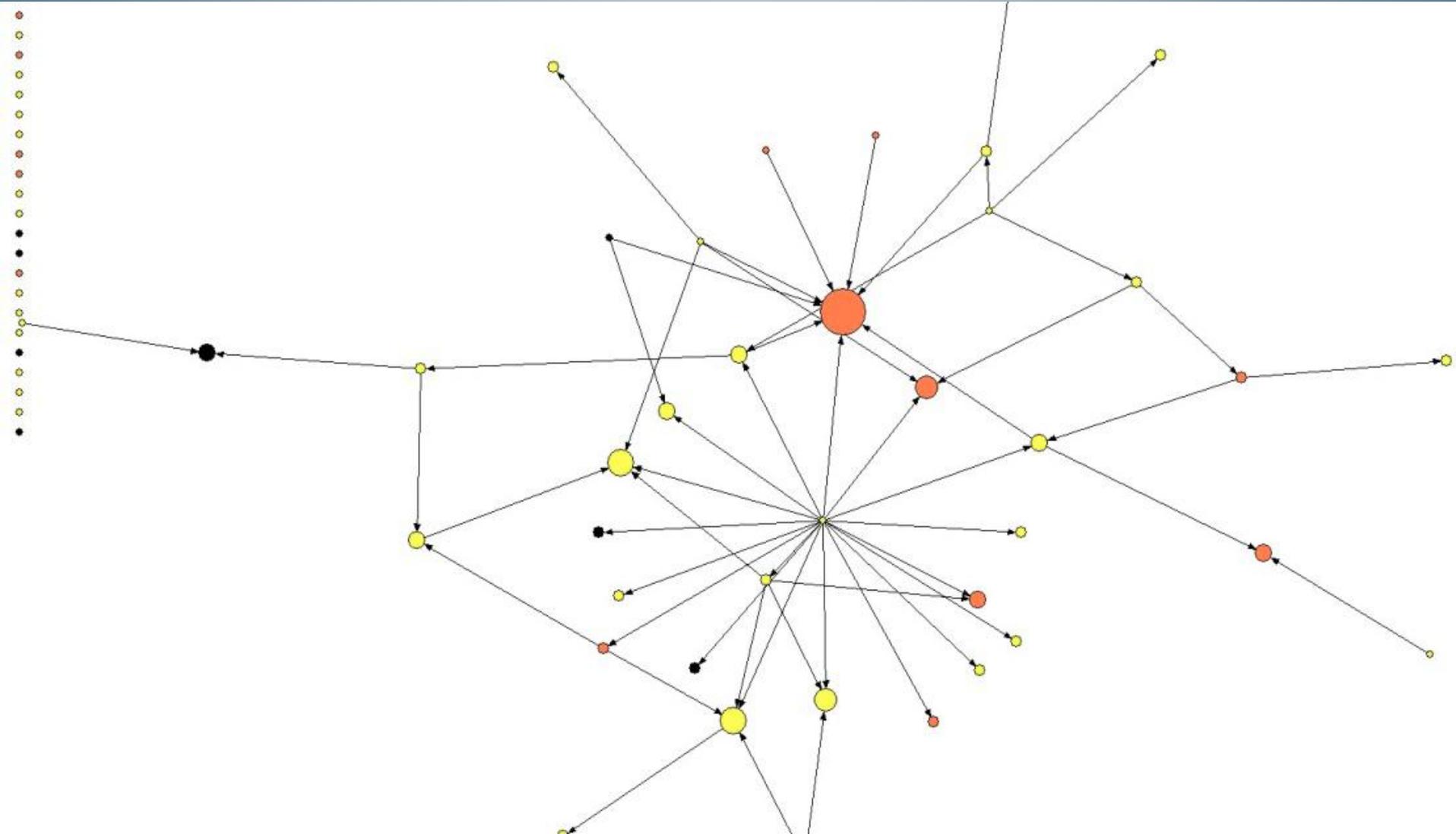
Finding: Bifurcation of the System



Finding: Importance of District-Level Brokers of Research



Finding: Importance of Principals as Brokers of Research at School Level



Policy Implications

- Emphasis on technical aspects of improvement overlooks relational component to complex, system-wide change
- Moving from compliance oriented responses to capacity-building systems
- Lack of attention to preparation and professional development of leaders (district/school) throughout the system (area sups, principals) relating to evidence interpretation may limit capacity for brokering
- Continued emphasis on consequences (with little attention to support) may increase the distrust and fragmentation that already exists in low-performing systems



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Related Publications

- Finnigan, K. S., Daly, A., J., & Che, J. (in press). The acquisition and use of evidence districtwide. *Journal of Educational Administration*.
- Daly, A. J., & Finnigan, K. S. (2012). The social side of district change: Relationships can play a key role in reform efforts. *District Administration*, 34.
- Finnigan, K. S., & Daly, A. J. (2012). Mind the gap: Learning, Trust, and Relationships in an Underperforming Urban District. *American Journal of Education*, 119(1), 41-71.
- Finnigan, K., Daly, A., & Stewart, T. (2012). Organizational learning in schools under sanction. *Education Research International*. vol. 2012, Article ID 270404, 10 pages, 2012. doi:10.1155/2012/270404.
- Daly, A., & Finnigan, K. (2012). Exploring the space between: Social networks, trust, and urban school district leaders. *Journal of School Leadership*, 22(3), 493-530.
- Daly, A., & Finnigan, K. (2011). The ebb and flow of network ties between district leaders: A case of structural inertia. *American Educational Research Journal*, 48(1), 39-79.
- Finnigan, K., & Daly, A. (2010). Learning at the system level: Ties between principals of low-performing schools and central office leaders. In Alan J. Daly (Ed), *Social Network Theory and Educational Change* (pp. 179-196). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Daly, A.J., & Finnigan, K. (2009). A bridge between worlds: Understanding network structure to understand change strategy. *Journal of Educational Change*, 11(2), 111-138.