How Do States Implement College- and Career-Readiness Standards?

A Distributed Leadership Analysis of Standards-Based Reform

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September 2018

Citation of published study:
Pak, K., & Desimone, L. M. (2018). How do states implement college-and career-readiness standards? A distributed leadership analysis of standards-based reform. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 0013161X18799463.

Abstract

This study examines the implementation of college- and- career- readiness content standards in Kentucky, Ohio, and Texas through the lens of distributed leadership theory, and determines the affordances and challenges of this distributed leadership through the lens of policy attribute theory. Data sources are 66, hour-long interviews of state and district administrators across the three states collected from Spring 2016 to Spring 2017. Based on distributed leadership and policy attribute theories, state leaders exhibited similar behaviors regarding the distribution of instructional leadership to regional, district, and organizational leaders to add specificity to the CCR standards, at the expense of compromising the consistency and power of the reform. This distribution of leadership is thought to contribute to the authority of the reform, though this authority is made tenuous by the instability of educational policies at the national and state levels. This analysis highlights the need to examine the implementation of education policy using leadership frameworks, and to leadership relationships between the state their regional and district partners.

Close your eyes and picture "educational leadership." You probably conjured up images of school principals, district leaders, or state superintendents. It is less likely that you thought about administrators in state education agencies (SEAs) who must also demonstrate leadership as they support districts in their day-to-day work of serving public schools. Similarly, the recently reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act, labeled the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, focuses on the leadership development of school principals and teachers as key levers for achieving educational goals (Young, Winn & Reedy, 2017), with no mention of the importance of leadership at the SEA level. This omission signals either an implicit assumption that SEAs already lead well, or a lack of theorizing about leadership emanating from SEAs. We argue that because the leadership of SEA officials is often not the object of study, we are missing critical opportunities to understand how and why educational reform unfolds successfully or unsuccessfully across state systems. By examining the practices of SEA officials as they support statewide efforts to implement college- and career- readiness standards, we seek to contribute to the limited literature on state-level educational leadership.

While there is generally consensus around the view that K-12 education should rigorously prepare students for the expectations of 21st century colleges and careers, there is less consensus on how educational leaders should mobilize resources and human capital to support this goal. The idea of college and career readiness (CCR) gained national popularity during the Obama Administration (Malin, Bragg, & Hackmann, 2017), especially with the advent of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2009. CCR standards such as these are designed to "increase the rigor of education in the United States… [and] to help bridge the gap between K-12 education and college and career readiness, a concern of policy makers nationwide" (Konrad et al., 2014, p. 76). CCR officially became a fixture of the federal education reform movement

when ESSA required states to align their educational systems with CCR standards (Young, Winn, & Reedy, 2017). Currently, all 50 states and the District of Columbia have adopted K-12 English language arts (ELA) and mathematics CCR content standards. Despite this trend, we know little about leadership practices that successfully or unsuccessfully facilitate the state-wide implementation of CCR standards.

To manage the daunting scope of CCR standards-based reform, state leaders must think strategically about how to leverage resources—not just their own agency's resources but also supports and expertise available from various sources throughout the state, including regional centers, universities, research organizations, local districts, and stakeholder groups. ESSA also requires them to specifically improve the experiences of marginalized student populations such as low-income students, students with disabilities (SWDs), English language learners (ELLs), and students of color (Young, Winn, & Reedy, 2017). As part of the work of the Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning (C-SAIL), we are examining the state leadership systems in place to orchestrate large-scale reforms, especially for these underserved student populations. While we study state and district supports for all students, we pay special attention to the two subgroups of students for whom specific SEA offices exist, SWDs and ELLs, as they are not integrated as frequently into general policy analyses on standards-based reform as low-income students of color. In this paper, we apply two theoretical frameworks to our exploration of statewide reforms: we use a *distributed leadership framework* to analyze statewide practices that influence the implementation of CCR standards, and we use the *policy attributes framework* to investigate how those practices improve or hinder standards implementation.

A distributed leadership lens focuses on the interactions between leaders, followers, and situations (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004), rather than focusing solely on the actions of individual actors or institutions. In this context, the "situations" that are part of distributed leadership theory are the policy environments and artifacts that mediate the state's distributed leadership to local leaders. Though this conceptual approach was developed specifically for diagnosing or studying school leadership (Diamond & Spillane, 2016; Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016), here we expand the framework to the level of statewide educational leadership practices to capture how state and local leaders interact. Our selection of distributed leadership theory as the study's analytical lens places state-local leadership relationships at the forefront, in response to the literature's narrow focus on leadership at the school and district levels. To understand how these leadership practices related to CCR standards may cause desirable or undesirable effects, we use the policy attributes theory (see Desimone, 2002; see also Porter, 1994). The policy attributes theory posits that the more specific, consistent, authoritative, powerful, and stable a policy is, the better implementation and effects will be. We merge the distributed leadership and policy attributes approaches to analyze how leadership practices can build or diminish the specificity, consistency, authority, power, and stability of standards-based reform efforts.

Examining state policy implementation using distributed leadership and policy attributes theories is a new application of these theoretical frameworks and adds to the limited literature on SEAs and CCR standards implementation. A search through internet databases yielded very few studies on the role that SEAs play in implementing CCR initiatives. Our Center has produced case study reports describing Kentucky's, Ohio's, and Texas's SEA implementation activities, which are available online (see Flores et al., 2017; Pak et al., 2017; Stornaiuolo et al., 2017). Other research organizations such as the Center on Education Policy (CEP), the Southern

Regional Education Board (SREB), and Achieve, have also contributed to the literature by

tracking state implementation initiatives since the start of the CCR movement. Trends across

existing reports reflect state officials' emphasis on professional development (PD) and funding

local capacity building efforts as their primary mechanisms for supporting the implementation of

the standards (O'Day, 2015; Rentner & Kober, 2011; Warren & Murphy, 2014), with SREB

states focusing on ongoing support to regional service centers and schools "more intensively than

ever before" (SREB, 2015, p. 31). While federal grants helped spur these investments in PD

during the earlier stages of CCR implementation, SREB (2015) noted that by 2014, SEAs

struggled with sustaining these activities after the funds ran out.

The issue of capacity is reflected in more recent scholarship as well. Smith and Their

(2017) found that SEA officials felt that they lacked the capacity themselves to take on the

increasing number of responsibilities that ESSA allocated to states compared to previous federal

requirements—for example, states have more control over their accountability indicators and

their interventions for low performing schools. This observation is reflected in the Rentner,

Frizzell, and Kober (2017) study where 31 out of 45 states reported needing to work more

collaboratively with districts, or let districts take the lead in supporting school improvement,

because SEAs did not have the capacity to take on that workload. The concern over SEA

capacity, and the paucity of research exploring SEA agency in influencing the course of

educational reform (e.g., Furgol & Helms, 2012), necessitates more explanations on how and

why state leaders can leverage existing pathways for local leadership to cultivate the

implementation of challenging academic standards. Rather than focusing on SEA shortcomings,

as is typical in the literature (e.g., Brown, Hess, Lautzenheiser, & Owen, 2011), we intend to pay

attention to how state officials capitalize on external resources and partnerships as a form of distributed leadership.

These explanations are critical given that studies on the implementation of education policies rarely incorporate leadership principles (Seashore Louis, Thomas, Gordon, & Febey, 2008), though state leadership is necessary in establishing policy environments conducive to standards implementation (O'Day, 2015). Therefore, we extend the distributed leadership framework from its previous applications to school and district contexts (Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Jones, Lefoe, Harvey, & Ryland, 2012), to describe state and local interactions. Similarly, CCR standards implementation studies so far have tended to shed light on policies enacted by states or districts separately (Achieve, 2014; Cristol & Ramsey, 2014) but have not incorporated leadership principles to explore the state's interactive relationships with other key players (Seashore Louis et al., 2008) or investigated the networks (Russell, Meredith, Childs, Stein, & Prine, 2015) that facilitate the flow of reform throughout various tiers of the state system. Thus, we highlight aspects of statewide leadership practices that are not typically addressed in distributed leadership, SEA capacity, or CCR studies.

In this study, we use data from 66 interviews with state and district administrators in three of the Center's partner states—Kentucky, Ohio, and Texas—to answer the following research questions. What are the statewide distributed leadership practices used to make CCR standards implementation more or less specific, consistent, authoritative, powerful, and stable? How does the state interact with local leaders in support of educational change? How do national and state policy environments, as well as state artifacts, enable or constrain these leadership activities? In answering these questions, we include policies, practices, and resources that

support ultimately support teachers in implementing the CCR standards, which include

accountability systems, professional development, and curriculum, to name a few examples.

As state leaders reconceptualize their approaches to CCR standards implementation under

ESSA they must understand their own strategic capacities (Ganz, 2000) to lead ambitious

reform, a topic this paper addresses. While the nation understands the *what* behind standards-

based reform (e.g., the implementation of challenging academic content standards, the use of

standardized assessments in grades 3–8 and 10 and aligned accountability systems, the

evaluation of school staff performance), we have had few opportunities to explore the *how* and

the *why* behind states' implementation actions. We therefore pay attention to how distributed

leadership is enacted by multiple players and how and why attributes of these relationships

positively or negatively impact the successful implementation of CCR standards.

Theoretical Framework

In many ways, educational change is contingent on productive leadership relationships

that connect the various segments of a dynamic educational system: federal, state, district,

school, and classroom. However, as a field, we have theorized much more about leadership at the

district and school levels, with nascent research on teacher leadership, and extremely limited

research on federal and state leaders. What we do know is that effective school leaders can

increase and sustain school performance (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, & Luppescu,

2010; Leithwood & Strauss, 2008), by leading the instructional improvement process (Huberman

et al., 2011), building the capacity of others to take on important leadership roles (Aladjem et al.,

2010; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2015), and reallocating resources (e.g., staff, budget,

schedule) within the building (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007). Such actions have

been noted to significantly impact other school level factors such as teacher perceptions of the

work environment, changed teacher practice, strategic planning for change, and job satisfaction (Burkhauser, 2017; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Effective district leaders establish districtwide vision and goals that support teaching and learning (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988; Togneri & Anderson, 2003), which subsequently influences the coordination and dissemination of all programmatic and financial activities across the district. The question is, what do effective state leaders do as they embark on statewide initiatives that trickle down to districts and schools and impact their leadership decisions? It should be noted that federal and teacher leadership is outside the scope of this study.

To answer this question, we turn to distributed leadership theory as a framework for understanding the leadership relationships that state officials establish between themselves and their local counterparts. State leaders are not expected to demonstrate expertise on every aspect of standards-based reform, which is why they also share leadership with regional, district, and school-based actors in ways that parallel distributed leadership theory. Here, we expand on this analytical lens and show how it intersects with our second lens, policy attributes theory.

Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership as a lens emerged to reflect the growing need to stretch expertise to multiple players within a coherent system bound by a common purpose (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004), as it calls for the "coordination of collective intelligence to try to solve problems" in "complex, uncertain, and rapidly changing task environments" (Gronn, 2008, p. 148). This leadership framework subscribes to the approach of tapping into various people's expertise to share in the responsibilities of leading, allowing for specialization in certain fields, and building the capacity of multiple stakeholders to address challenges as they arise in situations specific to those stakeholders' positions (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2004).

The interdependent practices of these critical actors, and not necessarily the actors themselves, are of interest in studies of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2005). Thus, to execute distributed leadership, **state leaders**, followers (referred to as both formal and informal **local leaders** in this study), and **situations** interact to produce the movement of resources and the generation of knowledge useful for organizational change (Spillane et al., 2004). Distributed leadership is found in the relationships between these three pillars that collectively and equally make change happen (Fitzsimons, James, & Denyer, 2011; Spillane et al., 2004).

State leaders, in the context we are studying, are the key state SEA officials who set the course for reform. State leaders may choose not to make all decisions at the top level (Mayrowetz, 2008; Spillane et al., 2004) in order to develop the capacity of **local leaders** (e.g., regional coordinators, district officials) to take on important aspects of standards-based reform. These players form networks of localized leadership, which facilitate the exchange of information, expertise, human capital, and financial capital (Wohlstetter, Smith, & Malloy, 2005), as well as the coordination of collective action with a variety of public and private organizations (Russell et al., 2015) in the name of a common vision of educational improvement. They can specialize in professional development, assessment training, and curricula development, they can more effectively and flexibly intervene in times of crisis, and they help broker the expectations of the state standards (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Spillane, 2015).

State leaders not only need local leaders to take on specialized tasks, they also need to operate within the confines of their state **situations** (Spillane et al., 2004), which ground the leadership activity. In envisioning statewide reform, states need to be cognizant of the policy environments that characterize their relationships with their districts such as federal requirements to adopt challenging academic standards and state policies of local control. Situations also

include the artifacts (e.g., policymaking routines, instructional resources, feedback structures) that state leaders share with local leaders to leverage educational change. These artifacts are essential to the study of leadership practice (Rowan, 2002), as they prompt users to act or think about educational goals in operationalized ways (Honig, Lorton, & Copland, 2009; Rowan, 2002). These artifacts are often depicted as "backdrop for leaders' practice," but under a distributed leadership perspective they are "defining components of that practice" (Spillane et al., 2004, p. 24).

Distributed leadership in the context of this study is viewed as how state leaders interact with local leaders who specialize in certain aspects of reform, how state practices directly emanate from the policy environments that determine the parameters for their actions, and how local leadership is informed by the artifacts disseminated by the state. As state interview data from Kentucky, Ohio, and Texas suggest, leadership does not merely entail the roles and responsibilities of their centralized agency—it entails state leaders' relationships with various groups and practitioners spread throughout the state in a manner that multiplies, rather than adds, supports to schools (Spillane et al., 2004). We hypothesize that the success of these distributed leadership practices is contingent on their linkages to the policy attributes.

Policy Attributes Theory

To understand different functions of distributed leadership, we explore whether and how certain practices make the reform initiatives seem more (a) *specific,* and therefore easier to implement with fidelity*,* (b) *consistent* with each other and with existing goals and initiatives, (c) *authoritative,* to persuade stakeholders to invest in the implementation of standards-based reform, (d) *powerful,* to encourage or deter practices that may or may not enhance the intention of the reform, and (e) *stable,* which affects the fate of these reforms. The intersection of the

policy attributes theory with the distributed leadership framework helps uncover how distributed leadership is enacted.

Policies high in *specificity* facilitate the implementation of reform by making explicit what school staff need to do in order to realize the intent of the policy (Desimone, 2002; Porter, Floden, Freeman, Schmidt, & Schwille, 1988; Porter,1994). Policies have high levels of specificity when they include clear goals and provide teachers with detailed curriculum frameworks and guidelines or professional development to educate them about the policy, to name a few examples. It is also helpful when policies demonstrate *consistency*, or when "different education policies all call for the same education practice" (Porter, 1994, p. 438). The alignment of various policies to the same common goals yields more effective implementation of reform and reduces tensions from competing goals.

Authority and power are two mechanisms for supporting and pressuring stakeholders to implement policies. Practitioners attribute *authority* to new policies when they are the products of stakeholder participation in decision making, when institutional resources and expert assistance emphasize the importance of the reform, and when they receive the endorsement of charismatic leaders (Desimone, 2002; Porter, 1994; Porter et al., 1988). Leaders not only work to enhance the legitimacy, or authority, of new policies, they also pressure stakeholders to make the necessary changes to their practice through the use of *power,* or rewards and sanctions. Power facilitates changes in the short-run, as the immediate gratification of a reward or a consequence for not meeting expectations can help produce effects more quickly (Desimone, 2002). Ideally, power should be balanced with authority so that leaders can both mandate and motivate stakeholders to implement CCR standards-based reform.

And finally, all of these policies would be in vain if practitioners felt like *stability* was missing or if reform environments felt volatile. The constancy of people, resources, circumstances, and policies over time (Desimone, 2002) is clearly linked to a reform's persistence and success in the long run.

Method

Kentucky, Ohio, and Texas were chosen as our units of analysis because they present sharp contrasts in their situations influencing the implementation of CCR standards-based reform. Kentucky was the first state to adopt the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and therefore had the longest amount of refine their leadership approaches. Ohio had also adopted CCSS, but the political backlash against the standards caused officials to replace the Common Core with Ohio-specific standards and aligned assessments. Texas has developed state-specific CCR standards and has been implementing them since 2009.

Our team of university professors and graduate students conducted 66 state and district interviews from Spring 2016 to Spring 2017. Thirty-eight of these interviews were with SEA officials (14 in Kentucky, 14 in Ohio, and 10 in Texas). Researchers worked with SEA contacts to purposively select officials in each state who are knowledgeable about the policy areas addressed in our hour-long structured interview protocols: curriculum, instruction, professional development, assessment, accountability related to all students, including low achieving students, students of color, and more specifically SWDs, and ELLs. These areas were chosen as major aspects of standards-based reform that SEAs would undertake as they guide districts and schools through their implementation of the CCR standards.

We also selected three districts in each state as the sites of the district-level interviews. We chose the three districts from the probability sample of districts participating in the Center's

state-representative parallel survey study. We selected one urban, suburban, and rural district in each state with (a) relatively high levels of SWDs and ELLs and (b) relatively high levels of student progress. A total of 28 district administrator interviews were conducted across the three states: nine in Kentucky, eight in Texas, and 11 in Ohio. We replicated the process for selecting district administrators by asking superintendents or assistant superintendents for three to five key informants. The structured interview protocol resembled the protocol used for the SEA officials, though with added questions on their perceptions of state supports and leadership.

SEA and district officials were given the interview questions and informed consent forms in advance, and they were reminded that they were under no obligation to participate in the study. Those who did not feel comfortable participating in the study either declined to be interviewed or referred a colleague to be interviewed in their stead.

All the interviews were transcribed and coded for the five policy attributes, and the curriculum, instruction, professional development, assessment, accountability, SWD, and ELL leadership practices that emerged in relation to these attributes. Inter-rater agreement was reached through a consensual process of coding in pairs and group discussions to arrive at common definitions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). We first read through our data to develop themes related to the distribution of leadership among state and local leaders, and how they grounded their leadership work in the situations characterizing their reform contexts. Each distributed leadership theme that emerged was placed in the category of specificity, consistency, authority, power, or stability. We then compared themes across states to notice similarities and differences in how cross-state leadership practices interact with the policy attributes.

Results

The goal of this paper is not to analyze the outcomes of state implementation activities based on student achievement gains. We instead focus on understanding distributed leadership strategies that influence the implementation of the CCR standards using the perspectives of SEA officials and local leaders. As our Center pays special attention to the experiences of SWDs and ELLs, we highlight practices supporting these populations when relevant.

The following section is organized around three major findings. Our first finding is that state leaders distribute instructional leadership to local leaders in order to add specificity to the CCR standards movement, yet this distribution of instructional leadership poses concerns with regards to consistency. Two, the specificity-consistency distributed leadership tension surfaces concerns about the use of power, particularly for accountability practices intended for ELL students. Three, to add authority to the CCR standards, state leaders distribute leadership to local leaders who collaborate with them to revise standards and accountability systems, which should also foster a sense of stability. However, both authority and stability falter as a result of the volatile national and state level policy contexts surrounding standards-based reform.

Exchanging Specificity for Consistency

To add specificity to their CCR standards reform efforts, state leaders distribute instructional leadership to local leaders—regional network leaders, regional academy leaders, regional service centers, and district leaders—who are charged with professionally developing local stakeholders. Instructional leadership, which focuses on improving student academic outcomes through defining instructional goals, managing the instructional program, and developing professional capacity and culture (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Hallinger, 2003), is typically associated with school principals. Some scholars reference the term when describing the need for state and district officials to share this focus on teaching and learning (Anderson,

2003; Honig, Lorton, & Copland, 2009) in addition to pursuing their managerial responsibilities, and we do the same in this study. One caveat of distributing instructional leadership to local leaders is that district officials yearn for the specificity to come from their SEAs directly. We also find that this distribution of instructional leadership poses consistency concerns, as locally controlled districts may not all be enacting curriculum and/or PD aligned to the CCR standards.

A common reason offered for the necessity in sharing instructional leadership is the geographic size of the states. As one SEA official noted, "In a state as big as Texas, it's virtually impossible to do anything from this centralized agency." Though expressed by a Texas Education Agency (TEA) administrator, the sentiment was echoed by Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) administrators, who said that Kentucky is too geographically diverse, that each region has its own needs, and that local educational leaders are best equipped to specify the instructional expectations embedded in the CCR standards. Similarly, administrators in the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) spoke to the impracticality for the state to determine specific, instructionally focused, support given their macro level perspectives.

As a result, none of the three states outline the specific instructional expectations of the standards. Instead, state administrators see their roles as providing artifacts that guide the work of their local leaders. KDE and ODE place online model curriculum frameworks, while all three states reference a wealth of resources, webinars, and guidance documents to aid the implementation of CCR standards for all student groups. Local leaders are then charged with interpreting and disseminating the instructional expectations suggested by the state artifacts. These local leaders are those directing the content and leadership networks, professional academies, professional organizations, and regional centers that directly support local implementers. Both state and district administrators shared that local educational centers and

networks were especially useful when the CCR standards were newly introduced to the state, as

they helped practitioners deconstruct the learning and teaching expectations of the CCR

standards, offered PD opportunities to trigger a "train the trainers" model of information flow,

and communicated important changes to statewide systems and structures. Thus, these

collaborative endeavors release state leaders from performing all the instructional tasks

necessary to make the system operate (Mayrowetz, 2008; Spillane et al., 2004).

Notable networks are the math and ELA content networks and leadership network in

Kentucky, and the Network of Regional Leaders (NRL) in Ohio. The math and ELA content

networks in Kentucky, launched in 2010, helped teachers understand the depth of the standards,

the progression of the standards, and how to design unit plans aligned to the standards. Parallel to

these networks is the Instructional Support Leadership Network (ISLN), which consists of

district leaders who are exposed to what teachers learn in their network meetings and how to

support teachers in their work. These content and leadership networks were therefore tasked by

the state to serve as instructional leaders who developed districts' capacity to enact the standards

in their own schools. Ohio's version of such networks, the NRL, is made up of content-area

leaders, district administrators, and education service centers. They regularly meet with ODE

staff to discuss how to guide districts in meeting the needs of all students, and how to develop

specific resources and PD to disseminate that guidance. Similarly, math and reading academies

in Texas perform this capacity-building function. Texas state legislature in 2015 passed a law

requiring TEA to provide PD for elementary teachers in the areas of reading and math

instruction. TEA distributed this instructional leadership to their Education Service Centers

(ESCs), which holds with one district administrator's observation about TEA's reliance on the

instructional leadership of their service centers: "I'm gonna tell you that in Texas, really the state depends on the regional service centers to provide most of the professional development."

State leaders also distribute specific instructional leadership to specify expectations for ELLs. Local Texan administrators believe that the ESCs throughout the state have offered valuable supports to make the state's ELL guidance cohere with their CCR instruction. ODE also depends on local organizations to provide distributed leadership expertise in the area of ELL instruction: they collaborate with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) Great Lakes Regional Center, which contains the Center for Applied Linguistics. This Center has conducted workshops for Ohio teachers of ELLs and has supported other ODE work in training their teacher leaders to use the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, which they are expected to spread to the rest of their colleagues back in their respective districts. Kentucky's membership in the WIDA consortium, a national organization that provides academic supports aligned to CCR standards for ELL students, also ensures that general education and ELL teachers have access to materials "that are an excellence complement to the ELA standards."

KDE, ODE, and TEA also provide an array of supports to assist teachers of SWDs in implementing the CCR standards, though some efforts are more specific than others. The nine special education cooperatives in Kentucky provide ongoing trainings to help teachers understand the specifics of serving their SWDs in a CCR environment. Local administrators in Kentucky recalled going to their cooperative for instructional support for SWDs, while the state's role was more to issue compliance regulations to the districts. Another source of distributed instructional leadership for SWDs is the University of Texas (UT), which fills a state gap in developing teacher capacity to offer specialized instruction. The collaboration with US allows the university to support Texas teachers with the implementation of Response to

Intervention (RTI) for low-performing students to help prevent the over-referral of students into special education. The specific supports that Ohio's NRL and ESCs provide for SWDs are slightly more nascent, as they are just beginning to offer targeted literacy PD for their early childhood special education and general education teachers.

District officials confirm that state leaders defer specific interpretation of the CCR standards to local leaders. The state decides the overarching vision of college and career readiness, but "it's more to the local entities to really standardize that, articulate it, and create thoughtful plans towards that" as a result of the principle of local control that bounds the work of the SEAs in Kentucky, Ohio, and Texas. Instructional leadership, therefore, is further distributed to the district administrators, who are responsible for carving out their own specific reform paths based on the parameters set by the state's artifacts.

Interestingly, local leaders in all three states have expressed a desire for more specific instructional leadership directly from the state. In one Kentucky district, for example, local leaders reported that the state sent them curricular documents and videos without helping them understand how to apply them to their direct practice. Administrators in an Ohio district shared the same sentiment about the lack of specific state expectations, causing them to outline their own perceptions of the instructional shifts inherent in the standards based on their own research: the state "may give you a suggestion of, 'this is what the student should be able to do'… not always in laymen's terms. They're expecting that the person would know exactly what that meant." Concerns in Texas were commonly attributed to the lack of specificity around instructional expectations for ELL students. Speaking about Texas's specific ELL supports, one local official noted:

But other than that, as far as materials, they really leave it up to the district… There's a,

there's a standard and there's laws and a lot of them are unfunded mandates and then

usually when you look at the verbiage is you know the, the district has the discretion of

choosing, here's what you need to do, but how you go about it is up to the district.

The flexibility afforded to districts with regard to ELLs is a source of frustration for local

leaders who yearn for more specific state guidance, which is a desire that may also be applicable

to Ohio. The state has partnered with a small consortium of states around a system called English

Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century (ELPA21), but a state official admitted to

not having developed the professional resources that specify the integration of their English

language proficiency standards into the different content areas. The observation that SEAs lack

specific instructional guidance around ELL supports is concerning considering the weight of

ELL performance data on state assessments—a point we will return to in the next section.

In the distributed leadership practices noted thus far, district officials are ultimately the

instructional agenda setters in their own localities. The situation of local control causes KDE,

ODE, and TEA to respect district autonomy, which puts constraints on their own leadership

practice in ensuring that everyone is aligned to a common vision. For this reason, SEA officials

acknowledge that they are not aware of the extent to which districts' chosen curriculum or PD

are actually consistent with the expectations of the CCR standards.

Curriculum that may be inconsistent with the CCR standards may be more prevalent in

Ohio and Kentucky, as TEA administrators maintain a list of materials that are 50% aligned to

their CCR standards. Texan districts that choose resources from this list must supplement the

resources with their own purchases of materials aligned with the other half of the standards. In

Ohio and Kentucky, however, SEA officials describe a lack of state monitoring over locally

selected curriculum. As one Ohio district administrator reminded us, "we're local control, so we don't do any type of curriculum audit," and ODE "makes no recommendations at all of any resources that districts should buy." Kentucky employs similar practices, though they are planning to adopt new systems to review district curriculum in recognition of the fact that Kentucky's schools are implementing materials with various degrees of alignment to the standards. KDE staff will begin to meet with their regional counterparts to develop a system for reviewing instructional materials based on their consistency with the standards, as it is "better to have fewer high quality materials than a ton of materials that are of questionable quality."

TEA administrators note the inconsistent instructional expectations communicated to districts about instruction for SWDs and ELLs. The new director of SWD and ELL support services has initiated "really drastic changes in how districts are being supported," given that the distribution of specific instructional leadership around these student populations has yielded mixed results throughout the state. The vague stance taken by the state with regards to ELLs has created "a lot of disparity across districts" in terms of how to instructionally these students, especially for their high mobility ELL students. Additionally, because the state has not monitored the types and quality of PD for SWDs offered at their regional centers, they are now involving themselves more in the implementation of these supports so that they are consistently high quality throughout the state. This decision is especially necessary considering that "Texas is under a lot of scrutiny for Special Ed" in terms of their exclusion of certain students from receiving special education supports.

Varying levels of PD aligned to the standards is a common problem in the three states, as district administrators cite a range of reasons for rushing through or delaying their provision of PD for teachers intended to help them understand the instructional shifts in the CCR standards.

In one district in Kentucky, officials realized that the quick rollout of the standards in 2010 left them little time to adequately prepare teachers for the shifts. As one of these officials stated,

> I think the first roll out was really surface level… and now after so many years… [we are] helping teachers get past those surface level, general understanding of it and to what really some of the standards mean cause they're very complex and deep and rigorous.

In a district in Ohio, officials admitted that their state's recent revision to the standards gave them the window of opportunity to provide substantive PD on the standards for the first time, as district superintendent turnover in past years prevented them from doing so when the standards originally came out. Two other districts in our sample even mentioned buffering their schools from the state's PD resources because they are reluctant to let the state influence what they do inside their district, or because they feel like they are miles ahead of their state. These examples suggest how the distribution of instructional leadership to districts will naturally lead to inconsistent implementation of PD aligned to varying levels of interpretation of the CCR standards.

Distributed Leadership, yet Centralized Power

In the previous section, we noted how the state's distribution of specific, instructional leadership led to tensions with inconsistent expectations and implementation of educational reform, especially for student subgroups. Here, we show how these tensions impact perceptions of unjust centralized power, and we focus on ELLs as the subgroup that district officials mentioned most frequently in reference to this issue of power. We also describe the benefits to this use of power that district administrators acknowledge with regards to an increased emphasis on ELL supports.

Districts in both Kentucky and Texas refer to the ideological and practical conflicts they face given the requirements to track ELL performance on their state's standardized exams. As one Kentucky official noted, sometimes students enter districts with "no formal English background," though districts are still held accountable for these students' test performance without having much time to work with them academically. Other officials in Kentucky confirm this challenge, describing the need to accelerate their support of ELLs due to their inclusion in accountability ratings despite educators not having knowledge or training in teaching ELL students.

Concerns over ELL accountability are also found among district administrators in Texas, who worry about the state's unrealistic expectations for ELL students. They alluded to the need for TEA to think more pragmatically about students who come to Texas without an English background and who are still being held accountable to the same set of standards:

> You cannot expect them to meet the same standards as the kids who have been born and raised here and I'm not saying lower the standards, but recognize that if you went to another country you would not acquire that language as quickly as we expect them to here.

The burdens over testing ELL students using the same assessments as English-speaking peers are so much that some administrators lack the incentive to go above and beyond the state mandates for ELLs because they do not have the capacity to offer more for these students.

It is important to note that power in general is not an entirely unwanted attribute of CCR standards-based reform. Despite the challenges of being held accountable to ELL performance when SEAs do not specify instructional expectations for these students, conversations about ELL accountability center around the types of accommodations and instruction ELLs should receive,

which is progress for these students who have been marginalized in the past. As one Kentucky

district administrator explained, "If you start looking at what the standards offer, then the

question for us people who are facilitating services for ELL . . . are we providing rigorous access

so the students can demonstrate their potential regardless of their language acquisition level?"

These questions are beneficial as they address students' best interests. Additionally, the fact that

the state conducts a desk audit every year of the districts' ELL services is a helpful bargaining

tool to convince principals and school board officials to focus more on ELL services, according

to district administrators in Kentucky. One official in an Ohio district described how supervisors

and specialists specifically for English learners were hired as a result of state accountability

policies for growth in ELL achievement, while an official in another Ohio district speculated that

the accountability policies likely created positive pressures in suburban and rural districts that

had previously allowed issues in ELL instruction go unnoticed. These changes suggest more

attention being afforded to ELL students who may otherwise have invisibly passed through the

system. District administrators in Texas described needing to offer bilingual programs and, in

doing so, "quot[ing] state law often" to explain to board members why bilingual programs are

not an option but a requirement in many cases.

The Ebb and Flow of Authority and Stability

To add authority to CCR reform, state leaders distribute leadership to individual

stakeholders, professional organizations, and district teams, who collaborate with them on

revising their standards and accountability systems. In theory, this distribution of leadership

creates stability that buffers schools from leadership turnover at the top**.** Yet state and local

leaders also face the unique situation of policy volatility at the federal and state legislative levels,

which compromise perceptions of both authority and stability.

All three states established leadership mechanisms that involve soliciting feedback from teachers, parents, administrators, community members, business partners, and other interested parties to improve the goals of readying students for colleges and careers. These distributed leadership structures that include stakeholder voices in important policy decisions may increase the authority, or legitimacy, of CCR reform. Kentucky administered an online survey to collect input on the standards revisions that are underway in the state as of March 2017. Additionally, the Kentucky Commissioner of Education hosted at least 10 town hall meetings in Spring 2017, and several more in Spring 2016, across the state to assess the implementation successes and challenges of standards-based reform. One outcome of these town hall meetings was the formation of committees and working groups charged with rethinking the state accountability model based upon the public's experiences. Ohio also involved stakeholders in their most recent revisions to the CCR standards by sending out a public survey, hosting 10 regional meetings across the state, and inviting 3,000+ participants to webinars to provide feedback on their state ESSA plans. They too formed working groups and advisory committees, which comprised educators, content-area experts, and representatives from 18 statewide educational organizations. These various mechanisms for soliciting and acting on the opinions held by those who are directly influenced by CCR standards-based reform are thought to add authority to the vision and direction of the reforms. Like Kentucky and Ohio, Texas officials distributed an online public survey, held over 70 stakeholder engagement meetings that included focus groups with teachers representing a range of demographic and educational settings, and the state commissioner met separately with regional superintendents in over 35 forums.

Authority may be further enhanced as districts ultimately determine how to operationalize the standards based on their unique circumstances, as described in previous

sections. In Kentucky, a site-based decision-making state, schools ultimately decide how they will enact the standards, and what resources they will use to do so. Given that the premise of local control is that districts and schools are the experts on how best to support their students, this distributed leadership relationship is thought to make the implementation of CCR standards more authoritative, rather than requiring districts to implement prescribed approaches from the state.

One theoretical benefit to distributed leadership mechanisms is that regular communication channels and shared authority help lessen the impact of shifting initiatives at the top, as this diffusion of responsibilities foster stable levels of commitment to practice in the face of leadership change (McLaughlin, 1991). Proper communication with local networks allows these middle managers to smooth over the usual obstacles associated with change, as they can more immediately handle problem-solving and capacity-building activities than state actors (Moolenaar, Sleegers, Karsten, & Zijlstra, 2009). Indeed, Texas state officials acknowledge that their ESCs have been a consistent source of support throughout the myriad changes that came out of the TEA.

Yet enacting a stable vision of reform is difficult when national and state political climates are in a constant state of flux, which then impacts the authoritative nature of the current standards. As one Ohio official remarked, we are in a "period of change," given the national educational forecast that would likely ensure "a few more years of pretty significant change across the country." The adoption of the CCSS in the past decade has compromised the authority of standards-based reform, even in a state like Texas that did not adopt the Common Core:

> But I can speak to the district I came from which was in, which was . . . an incredibly
> conservative town, an incredibly conservative district and there, Common Core, there

was a lot of fear about Common Core and when those new math standards rolled out we

dealt with a lot of community concern and had to field a lot of questions about that, that

was a definite issue.

The seemingly unstable nature of education policies has even led some educators to

believe that "if they wait long enough, things will change, and they won't have to do what they

should have been doing" in terms of learning the new expectations of the performance tasks in

the CCR-aligned assessments. This mentality signals that the constantly shifting policy

environment lends less credibility, or authority, to situations currently facing educators.

The leadership challenge is then to convince all levels of the state that the CCR reforms

are legitimate while national debates threaten the stability of the CCR movement. The 2015

passage of ESSA contributes to these concerns by generating uncertainties that filter down to

state and district leadership in Kentucky and Ohio, though it was minimally mentioned in Texas

interviews. Kentucky prepared for the ESSA changes by forming committees to incorporate

stakeholders' feedback and recommendations into a new, more simplified accountability system.

These committees play an important distributed leadership role in ensuring that Kentucky is

heading in a new direction that is not too volatile for local practitioners, especially the

"unintended consequence" committee that is charged with determining potentially destructive

effects of policy changes. One district official in Ohio communicated that the state has instructed

them to stay the course with regards to the "highly qualified" classification for teachers, despite

ESSA's elimination of that requirement. Their instructions to keep some policies in place

regardless of ESSA's relaxation of previous policies reflects an attempt to maintain stability in a

political era of instability.

The stability of the standards and accountability program is also contingent on state legislative decrees and state board of education mandates, which also fosters shifting levels of authority with regards to the CCR standards. KDE and TEA administrators referenced needing to wait and see what their respective state legislative bodies will pass that may influence the course of their reforms. As one Texas official put it, "every legislative session is a new ballgame," alluding to the fact that major elements of their work (i.e., state standards and assessments) are at the mercy of state legislative decisions and, ultimately, decisions made by the State Board. Kentucky officials are now accountable to the first Republican majority in their bicameral state legislature in 90 years, which is now spurring new directions to their standards-based reforms. Ohio state officials speculated that they would be asked to review and revise their standards every five years or so, allowing them to make improvements and edits to the standards.

Discussion

In this section, we summarize the affordances and challenges of state distributed leadership practices based on whether they positively or negatively influence the specificity, consistency, authority, power, and stability of standards implementation. Our goal here is to describe, not prescribe, how CCR standards implementation leadership is derived from the interdependent relationships between the SEAs, district offices, individual stakeholders, partner organizations, policy contexts, state tools, routines, and structures. We also suggest implications related to intermediary networks and local actors as the gatekeepers of instructional expectations, the need for statewide feedback loops to more equitably serve underserved students, and opportunities for SEAs to exercise adaptive leadership. Before summarizing our findings and implications, we offer a few caveats with our data analysis below.

All of our state and district interviews took place before the states officially submitted their ESSA plans to the United States Departments of Education, so we report data on leadership practices established before states formally submitted a new strategic plan. However, our examination of Kentucky's, Ohio's, and Texas's ESSA plans did not indicate drastic changes to statewide leadership structures: each state emphasized college- and career- readiness as the goal for their students, but they did not indicate different leadership approaches to interacting with districts and school to achieve this goal. Another potential limitation is that SEA interviews may yield politically correct data on how they theoretically lead to support districts. We have therefore triangulated their responses with perceptions of state supports from district administrators, who have provided critical accounts on where they think state leadership falls short.

Though Kentucky, Ohio, and Texas were selected as partner states for their vastly different experiences with standards-based reform, we find major similarities in how distributed leadership structures across the three states operate to address CCR implementation. While each state distributes instructional leadership to regional networks, educational centers, and individual leaders at the local level in order to add specificity to the implementation of the CCR standards, the deference to local control creates issues related to consistency, in terms of inconsistent alignment of curriculum and PD to the standards. Both the distribution of specific instructional leadership to local leaders and the lack of consistency throughout the state leads to unfair perceptions of power, particularly for ELL students, as they are expected to take standardized assessments despite the state not clarifying how to support them in CCR classrooms. And while the distribution of instructional leadership to local leaders lends authority to the policies, the authority is compromised by the instability of policy changes at the national and state levels.

Each state therefore faces the leadership challenge of maintaining a climate of stability in an era of political instability.

The distribution of instructional leadership to add specificity while compromising consistency and power. We found that local leaders specifically operationalized the broad state guidelines through collaborative networks, regional centers, and district teams. These local relationships within CCR standards-based reform highlight the tendency to distribute instructional leadership*,* which again, focuses on the development of the instructional goals, programs, capacity, and culture of an educational system*.* The distribution of instructional leadership responsibilities parallels the evolving recognition that such leadership should be shared with those with the capacity and expertise to take on this significant work, particularly within the K-12 setting (Hallinger, 2003; Marks & Printy, 2003). We expand the notion of instructional leadership further by highlighting the importance SEA officials place on distributing a specific, instructional focus to their local counterparts. This is in contrast to previous scholarship on networked arrays—linking different units of government, public institutions, and private organizations—that focus on the *managerial* aspect of governance (O'Toole & Meier, 2004), where gaining fiscal support, cooperation, and programmatic resources contributes to the execution of public education initiatives. Our analysis of distributed leadership relationships within CCR standards-based reform highlights the importance of dispersed *instructional leadership* rather than management. Instructional leadership and management serve two distinct functions, as leaders inspire specific changes with an unprecedented focus on instruction while managers control and supervise teams (Allio, 2012). The distribution of instructional leadership to add specificity to reform poses a shift from treating intergovernmental networks merely as a managerial mechanism, and it further suggests that local

leaders may be the gatekeepers of the detailed expectations that the standards bring to bear on instruction.

Complicating this relationship, however, is the desire from local practitioners to receive more specific guidelines from their state counterparts despite the existence of local control. The gap in specific instructional expectations for ELL students is particularly noticeable. District officials contend that state administrators need to clarify their expectations for instructional practice, suggesting that a pre-condition for local control is a clear, state-developed outline for how they see the standards changing practice, rather than the current practice of distributing that responsibility to intermediary actors. The limited state specificity then manifests in inconsistent application of the standards throughout the states in terms of curriculum and PD alignment, especially with regards to supporting student subgroups. Because of the autonomy that district and school actors have over the curriculum materials they select or the nature of the PD they implement, principals and teachers are now faced with instructional resources with varying degrees of alignment to the standards. Some districts may therefore feel more prepared for the state assessments than others, depending on whether individual localities had more capacity or greater understanding of the standards that aligned with the state's interpretations.

These challenges with specificity and consistency are inextricably linked to power, or the enforcement of rewards and sanctions for implementing the new behaviors expected. When the state distributes instructional leadership to their regional and district counterparts to specify the curricular or pedagogical intent of the standards, as well as how to apply the standards for ELLs who are held accountability to both English language proficiency standards and CCR standards, and when this leadership practice leads to pockets of inconsistencies, then the power of a standardized assessment built around the state's interpretation of the standards is naturally

viewed as unfair. The injustice felt over the use of power for ELL accountability is a double-edged sword: while the spotlight on ELLs in accountability systems has led to a greater, more positive emphasis on ELLs, it has also faced criticism for testing ELL students in the absence of specific guidelines for supporting them in CCR classrooms. The academic language demands of new standards and assessments place additional burdens on students who are not yet English-language proficient (Frantz, Bailey, Starr, & Perea, 2014).

Ensuring that historically marginalized student populations have equitable access to the same, rigorous content standards as their more privileged peers is a core civil rights issue of the educational field. We argue that while it makes sense for SEAs to distribute specific instructional leadership to local leaders who may have the expertise to specify what CCR instruction looks like, they should assert themselves as champions of underserved students by promoting instructional practices that are found to effectively meet the needs of low income students, students of color, SWDs, and ELLs. They can do so by establishing a regular feedback look that keeps SEA leaders informed of local leadership practices that do provide the supports that enable marginalized students to equitably access the CCR standards, which they can then disseminate out to other local actors from their centralized perch. They can also use the feedback loop to trouble-shoot inconsistent application of the standards or when they find that districts and schools are lagging in their efforts to meet their students' needs. This level of involvement is typical of distributed leadership in schools, where principals entrust their teachers to take on aspects of instructional leadership while also monitoring and improving the quality of their work through regular cycles of feedback. SEAs can certainly benefit from employing the same practice, and this may mitigate some of the concerns raised over the use of high stakes standardized assessments for ELL students in particular.

The delicate nature of authority in a political environment of instability. ESSA requires

states to involve stakeholders in the development of their plans for implementing educational

systems that prepare students for colleges and careers, and indeed, the SEA officials in our three

states describe mechanisms for involving local stakeholders in the revisions to standards and

accountability systems. Distributed leadership is a response to the perspective that authority rests

in one central location. The theory stipulates that leadership is not positional, but it is rooted in

multiple actors who collectively contribute to organizational processes (Supovitz, Sirinides, &

May, 2010), disrupt hierarchical policy environments, and validate the power that practitioners

hold in effectively and meaningfully influencing decisions (Grissom & Herringon, 2012;

Grossman, 2010). Kentucky, Ohio, and Texas state systems for involving practitioners in

revisions to their CCR standards, assessments, and accountability systems may be federally

mandated, but regardless, add legitimacy to these constitutive elements of standards-based

reform. This collaboration with stakeholders, coupled with the local control that districts and

schools have over determining the actual strategies they use to implement the CCR standards, is

thought to increase authority of the standards. When local leaders are able to take ownership

over their own implementation approaches to standards-based reform, they are likely to see their

own actions as adding to the authority of the policy that they are helping to construct (Supovitz,

2015).

Instability may threaten authority, however, when the policies are perceived to be in flux.

Within a six-year period from 2010 to 2016, the nation witnessed the widespread adoption of

CCR standards, the passage of ESSA, and the 2016 presidential and congressional elections.

Additionally, Kentucky welcomed a new state superintendent and governor within a six-month

period in 2016, Ohio has witnessed six state superintendent changes in the past eight years, and

Texas has also just recently welcomed a new state superintendent after his predecessor served a term of a little over three years. These rapid changes at the individual leadership level are common in the increasingly politicized world of public education (Wirt, 2005), necessitating distributed leadership relationships that can withstand this turbulence. Conferring roles and responsibilities to regional education centers, organizations, and district leaders is therefore one crucial mechanism for ensuring that the work continues while leadership turnover or policy change occurs at these top levels. However, the reality that this political instability exists leads some practitioners to view certain policies as less authoritative because they are ephemeral, or less authoritative because they are associated with political turmoil.

This reality necessitates adaptive leadership that can overcome these challenges. Adaptive leadership is defined as creating the conditions for learning new approaches to leadership given evolving norms, realities, expectations, and relationships (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001). Traditional SEA practices of depending on their local leaders to take on aspects of reform are not sufficient when national situations change, and when ESSA places new demands on state leadership. Furthermore, given the moderating effect that stability seems to have on authority, we wonder if it is possible to establish a moratorium on changes that can occur to major policy initiatives (e.g., the adoption of standards, the development of assessments and accountability systems) to stabilize the conditions for adaptive leadership to take hold, flourish, and learn to enhance the authority of CCR policies.

Expanding our theoretical frameworks. Our use of a leadership framework to explore policy implementation on a statewide scale reflects one attempt to merge two theoretical traditions that do not typically intersect. We encourage scholars to apply other theories found outside the traditional education literature base to research studies on the implementation of

education policies today. Examples of these theories include cross-sector collaboration in public

administration and management scholarship (see Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006) or

collaborative public management (see Agranoff & McGuire, 2004). These creative ventures can

lead to new and interesting insights about leading large-scale educational change efforts.

Conclusion

"Whether states will demonstrate the determination and capacity to lead meaningful CCR reform

within this new policy environment is currently unknown… but what is clear is that leadership is

crucial at all levels" (Malin, Bragg, & Hackman, 2017, p. 833).

While educational leadership essentially determines the success or failure of new

initiatives, studies on leadership concentrate on district and principal capacity to oversee reforms

while neglecting leadership at the SEA level. We argue that SEAs need to reexamine their

leadership capacity as ESSA affords them more ownership over CCR standards-based reform

(Weiss & McGuinn, 2016). One way of expanding their capacity is to consider leveraging

distributed leadership relationships in some of the ways that Kentucky, Ohio, and Texas officials

have over the past several years. They can charge their local leaders with the responsibility of

adding specific instructional supports that complement the broad parameters determined by the

state rather than utilizing these networks for non-instructional, managerial purposes. They can

build authority by encouraging local involvement in processes that refine or deepen standards-

based policies. Yet, the distribution of instructional leadership to create specificity and authority

at the local levels may compromise the consistency and power of the CCR movement. Still yet,

distributed leadership structures can potentially buffer stakeholders from volatile policy contexts

at the federal and state legislative levels, but the instability of education policies may diminish

the authority of current reforms. These pitfalls necessitate statewide feedback loops and policy change moratoriums so that states can adaptively lead reform in meaningful and sustained ways.

As the distributed leadership theory itself has been critiqued for paying lip service to the idea of participation (Anderson, 2009), we want to clarify that we are not positing that state leaders themselves claim that their implementation approaches are distributed in nature. We are using the framework as an analytic lens to organize and understand how multiple leadership practices are relied upon to implement CCR standards. The integration of policy attributes theory allows us to interpret the potential successes and challenges inherent in this implementation process. If we start to normalize the practice of using leadership principles to analyze policy implementation activities, then perhaps we can start to interpret the challenges of standards-based reform as challenges in statewide distributed leadership, not as indicators of the flaws of the standards themselves or of the low capacity of school-based practitioners taking up the reform. State officials must push beyond their roles as administrators and managers by developing the leadership skills that will enable them to strategically leverage system relationships and resources in order to distribute roles and responsibilities. With this distributed leadership network in place, state leaders will be in a position to facilitate the collective impact of rigorous academic standards on students' education.

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