Learning From Standards Deviations: Three Dimensions for Building Education Policies That Last

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Cynthia Coburn, in her 2016 article in the American Journal of Education*—"What's Policy Got to Do With It?"—states that the field of policy implementation suffers from the propensity to learn the same lessons over and over again. This repetition of mistakes, I argue, stems from a failure to account for predictable patterns in how policies become unpopular. Through an analysis of 52 interviews with state, regional, and district officials in California, Texas, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts, I investigate the decline in the popularity of K–12 standards-based reform. I consolidate existing policy implementation theories and describe three important dimensions—detail, drive, and durability—for understanding how standards and associated policies "succeed" or "fail." Using these dimensions, I reveal how policy design and implementation choices can strengthen or weaken standards-based education policies.*

KEYWORDS: College and Career Readiness Standards, Common Core State Standards, education reform, politics

Introduction

Overall support for the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) has fallen from 64% in 2013 to 44% in 2018 (Cheng, Henderson, Peterson, & West, 2018). States continue to drop out of CCSS-related organizations, such as the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, which once boasted 24 member states but now has only 6 (Jochim & McGuinn, 2016; Sawchuk, 2018). The reasons for the declining support for national standards, from unaligned curricular resources to rushed implementation

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timelines, to the difficulty of new tests, are well established (Cohen, Spillane, & Peurach, 2018; Polikoff, 2017). In addition to implementation challenges, political conflict expanded in the midst of a coordinated social media campaign, and former Education Secretary Arne Duncan became a polarizing proponent of the CCSS. The growing unpopularity of the CCSS ultimately led to a reduction of the federal government's involvement in standards-based reform (Jochim & Lavery, 2015; Saultz, Fusarelli, & McEachin, 2017; Supovitz, 2017).

As the political battles subsided, quantitative education researchers turned to the difficult question of determining the impact of the CCSS on student outcomes. The econometric approaches they used, while important to building an empirical foundation in the literature, fail to account for the important political lessons learned from the CCSS, including how states and districts have adapted standards-based policies. Since the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December 2015, states and districts have both enhanced and subverted (see Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018, for one such example) the original intent of the CCSS as well as the policies affiliated with Race to the Top (RttT) (McGuinn, 2012).

The focus of this work, which is part of a larger study of standards-based reform implementation, is to understand these adaptions. Using interviews with state and district officials conducted in 2018, I reveal how the latest College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards are being implemented in ways that both learn from the CCSS and repeat its mistakes. I define "CCR standards" as the current K–12 standards existing in every state as of 2018, the year of data collection for this study. I use "CCSS" to refer to the math and English Language Arts (ELA) standards as originally conceived in 2009. In four out of the five states in this study, these standards began as the CCSS and then morphed into state-specific CCR standards. Texas never adopted the CCSS, though its standards are quite similar in substance. Thus, while I do not attend to the specific content of each state's CCR standards, several studies have demonstrated that they are not substantively different from the CCSS (Carmichael, Martino, Porter-Magee, & Wilson, 2010; Kaufman, Opfer, Bongard, Pane, & Thompson, 2018; Norton, Ash, & Ballinger, 2017; Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011; Sawchuk, 2018).

The standards-based policies discussed throughout this article include not only the standards themselves but also the associated tests, curricula, professional development (PD), accountability systems, and evaluations. When researchers uncover null effects of these standards-based policies, they may be pointing to implementation issues instead of fully considering the political factors that caused the policy to "succeed" or "fail." Through a new theoretical framework based on dozens of interviews, I argue that future research would benefit from analyzing the initial policy design, and its inherent political ramifications, in order to better understand the complex and ongoing relationships between design and implementation.

This complexity, both theoretically and on the ground, is itself an obstacle to a shared understanding of policy among designers, implementers, and researchers. This lack of common understanding, combined with the unusually diffuse education governance structures in the United States, results in what Spillane (2009) calls "standards deviation," where policy is implemented in a thousand different ways. I reveal that the subversion or enhancement of standards-based policies is dependent on larger trends in public opinion, which are subject to partisan influences. Through interview analysis, I describe the ways in which state and district officials construct and modify policy in order to mollify different constituencies. And I suggest a path forward for future and current attempts at standards-based reform, using the lived experiences of practitioners as guideposts.

A Very Brief History of the Common Core State Standards

The CCSS were the latest nationwide attempt at implementing standards-based reform, which has operated for decades under the assumption that standardizing instruction would improve outcomes for students (Smith & O'Day, 1991). While initially supported by large swaths of teachers and the general public, the CCSS became much less popular during their implementation, according to national polling (Cheng et al., 2018). The partisan opinion gap between Republicans and Democrats also widened, and it is this partisanship that proved ultimately toxic.

The harsh reality of the current partisan climate necessitates a politically minded theoretical framework for future policy design and research. Polikoff, Hardaway, Marsh, and Plank (2016) established that, at least in California, support for the CCSS was related to respondents' approval of then president Obama. Certainly, partisan divides widened as President Obama and his Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, became the public face of the CCSS (Supovitz, 2017). Thus, what is often described as a "misconception" of the CCSS (Polikoff, 2017, p. 3) may be a product of families' experiences with testing comingled with partisan political calculations. Rather than turn a blind eye to political problems with implementation, I make them the focus of this work.

I summarize today's opposition to the CCSS by touching upon three core critiques: (1) the lack of empirical evidence as to the effectiveness of the CCSS, (2) a loss of local control and a privileging of elite influence, and (3) political partisans cynically using the CCSS as a wedge issue. In short, support declined over time among the general public, leading to a collapse in support among policy elites of both parties, who in turn sent cues to partisan voters to abandon the policy (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1980; Cheng et al., 2018).

The first critique is perhaps more salient for these policy elites. Polikoff (2017) demonstrates that the question of the impact of the CCSS remains

unresolved and will require creative solutions, on top of further implementation studies. Quasi-experimental research thus far has yielded small negative results (Song, Yang, & Garet, 2019). Regardless of their effectiveness, those with positional authority, such as the current secretary of education, have already declared that the "Common Core is *dead*" (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

The second and third critiques concern broader public opinion across the political spectrum. The design and funding of the CCSS came from the top down, not the bottom up, clashing with democratic notions of local control (Tampio, 2016). Scholars such as Tampio (2016) argue that the CCSS have prepared students for the global economy, not democracy, and that educational standards must be determined locally. The financial capital required to develop the CCSS originated from the philanthropic community (see Kornhaber, Barkauskas, & Griffith, 2016) and later the federal government through RttT. RttT provided grants via a competition to states that adopted the federal government's policy preferences, a design decision that created winners and losers (McGuinn, 2012). Finally, RttT bundled the CCSS with teacher evaluations and assessments, leading to a conflation of these policies in the minds of the general public. All these factors laid the groundwork for partisan polarization. Anticipating this polarization based on existing partisan preferences is key to furthering the study and construction of education policy. I describe the framework for doing so, which guides this interview analysis, in the next section.

Theoretical Framework

The field of implementation research can be agnostic concerning who is constructing the policy and for whom. Taylor (1997) describes policy research that is "managerial, technicist and uncritical in approach" (p. 23); a robust field of critical policy studies has emerged in response to her critique. But rarely do these two camps of education policy research speak to each other—one remains focused on econometric techniques and effect sizes, complemented by qualitative implementation work, while the other focuses on sweeping critiques of neoliberalism (e.g., Au, 2016). I explicitly aim to bridge these divides for future policy construction, implementation, and analysis. These three policy dimensions move beyond discussions of political pragmatism, policy windows, and policy streams (see Kingdon & Thurber, 1984) and strive to be clear and understandable to researchers and practitioners alike.

In developing my theoretical framework, I draw upon prior policy implementation frameworks by Porter (1994; Porter, Floden, Freeman, Schmidt, & Schwille, 1988) and Cohen et al. (2018). The policy attribute theory argues that the specificity, consistency, authority, power, and stability of a policy determine its effective implementation (Porter, 1994; Porter et al.,

1988). Specificity describes the level of detail, while consistency is the extent to which policies are aligned. Power reflects how policies are reinforced through rewards and consequences. Authority reflects a policy's legitimacy, which can be achieved through laws, institutional norms, and charismatic leaders. Stability is the extent to which policies change or remain constant over time. While Porter and colleagues' (1988) policy attributes are meant to be applied broadly, Cohen et al. (2018) focus more specifically on the competing pressures within standards-based reform. They identify four activity domains: (1) consensus on appropriate educational outcomes (or a lack thereof), (2) infrastructure to connect outcomes with instruction, (3) recruitment and preparation of teachers that are aligned with outcomes, and (4) competing environmental pressures.

I embed both the attributes and the activity domains into three simplified dimensions, which I am calling detail, drive, and durability. As shown in Table 1, "detail" captures the attributes of specificity and consistency, as well as the infrastructure and recruitment domains. "Drive" captures the attributes of authority and power (rules, leaders, and accountability), as well as the domain of environmental pressures. And "durability" captures other aspects of authority (including cultural values) and a consensus on outcomes—in short, the oft-contested purpose of schooling.

I also contextualize prior theory with practitioner knowledge and experience, relying on what English teacher D'Lee Pollock Moore describes as the "seven deadly sins" of the CCSS (Strauss, 2016). Using a strongly negative outlook ("sins") on the CCSS to develop a theoretical framework may seem to skew my findings, but the inclusion of the attributes and the domains is meant to place Moore's critiques within a broader theoretical framework. Moore's criticism is also not an outlier among teachers, who on average no longer support standards-based reforms, according to the most recently available national opinion polling (Cheng et al., 2018) and other media sources, in particular public teacher resignation letters (Dunn, Deroo, & VanDerHeide, 2017; Edgerton, 2012). Despite limitations, this approach foregrounds a forceful example of practitioner concerns, and including Moore aims to address the lack of teacher voice in the study's data collection.

Table 1 provides a crosswalk among the sins, domains, attributes, and dimensions. The majority of Moore's criticisms center on the lack of consensus on outcomes, as well as conflicts with cultural values, including local historical context and basic skills, as well as the environmental pressures enacted by political elites (Cohen et al., 2018). To put Moore into conversation with Porter (1994), the implementation of the CCSS was sorely lacking in specificity, consistency, and authority.

I argue that the current state of the CCSS, which have devolved into dozens of similar state variations, was predictable through the proper analytic lens and that analyzing a policy's detail, drive, and durability can help

Table 1
Crosswalk Among Dimensions, Sins, Attributes, and Domains

Dimension	Moore's CCSS Sin[a]	Policy Attribute	Activity Domain
Detail	Standards are too ambiguous	Specificity	Infrastructure to connect outcomes with instruction
Detail	Lack of teacher training	Consistency	Recruitment that is aligned with outcomes
Detail	Too many standards	Specificity	Consensus on outcomes
Drive	Misrepresentation by politicians	Authority, power	Environmental pressures
Durability	Students should develop their own writing style	Authority	Consensus on outcomes
Durability	Devalues literature as art	Authority	Consensus on outcomes
Durability	Ignores the basics	Authority	Consensus on outcomes

Note. CCSS = Common Core State Standards.
[a]D'Lee Pollock Moore's "seven deadly sins" of the CCSS (see Strauss 2016).

prevent future political backlash. Prior frameworks understate the importance of political acumen (Greene & McShane, 2018). It is not merely that there were unintended backlashes thanks to individual gaffes, such as the comment by Secretary Duncan about "white suburban moms who—all of a sudden—their child isn't as brilliant as they thought they were" (Strauss, 2013). The primary issue, I argue, is what Mehta (2013) calls the "allure of order." It is not enough to standardize and rationalize. In a democracy, popularity matters, as does the political process that allows policies to be "enacted with real support" (Greene & McShane, 2018, p. 50).

I developed the questions listed in Table 2 to guide this analysis; they are tailored to CCR standards but are intentionally general for future application to a range of education policies. To make the questions more transferable to future research, I use the phrase "the policy" in these questions instead of referring to a CCR standards–based reform specifically. I ask and answer each question in turn as it relates to CCR standards, using direct quotes from participants in 2018, which are drawn from a larger, 5-year study of standards-based reform implementation. As these participants are from partner states in an ongoing study, I avoid naming specific states in order to guard against negative overgeneralizations. But I do document the prevalence of certain attitudes.

In addition to presenting findings, I offer alternative designs or implementation decisions that might have created a more popular regime of national standards and associated policies. I argue that these changes, some large and some small, could have altered public opinion about the CCSS. Hindsight is 20/20, but it is useful to imagine how public opinion

Table 2
Nine Questions to Understand the Detail, Drive, and Durability of a Policy

Detail
  1. Is the policy clear and specific?
  2. Is the policy well aligned?
  3. Does the policy allow for adaptation without sacrificing its original intent?
Drive
  1. Does the policy have the legal and political legitimacy to drive implementation?
  2. Does the policy have advocates with clear and consistent communication?
  3. Does the policy have sufficient and appropriate rewards and consequences?
Durability
  1. Does the policy build institutional norms?
  2. Does the policy activate resistance because of conflicts with core values?
  3. Is the policy sufficiently funded to ensure implementation effects will build over time?

might have been shaped to bolster the common standards movement rather than weaken it.

Methods

During 2018, a research team of faculty and graduate students conducted 52 interviews with state, regional, and district officials as part of a 5-year study of standards-based reform implementation at The Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning. We conducted 9 interviews in Massachusetts (MA), 12 in California (CA), 12 in Pennsylvania (PA), 10 in Ohio (OH), and 9 in Texas (TX). We selected these states because (a) they were willing to partner with us in exchange for tailored research briefs and funding to participate in multistate conferences and (b) represented a compellingly diverse portrait of the United States in terms of size, regions, policies, and demographics.

We conducted the interviews in a semistructured format, whereby we developed a protocol collaboratively but allowed ourselves to deviate from specific questions in order to ask relevant follow-ups as the study progressed. Semistructured interviews are the most common type in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2012; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Weiss, 1995). Considering that these interviews occurred during Year 3 of a large study, this format also allowed for follow-up questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) based on the interviewers' knowledge of the prior years' findings (Desimone et al., 2019). This approach relies on process theory, which "deals with events and the processes that connect them" (Maxwell, 2004, p. 248) and allows for a closer understanding of the implementation of standards-based reform. By selecting individuals with positional authority (superintendents, state curriculum directors, and others), we were able to examine the thinking of leaders at the highest levels of state and local government.

The format also attempts to compensate for the reality that these conversations occurred around the country and over the phone, and across individuals with vastly differing levels of knowledge of specific standards-based policies (Cachia & Millward, 2011). To address these knowledge gaps, we also created separate protocols specifically tailored to those responsible for overseeing English language learner (ELL) and students with disabilities (SWD) policies. All the questions are provided in the appendix.

The quotes presented in this text are not meant to be representative of any state or district; they are designed only to illustrate lived experiences with standards-based policy (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). We chose respondents who were knowledgeable about standards implementation in their district or state according to our e-mail inquiries, and we selected three districts in each of our four partner states—one rural, one suburban, and one urban, in order to capture a range of geographies. In Pennsylvania, we were only able to interview in one urban district.

In the other four states, we developed a list of preferred districts that also participated in a contemporaneous survey of teachers, principals, and district administrators. We worked our way through this list, giving preference to those districts with significant numbers of ELLs and SWDs, as these student groups have too often been an afterthought within the context of standards-based reform policies. We also interviewed participants from a regional educational service center (ESC) in each state.

Data analysis took place across three stages. First, after the interviews were transcribed, the researchers coded the transcripts in Dedoose using inductive and deductive coding (Saldaña, 2015). The a priori thematic codes were the policy attributes. Additionally, second-tier codes that highlighted areas related to standards implementation (e.g., curriculum, assessments, PD, SWDs, ELLs) emerged. Over time, the research associates identified new codes that emerged from the data, and we collaboratively refined these into third-tier codes (e.g., leadership, instructional shifts). Interrater agreement was reached through a process of paired coding and group discussion (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

The second stage of analysis involved reading across these codes to identify overarching patterns and arrive at major themes and, ultimately, a new theoretical framework. In working with the five attributes, I began to theorize reconceptualizations of them within the more recent literature. I built upon findings from a prior interview analysis conducted in 2016 (Desimone et al., 2019) and began to consider how changes have emerged over time as states and districts adapted their CCR standards policies.

After many months of discussion with colleagues on the research team and considering the frequent co-occurrence of power and authority in the coding process, I condensed the attributes into the three dimensions of detail, drive, and durability. After reading through all of the interviews (including the ones that I conducted), I examined each of the existing codes

for evidence to answer the policy-relevant questions in Table 2. I frame the findings below using these subquestions to maximize accessibility to academic and nonacademic readers, to highlight findings of greatest policy relevance, and to clarify the lessons that future standards-based reform designers and implementers can learn.

First Dimension: Detail

Q1: Is the Policy Clear and Specific?

The failures of the CCSS to provide the proper amount of detail are well documented, stemming primarily from a reluctance to specify the curricula that teachers could and should use in their classrooms (Polikoff, 2017). This ambiguity is Moore's first sin (Strauss, 2016), but many of the interviewees spoke of this lack of specificity as politically necessary. One state education agency (SEA) official stated, "We are kind of loathe to say here's what you need to do, here's the program you need to have, here's what it should look like." Across all five states, SEA officials prioritized "local control" over curricula and left these decisions to individual districts. Said one SEA official, "We're very much a local control state, so curriculum and instruction are really local decisions." In no SEA did officials describe a more prescriptive approach to curriculum policy.

The reasons for this hands-off approach are historical, structural, and political. Historically, battles over curricular content doomed prior efforts, such as the national history standards (Ravitch, 2001). The architects of the CCSS may have overlearned this lesson by ensuring that standards, particularly in ELA, were vague enough to avoid political opposition. According to a comprehensive review of state websites (available at c-sail.org/maps), in addition to these interviews, states provided little curricular guidance outside of a handful of model units. In fact, one SEA official was sensitive to "the long history" of being "a compliance machine," a sentiment that appeared across interviews in every SEA. Across these states, officials were hesitant to provide curricular guidance that might be seen as too prescriptive or compliance oriented.

Because of this lack of specificity in the initial implementation of the CCSS, district-level participants described how they were still struggling to vet and implement curricula. One district official believed that the standards themselves discouraged the use of specific curricula:

> For ELA standards, I would say the biggest shift has been moving away from a specific curriculum guiding us and delving much deeper into the framework, and how that strategy or kind of shift in teaching is affecting not only our teachers but our students.

Here, a participant argued that the standards are decreasing, rather than increasing, specificity, which is needed to properly implement the standards,

according to the policy attribute theory (Porter, 1994; Porter et al., 1988), and to connect outcomes with instruction (Cohen et al., 2018). Other district interviewees did not, however, express this extreme aversion to specific curricula. But across interviews, participants described curricular work as time intensive and requiring several years of extra effort. While one SEA did not even address curricula because of political concerns, the four others were more willing to offer some guidance, such as model units and textbook recommendations.

High-quality curricular materials are not the only means by which standards-based policy can be made clearer and more specific. Understanding the details of a multipronged policy such as standards-based reform also requires adequate and ongoing PD (Desimone, 2009). Participants revealed that during the CCSS era, there was inadequate lead-up time to the reforms and inadequate PD. As one district official put it, "There's no preparation and no lead up to it, so it was like . . . teachers that first year had no idea what the questions were going to look like themselves, because there were no sample questions." Another district official said, "Our teachers would want to learn by doing" as opposed to sitting in lectures. District-level participants described a desire to provide more collaborative, practice-based PD, where teachers could receive quick feedback on standards-based instruction. But while these officials remained committed to learning from prior mistakes, they seemed in many cases to lack the capacity to do so. One state-level official understood this, stating, "I think there's one group of districts that purely does not have district-level capacity to build. They need someone to do that building for them." Across states, these lower-capacity districts were "tiny," meaning that they had five or fewer schools.

In these districts lacking in capacity, PD was often one-shot in nature, or it was delivered at a large state convening. One participant at an ESC said, "We also realize that those single, one-day PD sessions are not necessarily showing how to change and truly support those teachers, in terms of long-term impact to the classroom." SEAs, ESCs, and districts with lower capacity have not been able to conduct the intensive follow-up PD needed for successful implementation of CCR standards (Kaufman, Cannon, et al., 2018). Within the context of this study, four SEAs seemed to have invested significant resources in sustained PD, but one had only recently required its districts to develop standards-aligned PD in partnership with their ESC.

In response to capacity issues, one SEA developed online PD to implement its CCR standards, including microcredentialing incentives for teachers to participate. These online courses sought to clarify how teachers should change their instruction. But the requirements for teachers of SWDs and ELLs in this state remained somewhat obscure. District officials wanted more online training for teachers of SWDs; the state offered PD primarily for general educators. One district official said, "The [PD website] does have some coursework for teachers involved, and some resources for

students with disabilities, but frankly, it's not something that we have taken full advantage of in special education." "Taking full advantage" would mean creating a sequence of online courses specifically for teachers of SWDs. Across states, district leaders felt that they needed better PD to help teachers scaffold grade-level content for SWDs.

On average, SEA and district officials felt that they were better equipped to meet the needs of ELLs. One state made its CCR ELA standards more specific than the CCSS, which may have made the newer standards more popular. One district official stated, "What I love about the new [state] standards . . . is that they actually call out the language demand. In the past, that wasn't done. And it really makes it very explicit that it's everyone's job to educate and meet the needs of English learners." This state's revision added clarity, compared with the relatively vague CCSS, which did not explicitly address the needs of diverse learners, according to a criticism raised by at least one ELL or SWD specialist in every state.

Not every state, however, has moved to make the CCR standards clearer and more specific. In one instance, the revisions may have had the opposite effect on their popularity. The standards in this state became too detailed; there were simply too many of them, leading to complaints in all three of this state's districts where we interviewed. One SEA official summarized his thoughts by saying that while districts want more specificity, "it's a very wide continuum in terms of how districts respond to the department in terms of the work that we do." This official worried about the backlash to additional detail. Considering these varying responses, there was no consensus across the states on whether their current CCR standards were an improvement over the CCSS. SEA participants in the more politically conservative states reported some continuing resistance to standards-based reform policies, which suggests that a partisan political divide lingers.

Q2: Is the Policy Well Aligned?

A policy can be appropriately specific and yet completely unaligned with prior initiatives. The CCSS emerged in the wake of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which mandated that all states implement relatively basic tests in English and mathematics (Mehta, 2013). RttT and the CCSS did not address the testing regime imposed by NCLB but rather focused on the rigor of the standards and, by extension, the tests. Tweaking NCLB, rather than modifying it wholesale, would seem at first glance to increase alignment over time. But in one state that changed its math and ELA tests frequently, the alignment concerns remained. The four other states, in contrast, seemed to have more faith in the alignment of standards, tests, and curricula.

Standards-based reform demands extensive alignment at multiple levels of the policy system, particularly among curricula, assessments, and tests

(Cohen et al., 2018). During the initial phase of CCSS implementation, teachers had good reason to be suspicious as publishers marketed outdated books as CCSS aligned when they were not (Polikoff, 2015). One district administrator, reflecting on the past years, said "[In] our district, there really weren't any instructional materials that were particularly Common Core aligned at that particular time. Lots of things that had a sticker on it, that said Common Core, but nothing that really helped the teachers with the shift, with pedagogy, and things of that nature."

Most of the districts in this study, however, had moved beyond these initial problems, with the exception of the state that had frequently changed its standardized tests. A district participant in this state remarked, "We're hearing from students and parents, 'Well, I don't know what I'm supposed to be studying for this test.'" Parental concerns can create political problems since families often associate standards-based reform solely with testing, even though there are many other moving parts (Supovitz, 2009). Fortunately, these alignment concerns were not present in the other SEAs, ESCs, and districts where we interviewed.

Alignment also demands the recruitment of teachers who are trained in the standards, which requires standards-aligned teacher preparation programs (Cohen et al., 2018). Some states have invested millions in teacher recruitment, according to participants. But teacher preparation requirements remain loose and undefined (Drake, Pomerance, Rickenbrode, & Walsh, 2018). Once in the field, teacher PD can be similarly vague and unaligned. To combat this problem, one SEA provided 3 years of intensive PD and on-site training to districts in need. Another SEA, however, only provided workshops using a train-the-trainer model, which is less effective than intensive coaching (Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan, 2018).

Within the context of PD, clarity, specificity, and alignment concerns consistently emerged across SEAs. These concerns were more acute when discussing standards-based instruction for ELLs and SWDs. At least one participant at every SEA stated that they were not providing enough support for SWDs in particular. If the intent of the CCSS was to craft standards that were general enough to be politically popular, this generality may have caused uneven alignment and, paradoxically, made differentiation more difficult (Edgerton, Fuchs, & Fuchs, in press). I next describe how interviewees had adapted the details of standards-based policy to suit competing interests, and whether this resulted in too much "standards deviation" (Spillane, 2009).

Q3: Does the Policy Allow for Adaptation Without Sacrificing Its Original Intent?

A policy can be clear, specific, and well aligned while remaining adaptable to local contexts and the needs of all students, in particular ELLs and SWDs. Adaptability in the case of CCR standards implementation would

involve providing some curricula that teachers could also supplement. Teachers value this autonomy according to contemporaneous interviews from one of the partner states in this study (Polikoff & Campbell, 2018).

Two district administrators, however, viewed this supplementation as a negative adaptation that undermined the intent of standards-based reform. As one district official put it, "Teachers were like, 'Well, I teach a lesson on dinosaurs, and I like my dinosaur lesson. Don't take it away from me,' but it didn't match any of the standards. You know?" Rather than help teachers integrate the standards into existing lessons, the official here wanted to upend the existing curricula. Another anecdote occurred in a different state, where a district administrator expressed frustration with teachers' "clinging" to traditional practices. Though not widespread, these sentiments occurred when central office administrators felt that teachers were not responsive to new pedagogical knowledge—a common concern with standards implementation (Goodson, Moore, & Hargreaves, 2006; Spillane, 2009). According to these administrators, the two districts' teachers were more concerned with what Moore calls "the basics" (Strauss, 2016), as opposed to the more challenging CCR-aligned instruction.

In these two instances, modifying rather than disparaging teachers' favorite prior lessons might have helped build greater teacher support. Teacher buy-in is important to achieving a consensus on learning outcomes, according to teacher surveys, particularly among ELA teachers, where there is less consensus on what should be taught (Edgerton & Desimone, 2018). But in two of these interviews, concerns about administrative compliance subsumed teachers' curricular preferences—in contrast to the many SEA interviews seeking to move away from compliance and toward a more supportive philosophy. This difference suggests that while these five SEAs have learned important implementation lessons, not all districts have.

Crafting adaptable standards-based policy also means adequately supporting the needs of ELLs and SWDs, particularly considering that teachers of SWDs are significantly less likely to believe that the CCR standards are appropriate (Edgerton et al., in press). The interviews revealed that this attitude may also reflect a lack of training. One participant at an ESC said,

> We're not actually teaching our practitioners how to do that [differentiation]. And they're coming, from no fault of their own because of the way things have shifted from learning how to teach from a scripted lesson plan book, to saying, the script's out. You're the experts. You're going to modify; you're going to accommodate. And they don't know how.

This ESC official saw her work as undoing prior attempts at scripted standards-based reform under the original CCSS in order to make the CCR standards relevant for ELLs and SWDs. An official in another state lamented that differentiation for ELLs typically involved saying simply, "Here's

a bilingual dictionary." However, an official in a different state pointed to revisions that made the CCR standards more accessible for ELLs. Thus, the SEAs had vastly different infrastructures and policies for helping ELLs and SWDs reach grade-level expectations.

I turn last to the question of whether the original intent of the CCSS has been lost through the state-level permutations of the CCR standards. I define the purposes of the CCSS using its own website: (1) "establish clear, consistent guidelines for what every student should know and be able to do in math and English language arts from kindergarten through 12th grade"; (b) "ensure students are prepared for today's entry-level careers, freshman-level college courses, and workforce training programs"; and (3) "provide a way for teachers to measure student progress throughout the school year and ensure that students are on the pathway to success in their academic careers" (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2019).

Though the content of some standards may have changed, the institutional logic (see DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) of standards-based reform was prevalent across all the interviews. Interviewees frequently emphasized all three of the goals listed on the CCSS website. The CCR standards have become an ever-adapting bureaucratic invention, with 5-year staggered revision timelines and multiple feedback loops. SEAs and district offices may have moved on from the CCSS-era math and ELA standards debates, but they have engaged in expanding the standards-based mind-set to other subjects. For example, one district administrator described their strategy:

> We're always looking at technology [standards]. We'll be doing more science. We have a rolling plan of what our focus is. We always have a very heavy focus one year, and then we try to circle back to some of those things every year.

The use of the term *rolling* frequently occurred across interviews; districts were continually "rolling out" curricula, models, new policies, procedures, and standards revisions. The CCR standards are now "dynamic and generative," in the words of one SEA official, making them a perpetual project rather than a one-and-done policy.

Second Dimension: Drive

After attending to the importance of clear, specific, well-aligned, and adaptable details, I suggest that the drivers behind policy implementation are legal and political legitimacy, appropriate rewards and consequences, and sustained advocacy at multiple levels of the policy system. Those engaged in standards-based work can attend to these three drivers in current efforts, which participants suggested are now more focused on science and social studies than on math and ELA.

**Q1: Does the Policy Have the Legal and Political
Legitimacy to Drive Its Implementation?**

Over the past several decades, local district authorities have been squeezed into a smaller education policymaking space, as federal and state governments impose more requirements upon them (Kirst & Wirt, 2009). This reality necessitates both a strong legal foundation and political legitimacy on the ground level. In the case of the CCR standards, legal legitimacy now must come from the state. The CCSS had the full weight of the federal government behind it thanks to RttT funding, but there remains a constitutional inability to mandate national standards (McGuinn, 2012). As RttT was not a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the CCSS and RttT lacked a long-term legal foundation while simultaneously requiring a shift from the basic numeracy and literacy tests mandated under NCLB. To secure RttT funding, states still adopted the CCSS, new assessments, and teacher evaluation laws (Bleiberg & Harbatkin, 2018). As the funding evaporated, these federally driven laws became less popular (Cheng et al., 2018).

It is no accident, then, that four of the five states in this study no longer mention "Common Core" in the name of their CCR standards. While many have pointed to this change as being more rhetorical than substantive (Coburn, Hill, & Spillane, 2016), including several participants in this study, the name change relocated the drive for standards-based reform from the federal to the state level. Presumably, the removal of the phrase "Common Core" would attract less partisan attention. As one state official said, "The political climate at that time [of repealing the CCSS] was . . . we needed to be on our own." State-led reforms may have more legitimacy in the minds of voters, particularly among ideological conservatives and Republican voters (Kirst & Wirt, 2009; Tetlock, Vieider, Patil, & Grant, 2013).

This strategy, however, has not worked in every state, where standards remain a hot-button issue lacking in support, even without the perceived involvement of the federal government. One district interviewee said, "I can't imagine working at the state department, especially, under our current political climate." Another state official commented when comparing the CCSS with the state's current standards, "I think part of the Common Core, I guess, 'theatrical' would be the word I would use, is that they [parents and teachers] didn't see who was really involved. They didn't see that it was for the benefit of [state's] students." A mere rebranding was not able to shift public perception in these more conservative areas.

These comments should remind reformers that political legitimacy stems from driven, charismatic advocates (Porter, 1994; Porter et al., 1988) who the public perceive to be acting on behalf of students' best interests, above the partisan fray. For example, one superintendent was described as "one of the best [state CCR standards] advocates I know, who is out there engaging with

our families and with community members to better support our students and families." In this district, leaders built political legitimacy for standards-based reform through careful groundwork. This legitimacy took time to build. One district participant stated that it took years to "have seen the kids benefit in what they're able to do." One SEA official understood that building this legitimacy required at least 3 years of intensive state support for the most underresourced districts. Many states, however, did not pair support with strategic communication efforts, a shortcoming I detail in the next subsection.

Q2: Does the Policy Have Advocates With Clear and Consistent Communication?

In contrast to the individual district success stories, at the federal level, the unpopularity of Secretary Duncan may have contributed to the CCSS implementation woes. President Obama's popularity among Republicans and certain conservative groups also nose-dived after successful partisan attacks that used the CCSS as a wedge issue (among many others) (Druckman, Levendusky, & McLain, 2018; Polikoff et al., 2016; Supovitz, 2017). In addition to the federal role, successful CCR standards implementation requires consistent advocates at lower levels of the policy system. Those with positional district leadership, including superintendents, can make or break the implementation of standards-based policy (Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013; Sharratt & Fullan, 2009; Supovitz, 2006). In analyzing these interviews, I uncovered how advocates at state and regional levels have learned to create communication infrastructures that outlast themselves. Robust communication among administrators, teachers, students, and parents was key to building public support for the CCR standards. This finding is not all that surprising, but it does highlight the limitations of even the best-designed policy without sustained communication at all three levels—state, regional, and district. Federal communication concerning educational standards, in contrast, may be more harmful than helpful, as it has carried the threat of compliance since NCLB (Desimone, 2013).

While three SEAs in this study learned from their mistakes and created clear and consistent messaging through regular communication, two SEAs appeared mired in the past. Some still had not developed communication plans for their state's CCR standards. One SEA official said, "But as soon as we have a communications strategy, I'll be happy to share that with you and let you know how we're going to do it." Communication infrastructures also remained unidirectional in many instances. For example, no SEA official could speak to organized data collection analyzing which curricula districts chose to adopt. This communication breakdown prevented states from effectively driving policy details. One official said, "So everybody uses, there could be 1,000 different ones [curricula] out there. I don't

know." A district official in the same state described the SEA as a "black hole" where information vanishes, never to return. Also in this state, officials realized that practitioners did not have a common working definition for what constitutes "curricula." One official said, "We need to define this better" so that curricula would be more than "a scope and sequence from Pearson." These were the two most damning instances of poor communication.

Not at all participants, however, felt that there was poor communication around CCR standards. Others highlighted how they have improved stakeholder feedback mechanisms and included more teachers in policy conversations. New communication strategies in these states ultimately sought to highlight the benefits of CCR standards policies to students and families, especially when it came to accountability plans. One SEA official stated, "The public campaigns to revise our accountability system were pretty comprehensive," and they included "other public menus and presentations and feedback sessions that were open to anyone." SEA officials across states attributed these changes to the feedback requirements under ESSA, NCLB's replacement.

ESCs seemed more adept than SEAs at service-oriented communication as they were already acting as intermediaries between SEAs and districts. One ESC participant described this infrastructure:

> We have [state] work groups that are ongoing, and the service center is able to participate in those work groups in order to understand the changes to the standards, and then how that applies because of a deep understanding of those standards . . . then be able to communicate that out regionally to all of our customer districts.

The use of "customer" here reflects a service, or supportive, mentality toward CCR standards implementation. The final drive question confronts this central issue of how to incentivize implementation.

Q3: Does the Policy Have Sufficient and Appropriate Rewards and Consequences?

Though many have sought to separate the question of accountability from K–12 standards, the two are inextricably linked in the minds of most because of RttT and partisan political media that conflate multiple education policies (McGuinn, 2012; Supovitz, 2017). The research team asked all the participants how they were rewarded or punished for implementing standards. Across the district interviews, the participants did not describe positive rewards, but a few referred to negative consequences for teacher and school performance on state CCR tests, which narrowed their focus. One district official said, "We don't have time for that [cultural competency] because what we're rated on are our academic scores." Punitive consequences, however, have diminished over time (Desimone et al., 2019; Edgerton, in press), and only two district administrators brought up accountability concerns.

RttT encouraged states to create rewards and consequences around teacher evaluation systems, which four out of the five states in this study adopted (California being the exception). Across the country, states followed the lead of major urban areas in adopting rewards and consequences for student achievement measures (Bleiberg & Harbatkin, 2018). The unintended consequences of holding teachers accountable for student achievement are well documented and researched (e.g., Booher-Jennings, 2005; Coburn, Hill, & Spillane, 2016; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2000; Supovitz, 2009). On the other hand, proponents point to some student achievement gains during the RttT and CCSS era (e.g., Alexander, Jang, & Kankane, 2017), though few studies found similar positive results (see Polikoff, 2017, for a review; Song et al., 2019). In short, the appropriateness of test-based accountability is an ongoing debate, but a clear majority of the general public remain supportive of it, according to national opinion polling—which stands in stark contrast to teacher opinion (Cheng et al., 2018).

Less discussed is how the drive to use accountability to incentivize CCR standards implementation has not always increased standards-based practices around assessment data. This concern surfaced across the districts' interviews in one of the states. A district participant said,

> So we get tons of data, we get a horrible report card, and then they [the SEA] don't speak to you about it for another year unless you have schools on a list. And then your schools are put on a list. But I never feel like they actually talk to us about what does the data say? What are we noticing? Here's some feedback for you around the data. I don't see it that way.

In this case, the consequences were not effective at boosting support for standards-based policy because they were not paired with substantive feedback. Clearly, this SEA had not learned the lessons of the NCLB era, much less the CCSS era.

However, district officials in other states described more positive experiences with accountability. One rural district in particular welcomed the supports provided through the state turnaround process. And two states have responded to accountability concerns, specifically an overemphasis on student proficiency, by introducing multiple measures such as student growth and chronic absenteeism (Edgerton, in press). By using more comprehensive measures of school quality, advocates of multiple measures hope to build greater consensus on educational outcomes (Cohen et al., 2018; Schneider, 2017). Despite some concerns about making accountability too complex for families to understand, multiple measures seem to be popular, according to the limited state polling on the issue (Policy Analysis for California Education, 2018). These new systems may lead to a perception that rewards and consequences are more appropriately designed in the CCR standards era, which can build policy durability.

Third Dimension: Durability

Q1: Does the Policy Build Institutional Norms?

Even when policies have sufficient drive in the beginning, policy durability depends on multiple individuals willing to sustain implementation, a requirement that can be particularly difficult in organizations with high staff turnover. Policies that endure and build institutional norms require constant check-ins, modification, and collaboration (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Elmore, 2000; Spillane, 2009). I found encouraging evidence of norm building across interviews, particularly at the regional level. ESCs in all states wielded institutional knowledge of CCR standards implementation to design active, ongoing PD in order to foster building-level and district-level norms.

At the district level, results were again more dependent on capacity. Larger districts with higher capacity (fiscal resources, human capital, or strategic capacity) were better able to cultivate new standards-based norms. For example, one urban district official said, "I have an expectation, and I require the follow-up. Any time we deliver professional development, they have to have, within 10 days, a half-day check-in . . . either we're going in to them, or they're coming to us." Sustaining reform beyond individual leadership requires the creation of these types of institutional norms, as standards implementation demands a lot of human capital. Another urban official said, "It's a capacity issue of how do I now find the bodies who are normed to go in and see it, and to validate, 'Yes, practice changed.'" There are no shortcuts to cementing this type of institutional durability.

The CCSS demanded more rigorous standards of all public schools; some pre-CCSS standards in our study states were far less rigorous (see Carmichael et al., 2010, for a comparison). Similarly, the sheer difficulty of the newer CCR-aligned tests challenged some institutional norms. One regional official commented on their new state test: "I mean, I had a graduate student who gave it to all of her third graders and none of them passed it. They're all native English speakers. . . . It is a difficult test." In addition to the difficulty of achieving the more rigorous standards, current CCR standards may still butt up against traditional notions of what should and should not be taught at certain grade levels. I discuss these culture clashes in the next section.

**Q2: Does the Policy Activate Resistance
Because of Conflicts With Core Values?**

District leaders are continually reconstructing state education policy (Daly & Finnigan, 2011; Woulfin, Donaldson, & Gonzales, 2016) while they accommodate the institutional memories of their teaching force (Goodson et al., 2006) and navigate emotional networks (Fullan, 2016).

Murphy (2004) states, "Wherever schools become battlegrounds for partisan moral and religious agendas, the whole ideal of common schooling loses public support" (p. 264). The idea of setting only academic standards, instead of specific curricula, is meant to circumvent this political dilemma. But for the reasons previously discussed, the CCSS still activated partisan political resistance. In many cases, state officials did want to provide more specific support but came into conflict with cultural values. In particular, there were significant urban-rural tensions. As one state official said,

> If we step in too much then we get that pushback to say, "You don't know my district. You don't know my community. You don't know what the real causes of my failures are, my bad letter grades. You should stay out of it. My community knows best, and my local board, my local teachers."

Considering these tensions, SEA officials were frequently engaged in a precarious balancing act.

When the CCR standards do challenge existing assumptions about students, teachers need to experience student success. Research frequently emphasizes that teachers respond to intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation (e.g., Firestone, 2014). One district participant said,

> Because a lot of our students come from traumatized backgrounds, really tough home lives, and so I think in a sense teachers try to be empathetic, but in doing that they almost had been . . . lowering their expectations because of that. When in reality, once they heightened them, the students rose to the challenge. And they realized they [students] could do a lot more than what they initially thought.

Meaningful learning outcomes, in this case, allowed the practitioners to feel successful at implementing the CCR standards. These outcomes for the teachers were observable, in-class student learning. Understanding and accounting for these core motivators may help preserve policy durability and lessen backlash.

Finally, providing practitioners with choices may help diffuse some of these conflicts. When discussing PD, one participant said, "We responded to a lot of surveys that were taken and a lot of interview work that was done in the district that revealed that people want to have some choice and ownership over what they learn" about CCR standards. Successful districts provided a suite of PD options and opportunities for teachers to collaborate across subject areas.

Q3: Is the Policy Sufficiently Funded to Ensure Implementation Effects Will Build Over Time?

Even if resistance to change is overcome, a policy needs predictable funding to endure. Both states and districts have to determine funding

priorities, and their cumulative funding commitments over time determine the durability of a policy. The implementation of state standards has often relied on one-time cash infusions to provide teachers with a large dose of PD in a single year (McGuinn, 2012). This theme appeared frequently across interviews and state lines. Participants knew that providing PD funding for a single year can be inefficient in an environment of high staff turnover. Many participants spoke positively about earlier experiences funded by the SEA. But in four out of five states, financial commitments faded over time, or they were reallocated toward new subject areas and priorities, including history and socio-emotional learning.

These shifts meant less attention paid to math and ELA—a trade-off that distressed participants in lower-performing districts. In one large urban district, an administrator described making budgetary decisions as having "to put a stake in the ground somewhere. I'm a middle school math teacher, so you can sell me all day, every day on why we need to do more math PD." But math PD was not a funding priority in this district, and neither math nor ELA was the primary focus of recent initiatives. One SEA official in this state complained, "There's zero funding for English language arts. That is our big frustration right now, so there is no statewide PD, there is no common body of knowledge that teachers in the state are learning." It is alarming to hear this concern expressed nearly a decade after this state's initial adoption of the CCSS.

Though other SEAs could point to a common body of knowledge, ongoing standards-based PD for math and ELA is now competing with other priorities. Time constraints present a major challenge in districts where PD is contractually limited to a few days by collective-bargaining agreements. An ESC participant who trained teachers on the CCR standards stated, "It's not lightning quick progress, like, this takes time. We're talking about human beings, and their brains, and this doesn't just happen instantly." Other districts were more successful at making use of limited funding without sacrificing durability. But most districts felt that they were receiving less PD funding for CCR activities.

Considerations in Interpreting the Results

I pause here to reemphasize the limitations of this study design: Only five states are represented and only 13 school districts. But these states do cover a range of policy environments (see c-sail.org/maps for a comprehensive review of these policies). These states also run the political gamut from those still willing to refer to their standards as Common Core (California) to those that were deeply suspicious of them in the first place (Texas). They represent states that have struggled with standards repeal and the ensuing confusion around rapid policy changes, and they include RttT winners and losers. We were not, however, able to include any states from the

bottom tier of national achievement rankings according to *Education Week* (2018). Considering these limitations, these results represent perhaps a more positive outlook on CCR standards–based policy.

Another major limitation is that the original study design did not include teacher interviews, which are now being collected through targeted site visits in each state. I have attempted to compensate for this lack of practitioner perspective by incorporating Moore's critiques (Strauss, 2016). Related survey analysis suggests that teacher attitudes across these states are quite similar, though there are significantly more negative perceptions of CCR standards in those states that have made more frequent policy changes (Edgerton & Desimone, 2018). But overall, the remarkable sameness of the perceptions of teachers, principals, and superintendents across these states is a testament to the power of social media and national political coverage to shape attitudes toward the standards (Cheng et al., 2018; Edgerton & Desimone, 2019; Supovitz, 2017). This nationalization of education policy makes a politically minded theoretical framework all the more important to future policy research, particularly when local actors are left alone to implement the CCR standards.

Conclusion

By using three dimensions to compare CCR standards policy implementation with CCSS-era efforts, I reveal how omitting key details—curriculum examples and long-term PD infrastructures—may have doomed the popularity of the CCSS from the start. These omissions compounded over time and were worsened by incoherent messaging. States and districts are now learning from these mistakes in fits and starts. This institutional learning depends on their leadership and capacity, making local decision making more influential (Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013). The CCSS may have been successful at making individual state standards more similar over the long term (Porter et al., 2011) and at making teachers' perceptions similar across some of the states in this study (Edgerton & Desimone, 2018). But the CCR standards certainly are not popular among teachers (Cheng et al., 2018). And one of the core problems that the CCSS was meant to solve for education researchers—the lack of a norm-referenced multistate test aside from the National Assessment of Educational Progress—has not been solved.

As for drivers, the CCSS also needed more charismatic individuals and more appropriate rewards and consequences. Here again, states are both learning from and repeating mistakes, as not all have embraced multiple measures or developed coherent communication plans. More recent CCR standards efforts have avoided designating a clear political figurehead in the mold of Secretary Duncan. Implementation work happens more quietly and behind the scenes. As for rewards and consequences, states and districts

have avoided creating new incentives for new CCR standards, but many have left their existing RttT-era policies in place.

Standards-based reform is now driven at the state, regional, and district levels. This development carries both positive and negative consequences according to these interviews. Districts have had to pick up the slack as federal and state governments have withdrawn. Some have the capacity to do so, while others struggle or choose different priorities. Many have since turned their attention away from ELA and math and toward science and social studies, suggesting that the institutional logic (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) of standards-based reform persists despite political challenges. It is hard to imagine "standard-less" education. The issue remains who or what has the legitimacy to impose standards? And who should construct them? Through interview analysis, I have described how states and districts have incorporated more stakeholders, diversified advocates, and simplified messaging. In short, they are sweating more of the details and avoiding sweeping rhetoric, and they are investing in new drivers for standards-based reform across a more diverse array of subject areas.

These improvements may bode well over time for each state's CCR standards despite the instability of the 2010s. But the reliance of the CCSS on one-time RttT stimulus funding, used to sustain structures like the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, was an initial design flaw. A sustained effort at standards-based reform is not compatible with a metaphorical shot in the arm or a flurry of PD in a single year, as participants repeatedly emphasized. Finally, the CCSS activated core cultural values about the purpose of education, over which Americans continue to disagree. Unlike NCLB, which focused on a basic adequacy standard (see Satz, 2007), the CCSS assumed a set of skills needed to compete globally. This mentality differs dramatically from that of much of rural America, as the CCSS are disconnected from rural realities and economic opportunities (Yettick, Baker, Wickersham, & Hupfield, 2014). The inclusion of a career focus in the CCR standards aims to address this deficit, but participants were not able to point to concrete examples of career readiness.

We will always be debating what is taught in our schools, how, and by whom. But we should be able to build a solid theoretical foundation for predicting what might sink future efforts by listening to the voices of policy designers, implementers, and practitioners. It is not that the federal and philanthropic architects of the CCSS and RttT did not consider the details, the drivers, and the durability of the reform. It is that they failed to anticipate the political backlash from each of their design decisions and make course corrections in response to changing political conditions.

When tasked with implementing the latest CCR standards, districts have stepped up to the plate, but they still must grapple with familiar capacity constraints and competing demands. In the current political environment, perhaps deference to local control is the only means by which to avoid

backlash. In spite of these ongoing challenges, researchers can use this framework to help predict political backlash and advise policymakers accordingly. We can closely and explicitly examine these political factors instead of brushing them aside, which will add valuable context to future implementation studies. We do not have to learn "the same lessons over and over again" (Coburn, 2016, p. 473). Finally, should a policy window open at the state or federal level, policymakers can use these lessons to think more carefully about the appropriate level of detail and the drivers necessary to craft durable education policies.

Appendix

This appendix provides all the interview questions posed to the participants in a semistructured format. The research team collaboratively developed and internalized these questions prior to conducting the interviews in order to facilitate productive and authentic conversations. *"SWDs" stands for students with disabilities, while "ELLs" stands for English language learners.*

State Education Agency Questions

Could you begin by telling me your name and position, and then more generally about your role at the ___?

1. We spoke last year about your state's approach to standards implementation. We would appreciate if you could begin by giving us an overview of any changes you have made over the last year.
2. *The first sentence is for MA, OH, and TX:* We understand that the state [superintendent/commissioner/chief] of education are fairly new to their position. *For all states:* Can you describe their leadership vision and/or priority areas for implementing college and career readiness standards in your state?
   a. How is their vision the same or different from the previous commissioners'?
   b. Do you get the sense this vision is aligned with the state board's vision? The state legislature? The governor's office?
3. Many states have changed their accountability systems as they submit new state plans under ESSA. Can you explain the major changes to your accountability system, if any? (*Prompts:* CA isn't using summative scores and adding in chronic absenteeism/suspension indicator, OH is adding in chronic absenteeism and prepared for success indicators, MA is adding in chronic absenteeism/9th-grade promotion/completion of challenging coursework indicators, TX is using A–F scoring and CCR/military readiness, PA is moving to a dashboard)
   a. Can you explain why these changes are being made and who helped designed them?
   b. How are these changes messaged to various stakeholders (e.g., district leaders, principals, teachers, community members)?

> c. Have you received any resistance to the changes in the accountability system? What do you think is the basis of this resistance, and how are you addressing it?
>
> d. What is plan/timeline for implementing these changes?

4. ESSA requires state accountability plans to include an English proficiency indicator for ELLs under Title 1 rather than under Title III. How has this change affected ELLs in your state, if at all?

5. ESSA requires states to develop assessments aligned to the principles of universal design for learning (UDL) and to help guide teachers' usage of UDL in their instruction. What activities has your state undertaken to prepare for this transition?

6. Now that we've received an overview of the policy shifts in standards implementation over the past year, we wanted to ask more specifically about the influence of "local control" in your state. We noticed that local control emerged again and again in our state and district interviews over the past 2 years. I'm interested to hear how you define local control and how it plays out in the way policies for both general education and special populations are designed and implemented.

> a. What are the primary benefits of the current system of local control?
>
> b. What are the primary challenges of the current system?

Policy Attributes

1. *Specificity:* We noticed a tension between state officials wanting to respect local control and district officials wanting more specific state guidance related to CCR standards (e.g., curriculum). How has [state] navigated this tension?

> a. What do you think are the benefits and challenges of local control?
>
> b. For which policies do you think it's important to be specific, and for which policies do you think it's important to be general?

2. *Consistency:* All of our state partners shared that the state assessment is aligned to the CCR standards, but there were mixed reports on the extent to which state administrators help ensure that district curriculum and supplementary resources are aligned to the standards. What role does your state play in assessing aligned curriculum at the local level?

> a. What do you think are the affordances and challenges of this system?
>
> b. How do you manage the work of your state partners (e.g., teacher prep programs, CTE [Career and Technical Education] programs) so that they are also aligning themselves to the evolving state standards?

3. *Authority:* In every state, stakeholders participated in working groups to help revise the standards, accountability systems, and/or curriculum frameworks. In what ways is your state system for involving stakeholders the same or different from previous years, and why?

> a. What do you think are the affordances and challenges of this system?
>
> b. What other factors do you think lend authority/legitimacy/credibility to the CCR standards?

4. *Power:* Many of our state powers have shifted away from describing accountability systems and the use of data as punitive and are instead describing them

as systems of support. Does this shift characterize how your state messages, and then enacts, rewards and sanctions for districts and schools? Please describe.

   a. What do you think are the affordances and challenges of this system?
   b. What are other ways in which the state thinks about the use of power to aid the implementation of the CCR standards?

5. *Stability:* Leadership turnover as well as revisions to standards, assessments, accountability systems, the state legislature, and other relevant educational domains seem to be the norm in this current climate. How does your state seek to maintain a semblance of stability amid this instability?

   a. What do you think are the affordances and challenges of updating educational policies and practices?

State-Specific Questions

California

1. Can you talk about the current state of the effort to include multiple measures in the accountability system?
2. The move toward the Local Control and Funding Formula, with districts setting their own growth goals for student improvement and progress, has led to a number of changes in the state's relationship with districts (including the newly created California Collaborative on Educational Excellence, which offers districts support). Can you tell us more about how the process is going and what changes have taken place this year?
3. One of the things that we talked about last year was a focus on professional development for principals at the state level. Have there been any new developments on that front over the last year?
4. Technology infrastructure was mentioned as an area of concentration in the past, allowing for a smoother rollout of online assessments. How has the state been focused on instructional technologies in the past year?

Massachusetts

1. We know that your MA Curriculum Framework recently underwent a period of revision. What is your state's plan for implementing the revised standards?

   a. Have you received any feedback on the revisions thus far?
   b. Did you decide to implement the "We Believe" statements, and if so, can you describe that implementation process? How do you think it went?

2. How was the rollout of MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) 2.0?

   a. What type of feedback did you receive about the alignment of the content to the MA Curriculum Framework?
   b. Do you think it's a fair assessment for general education/SWD/ELL students? Why or why not?

3. From previous state interviews, we know that your state invests a lot in professional learning, whether it is for principals learning about inclusive practices, teacher ambassadors learning to be coaches, or teachers with regard to cultural competency and overidentification of disability in Black students. Can you provide an update on these PD initiatives?
    a. Do you think these PD opportunities have been effective? Why or why not?

Ohio

1. We know that your ELA and math standards recently underwent a revision process. What is your state's plan for implementing the revised standards?
    a. Have you received any feedback on the revisions thus far?
2. We are interested in learning more about Ohio's focus on diverse learners. Last year, we learned that the state was planning to create in-house modules for teaching diverse learners. Have these modules been created, and if so, how are they being used?
    a. We also learned last year that the state is piloting 15 state support teams for diverse learners. What did you learn from this pilot?
    b. Are there other state initiatives that relate to your goal of addressing diverse learners?

Texas

1. We know that you recently revised the ELA and SLA standards in your state. What is your state's plan for implementing the revised standards?
    a. Have you received any feedback on the revisions thus far? Please explain.
2. We learned last year that your state is experimenting with Texas Gateway. What are the different types of resources available on Texas Gateway, and who has access to them?
    a. Which of the resources do you think (or do stakeholders think) are the most useful?
3. Is teacher microcredentialing still in its pilot form? Can you describe what this system currently looks like and where you think it's heading?

Pennsylvania

1. What would you say have been some of the successful innovations in the way your state has implemented policies around CCR standards?
2. We know that Philadelphia recently shifted from a mostly state-appointed board to a locally appointed board. Can you describe the implications of this shift for the state?
3. We know that many reforms come and go, while others are institutionalized. What is your perspective on the longevity of the standards in your state? Do you think they will last? Why or why not?

4. What is your perspective on the longevity of the assessment aligned to the standards?

ELL Specialist Questions

1. ESSA introduced many new requirements at the state level for ELLs. Can you describe how processes (e.g., classification, exiting, collecting data) have changed with regard to ELLs as a response to ESSA?
   a. Who collaborated in the design of these changes?
   b. What are the implications of these changes for ELL students?
2. With ESSA, state departments have discretion in determining consistent ELL proficiency targets and trajectories in their states. Can you describe how the state determined ELL growth targets and trajectories?
   a. Who participated in the determination of these targets and trajectories?
   b. Have these targets and trajectories changed how ELLs access the general education curriculum?
   c. Have they changed how teachers or schools are held accountable for ELL performance?
   d. What training and/or resources are available for the implementation of these targets and trajectories for districts, schools, and teachers?
3. A shift for ELL policy under ESSA is the move from Title III to Title I accountability. Can you describe the effects of this shift?
   a. Has this shift changed the ways districts and schools are held accountable for ELL student progress?
   b. Has this shift changed the ways teachers are held accountable for ELL student progress?
4. How are changes in accountability, if any, being messaged to various stakeholders (e.g., district leaders, principals, teachers, community members), again specifically with regard to changes around ELL policy?
5. Have you received any push-back to the changes in the accountability system?
   a. What do you think is the basis of this resistance, and how are you addressing it?
6. Can you describe any specific state policies for ELLs with disabilities?
   a. Do you feel these policies are adequate for ELLs with disabilities?
7. Can you describe any new or innovative changes to the PD programs and activities that support ELL instruction provided in the last year?
   a. How is the content of PD determined?
   b. To whom is this PD made available (district officials, ELL specialists, ELL teachers, general education teachers)?
8. What kind of PD has been most requested or well received?
   a. How is this monitored?
9. *For states with consortia (OH, MA):* Has the use of consortia standards and/or assessments changed the nature or the quality of the PD the state offers to districts and teachers of ELLs? If so, in what ways?
   a. To what extent do the consortia directly provide PD to districts and teachers of ELLs?

10. *For states without consortia (PA, TX, CA):* We're interested in hearing more about the state's partnership with various organizations (e.g., ESCs or regional cooperatives, universities) to deliver PD regarding ELL students. Can you tell me more about who the state's main partners for delivering ELL PD are and what functions they serve?
   a. How were these partnerships identified?
   b. How long has the state partnered with them?
   c. How do you monitor or track the effectiveness of the PD offered by these partners?

State-Specific ELL Questions

Ohio

1. In our previous interviews, we learned that the Ohio Department of Education was revising its Administrative Code following ESSA. How do you foresee ELL students being affected by these revisions?
2. In our previous interviews, we also learned that new Lau Resource Center leadership was in place. Can you describe any changes in the resources provided to support ELLs?

Massachusetts

1. In our previous interviews, we learned that Massachusetts was in the process of adjusting to the English language proficiency thresholds introduced with WIDA (World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment). Can you describe this process and its effects?
   a. Were any of these effects unintended or unforeseen?
2. We know that one of the supports for ELL students the department was considering was offering the MCAS for ELLs in different languages. Could you tell me more about these supports?
   a. Are these assessments intended for all ELL students?
   b. How have districts reacted to these supports?
   c. What training is provided for their administration?
3. The state legislature recently repealed the ban on bilingual education in Massachusetts. How do you anticipate this will impact the education of ELLs in your state, if at all?

Texas

1. In our previous interviews we were told that the state was revising the English Language Proficiency Standards. Could you update us on the progress of this work?
   a. Which stakeholders were involved in designing the revisions?
   b. Have there been consequent revisions to the TELPAS (Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System)?
   c. How do you foresee these revisions affecting ELL students?

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2. In our previous interviews, we learned that a committee tasked with reviewing the alignment between Chapter 89 (state plan for ELL students) and Chapter 29 (special education policy) had been created. Could you please tell me more about this process?
   a. Which divisions of the Texas Education Agency were involved in this committee?
   b. Can you describe any changes to the classification, reclassification, or educational models available for ELL SWDs?

California

1. In our previous interviews, we learned that an English Learner Roadmap working group was developing a proposition that would update policies for ELL SWDs. Can you tell me more about any changes or shifts that have occurred since we last spoke?
   a. What are the implications for ELL SWDs?
   b. Has this influenced the level of collaboration between different offices?
   c. What guidance have districts received?
2. In previous interviews, we discussed the implications of the recent repeal of the ban on bilingual education in California. Have there been any new developments in the implementation of the new policy in the past year?
3. We know that the department has proposed bills to create a pipeline for bilingual teachers. Can you describe any recent progress with regard to these bills?
   a. What does the pipeline (or its early stages) look like?
   b. What have the affordances and challenges of implementing this pipeline for bilingual teachers been?

SWD Specialist Questions

1. Many states have changed their accountability systems as they submit new state plans under ESSA. Can you explain any changes your state has made with regard to SWDs in response to ESSA?
   a. Who helped design these changes (if any)?
   b. Have they changed how SWDs access the general education curriculum?
   c. Have they changed how teachers or schools are held accountable for SWD performance?
2. How is the state getting various stakeholders to buy in to these changes, again specifically with regard to changes around SWD policy (e.g., district leaders, principals, teachers, community members)?
3. Have you received any feedback (positive or negative) to the SWD changes in the accountability system due to ESSA? If so, can you describe the feedback you've received? How are you addressing it?
4. ESSA requires states to develop assessments aligned to the principles of UDL and to help guide teachers' usage of UDL in their instruction. How has your state incorporated UDL, and will this change with the new requirements?
   a. What activities has your state undertaken to prepare for this transition?

      b. How do you monitor whether districts are incorporating UDL?

      c. To what extent do you think SWDs are benefiting from this shift?

5. We are interested in learning about the balance between offering compliance-oriented PD (focused on, e.g., IDEA [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act] requirements, how to write an IEP [individualized education program]) versus instruction-oriented PD (focused on, e.g., differentiation, pedagogy, content). How does your state balance these two?

      a. What kinds of topics does instruction-oriented PD tend to cover?

      b. To what extent do you think this PD supports teachers in addressing a wide range of student abilities in their classrooms?

State Role in Mind-Sets

6. To what extent have the CCR standards changed your state's vision for SWDs?

      a. How do you think the state's policies and priorities help support this vision?

      b. How is this vision communicated to districts? To school leaders and teachers?

        i. How do you think this is being received? Have you experienced any resistance?

          • If so, what do you think is the basis for this resistance, and how are you addressing it?

7. To what extent does the state encourage collaboration between special education and general education teachers?

      a. Have you run into any resistance to encouraging collaboration or shared ownership around SWDs?

8. What do you see as the state's role, as a policymaker, in tackling the need for differentiation?

      a. What role do you think school leadership, and specifically the principal, plays?

      b. Do you have any strong examples of ways in which teachers or districts are doing a good job of differentiating instruction?

      c. Have you observed any difference in how differentiation plays out across different content areas (e.g., literacy vs. math) or different levels (e.g., elementary vs. high)?

      d. What challenges, if any, is the state facing in holding districts/schools accountable for differentiating instruction and ensuring that SWDs are accessing the general curriculum?

9. Does the state have any partnerships that provide external support for teachers of SWDs (e.g., a university, CCSSO [Council of Chief State School Officers], Exceptional Children)?

      a. How long have these partnerships existed?

      b. What are some of the specific topics or resources these partnerships provide?

      c. Do districts/schools take advantage of these partnerships?

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State-Specific Questions

   Massachusetts

1. In our previous interviews, we heard about the work that your state is doing to train administrators and teachers around building cultural competency. How do you think this is going?
   a. How have teachers and principals reacted to this work?
   b. Do you think these PD opportunities have been effective in changing the trend of overidentifying disabilities in marginalized groups?
2. We know that your MA Curriculum Framework recently underwent a period of revision. How do you foresee SWDs being affected by these revisions?
   a. Have SWD teachers received any specific training in ensuring that the revised standards are accessible to SWDs?
3. Do you think the new MCAS 2.0 is an appropriate assessment of SWD students? Why or why not?

   Ohio

1. We know that your ELA and math standards recently underwent a period of revision. How do you foresee SWDs being affected by these revisions?
   a. Have SWD teachers received any specific training in ensuring that the revised standards are accessible to SWDs?
2. We are interested in learning more about Ohio's focus on diverse learners. Last year, we learned that the state was planning to create in-house modules for teaching diverse learners. Have these modules been created, and if so, how are they being used?
   a. We also learned last year that the state is piloting 15 state support teams for diverse learners. What did you learn from this pilot?
   b. Are there other state initiatives that relate to your goal of addressing diverse learners?

   Texas

1. We learned last year that your state is experimenting with Texas Gateway. What are the different types of resources available on Texas Gateway for teachers of SWDs?
   a. Which of the resources do you think SWD teachers find the most useful?
   b. Do you think some teachers or groups of students are benefiting more from Texas Gateway than others or using the platform more than others?

   California

1. We learned last year that your state is promoting and implementing more interagency collaboration in terms of curriculum, instruction, and workforce training for SWDs. Can you share the reasoning behind this development and some examples of this development playing out?
   a. Do you think this collaboration is working? Why or why not?

b. Where are there still areas for growth?
2. In our previous interviews, we heard about the district improvement cohorts that your state is using, where a high-improving district partners with a district with a lower improvement status. How has this been going?
   a. How have districts and schools reacted to this program?
   b. To what extent do you think SWDs are benefiting from this work?

Educational Service Center Questions

Could you begin by telling me your name and position, and then more generally about your role at the ___?

1. How would you describe the ESC's relationship with the state department of education? (*Prompts:* collaborative, state as a client with needs, distinct and separate)
   a. How often do you interact and plan activities together?
2. How would you describe your relationship with school districts?
   a. *Prompts:* Who initiates this contact? How often do you communicate with districts? Does this vary by district? Do you work more with districts directly, with principals or teachers, or through the state?
3. We have found across our interviews that ESCs have become more involved in the implementation of standards, especially for PD. Do you think that your role has expanded, and if so, why?
4. What types of information does the state collect about PD that you offer?
5. What are your most popular PD offerings for teachers? Principals? District administrators?
6. How do you monitor and evaluate PD?
   a. What types of feedback do you collect from teachers or principals who participate in your PD?
      i. Do you analyze these data systematically? How frequently?
7. How do you establish alignment of PD with the standards?
8. How do you decide what PD to offer?
   a. How is this work funded?
9. How would you describe your teacher and principal PD model? Do you offer more direct PD to teachers, do you train the trainers, or a combination of both?
   a. If you train the trainers, please describe this process.
10. What resources do you receive to meet the PD needs of your region/state?
    a. How satisfied are you with the resources that you receive?
11. What do you think are the challenges in implementing teacher, principal, and district PD in your state?
12. What types of curricular support do you provide to districts? Do districts seem to want more or less support?
13. Teachers in our surveys report that they most want more digital tools aligned to the standards. Do you provide these to districts? If so, please describe.
14. To what extent do you feel that district administrators in your region or state understand and implement the CCR standards?

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        a. Is this different or the same for principals? Teachers?
        b. Have you noticed improvement around knowledge of the standards (and the corresponding instructional shifts) among these groups?

15. What are the types of concerns that teachers, principals, and districts raise about the standards?
    a. Do you feel they are appropriate for all students (i.e., low-achieving students, ELLs, SWDs)?

16. How would you describe the stability of standards policy in your state?
    a. How does this affect your work, if at all?

District Questions

Could you begin by telling me your name and position, and then more generally about your role at the ___?

Background of Standards

1. Could you share with me any background about your district that you think might be helpful for us to know?

2. What are the major instructional shifts corresponding with your state's ELA standards?
    a. In what ways are they better (if at all), and in what ways are they worse (if at all?)
    b. According to the survey, district officials wanted more guidance on how teachers should change their practice. Are there any areas related to teachers' instructional shifts that you would like more guidance on?
    c. According to the survey, ELA teachers are covering more standards-emphasized content at the high school level but not at the elementary level. Do you think this is happening in your district, and if yes, why might that be the case?

3. What are the major instructional shifts corresponding with your state's math standards?
    a. In what ways are they better (if at all), and in what ways are they worse (if at all?)
    b. According to the survey, district officials wanted more guidance on how teachers should change their practice. Are there any areas that you would like more guidance on?
    c. According to the survey, math teachers are covering more standards-emphasized content at the elementary level but not at the high school level. Do you think this is happening in your district, and if yes, why might that be the case?

4. How appropriate do you think the standards are for students in your district (i.e., ELLs, SWDs, low-performing students)?

Supports and Resources Available From the District and State

5. Please describe any materials, resources, or forms of guidance that your district provides to schools in implementing the standards. (*Prompts:* supports related to textbooks, curriculum, online lessons)
   a. What materials are offered to different constituencies (e.g., principals, teachers)? How are they disseminated to them? What do they find the most helpful? Why?
   b. Please describe any materials, resources, or forms of guidance that your state provides to support districts in implementing the standards. (*Prompts:* supports related to textbooks, curriculum, online lessons)
   c. District administrators on the state survey reported wanting more guidance about identifying and implementing effective curricula. Is there any more guidance from the state that you wish your district had?
6. Who was involved in the development of your district's strategy and supports for the implementation of the standards? (*Prompts*: special education, ELL teachers, principals, students)
   a. How were these people or groups chosen? Did they volunteer, or were they appointed?
7. Are there any challenges that you still feel your district needs to address in aligning curricular materials to meet the needs of all students, including SWDs and ELLs?

Professional Development Opportunities From the District and State

8. Can you briefly describe the PD landscape in your district? Is this different for ELA and math?
   a. How do you factor in PD for teachers of SWDs or ELLs?
9. Can you describe one or two of your most effective PD programs related to the standards? If this answer is different for ELA and math, please explain.
   a. Is this PD required or encouraged?
   b. Who attends this PD?
   c. When does this PD occur, and what is the basis for this decision?
   d. How does the PD connect to the standards?
10. If applicable, can you describe one or two of the state's most effective PD programs that help districts and schools with the implementation of the standards? If this answer is different for ELA and math, please explain.
    a. Is this PD required or encouraged?
    b. Who attends this PD?
    c. When does this PD occur, and what is the basis for this decision?
    d. How does the PD connect to the standards?

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11. Given that time is a frequently cited challenge for teachers, does your district do anything innovative with regard to time for teachers to collaborate and develop their practice?

State Assessments

12. How would you evaluate the appropriateness of your state's assessments? (*Prompt:* how appropriate are they for SWDs and ELLs?)
13. To what extent do you think your state's standards and assessments are aligned?
    a. Is your answer/opinion the same for ELA and math standards?
14. Does your state incentivize districts for scoring well on the state test? In what other ways does your state reward/incentivize or penalize/sanction districts or teachers based on their state assessment scores?
    a. To what extent do you think these policies are appropriate and fair? Do you think they encourage the use of the standards? Does your state have any plans to change these policies?
    b. To what extent do you think these policies are appropriate and fair for SWDs? For ELLs?

District Administration of Assessments

15. District administrators on the state survey reported that formative and diagnostic assessments were one of the most useful resources for implementing the standards. Does your district use them, and if so, how?
16. Does your district incentivize schools for scoring well on the state test?
    a. Do student assessment scores factor into teacher evaluations and school/district ratings, and if so, which do you use and how do you use them?
    b. Do assessment scores for ELLs and SWDs factor differently into teacher evaluations and school/district ratings?
    c. To what extent do you think these policies are appropriate and fair? Do you think they encourage the use of the standards? Are there plans to change these policies?
17. Does your district use any other mechanism for measuring the implementation of the standards, besides the assessments (i.e., observations, teacher portfolios, etc.)?

Contextual Information About the District and State

18. Would you describe any indications of support for, or resistance against, the new standards and assessments from different groups across the district? (*Prompts:* supportive letters from organizations, parental resistance)

      a. Would you describe any indications of support for, or resistance against, the new standards and assessments from different districts across the state? (*Prompts:* supportive letters from organizations, parental resistance)

19. The most challenging obstacle to implementation of the CCR standards identified by district administrators is the conflicting nature of state initiatives. Do you think this is the case, from your perspective?
      a. If so, what are some of the conflicting state initiatives?
      b. What state initiatives should be prioritized or improved to better support your work at the district level?

20. We were hoping to share some graphics representing survey responses that highlight more generally district administrators', principals', and teachers' thoughts on the policy environment generated by standards-based reform: TX—teachers perceive less authority (buy-in) than principals/districts, higher power (punishments) than principals/districts, lower specificity than districts; OH—teachers perceive less authority than principals/districts, higher power than principals/districts.
      a. How would you interpret these findings?
      b. Do you have any insights that may help us better understand these findings?

Concluding Thoughts About Standards and Assessments

21. We know that many reforms come and go, while others are institutionalized. What is your perspective on the longevity of the standards and assessments your state has recently adopted? Do you think they will last? Why or why not?

22. We will circle back to your district in 2 years to see how you've progressed in your implementation of the standards. Given what we've already discussed, are there any other interesting or innovative activities and policies that we should check back on when we interview you again?

23. Finally, the state is interested in hearing your feedback on what they are doing well and what would be more helpful for you as a district. What would you like to be communicated to them?

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