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Creating High Leverage Policies: A New Framework to Support Policy Development

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Abstract

In this paper we describe the development and application of a research-based model for understanding the formulation and implementation of education policy. We draw upon research on policy implementation across a variety of contexts to create what we call the “high leverage policy” (HLP) framework. The HLP framework identifies three specific areas policy makers should attend to: the policy-to-practice lever, design features of the policy, and contingencies for implementation. These three elements are connected by an explicit theory-of-action that describes the policy’s intentions and how it will play out in practice. We illustrate the application of the HLP framework using an example of state policy development and execution in Rhode Island. Finally, we conclude by discussing the framework’s potential utility to policy makers.

Key Words: educational policy, equity, student performance, education, policy studies

In recent years, calls for improving the quality of U.S. schools have increased. According to numerous international studies, students from a range of countries outperform U.S. students on a variety of assessments. The differences are particularly prominent at the high school level. On the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), U.S. fifteen-year-olds scored lower in mathematics, on average, than 17 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (Fleischman, Hopstock, Pelczar, & Shelley, 2010). In science and reading literacy, U.S. fifteen-year-olds scored lower than 12 and 6 countries, respectively. While U.S. students perform less well, on average, than students in many other industrialized nations, even more alarming is the large achievement gap between high-income, White, and Asian American students on the one hand, and low-income, African American, and Latino students on the other (Fleischman et al., 2010).

In 2009, the newly formed New England Secondary School Consortium (NESSC) asked us² to examine how state and local policies might reverse these trends in student performance. We were guided by two central questions: 1) How can states create policies to increase secondary schools’ capacity to provide deep learning opportunities leading all students to achieve at high levels?, 2) What policies are most likely to achieve these

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goals? To answer these questions, we drew on research in education policy, school reform, organizational change, leadership development, and program evaluation. Our work led to deeper understandings of why some policies seem to work and others fail and the conditions associated with those outcomes. We translated this understanding into a research-based model, which we call the High Leverage Policy (HLP) framework. The HLP framework can be used as an analytic tool to examine policy development and implementation, and it can be used more proactively to inform the construction of new policies. In this paper, we describe the origins of the framework and illustrate its application to a specific, state-level policy in Rhode Island.

Origins of the HLP Framework

Theoretical and empirical explorations of the policy process abound. Everything from problem definition to policy formulation, adoption, and implementation have been investigated. Policy implementation has arguably received the most attention, with numerous studies of how policies are ultimately enacted at the state, district, or school level. Several macro and micro theories have emerged to explain various implementation scenarios (e.g., street level bureaucracy, [Lipsky, 1980]; transformation of intentions, [Hall & McGinty, 1997; Placier, Hall, McKendall, & Cockrell 2000]; micropolitics, [Ball, 1990]; political spectacle, [Edelman, 1988; Miller-Kahn & Smith 2001]; backward mapping, [Dyer, 1999; Elmore, 1980]; cognition framing and sensemaking, [Coburn, 2001, 2005; Spillane, 2004]; organizational learning, [Coburn & Stein, 2006; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002]; and mutual adaptation, [Browne & Wildavsky, 1984; Datnow, 2006]). However, these theories tend not to take each other into account. Moreover, scholars have summarized the research on policy implementation (e.g., Fuhman, Clune, & Elmore, 1988; McLaughlin, 1998; Odden, 1991) but have not posited a cohesive model that would directly inform policy development. The preponderance of implementation studies are post mortem accounts that aim to explain why policies produce certain outcomes rather than directly inform efforts to create policy.

To develop the HLP framework, our first task was to examine the literature on the implementation of education policies. We began our literature search by consulting foundational studies of education policy implementation. These included the RAND implementation study (see, e.g., Fuhman, Clune, & Elmore, 1988; McDonnell & Elmore, 1987; McLaughlin, 1989) and the macro and micro theories listed above. Working within the EBSCO, ERIC, and Academic Search Premier databases, we then searched for more recent publications citing these works.

We reviewed studies that ranged in focus from classroom-based studies to state-level enactment of policies. We were particularly interested in studies that investigated the outcomes of policy implementation and that considered factors that may have influenced those outcomes. From this initial review we were able to discern two types of influential factors. One series of factors had to do with the ways in which policies were designed to achieve their intended outcomes. The other type of factor addressed context and highlighted conditions and contingencies under which implementation occurred. In the next two sections we describe the literature relevant to *design features* and *implementation contingencies*.

Policy Design and Use

Research suggests that a number of key design factors affect whether or not a policy achieves its intended purpose in its intended fashion. Design features that are particularly important include a policy's instrumental function (its focus), scope, and coherence with other policies at the state and local level.

Based on prior research, McDonnell and Elmore (1987) affirm that a policy's success depends on the appropriateness of the policy instruments, or mechanisms, used to carry it out. Specifically, they argue that policymakers' choice of mandates, inducements, persuasion, capacity-building, or systems change efforts should vary according to the nature of the problem targeted by the policy. For example, problems that are simple and easily understood by implementers, such as excessive speeding on a highway, may be addressed through a mandate such as a posted speed limit. By contrast, complex problems that require new knowledge on the part of implementers, such as teaching adolescents to read more effectively, are better addressed through capacity-building efforts.

Additional research predicts that a blend of instruments will yield better results than a single one. Fuhrman and Elmore's (1990) research suggests that states should use multiple mechanisms to influence rather than directly control local practice. Numerous studies indicate that pressure alone is generally insufficient for changing attitudes, beliefs, and routine practices (Fullan, 1985; McLaughlin & Elmore, 1982; McLaughlin, 1987; Montjoy & O'Toole, 1979; Zald & Jacobs, 1978). For example, when coupled with ongoing coaching, accountability has a greater likelihood of changing teachers' practice than when it acts alone. Lastly, poorly designed incentive structures can also inhibit successful implementation of reforms (McDermott, 2006). For example, if incentives are too small or confusing, they are unlikely to prompt changes in behavior.

A policy's impact is also affected by its scope, intensity, and reach. In general, the research suggests that ambitious policies that seek to effect change system-wide are more likely to stimulate teacher involvement and change than policies that are modest and narrow in their aims. Studies indicate that policies with a narrow scope tend to become ends in and of themselves (Fullan, Bennett, & Rolheiser-Bennett, 1990; McLaughlin, 1990). In this way, they tend to divert people's attention from broader aims. Fullan et al. (1990) note that, "innovations should be seen as points of departure or catalysts, rather than as things to be implemented" (p. 19). For example, a state policy requiring in-school suspensions for minor student offenses can be implemented overnight by establishing a designated classroom and adult monitor. The primary intent of the in-school suspension policy may be to reduce unnecessary out-of-school suspensions that cause students to miss learning opportunities. Other intentions of the policy may be to offer behavioral interventions for repeat offenders, develop powerful alternative learning environments for students at risk, and/or create opportunities for authentic dialogue between offending students and adults in the school. Without explicitly attending to the entire scope of possibilities, a policy can result in a very limited outcome.

Research also suggests that a policy's success depends on its coherence with existing goals, policies, and practices. State policies exert the greatest influence when their goals align with those of districts or schools (Abelmann & Elmore, 1999; Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990; Zald, 1978). Similarly, new policies are most likely to succeed when they align

with current policy and practice in districts (Cohen & Hill, 2001). Honig and Hatch (2004) view coherence as a dynamic process, defining it “as a process of negotiation whereby school leaders and central office administrators continually craft the fit between external policy demands and schools’ own goals and strategies and use external demands strategically to inform and enable implementation of those goals and strategies” (p. 19).

Policy Implementation Contingencies

A policy’s design features are typically static and established in advance of implementation. However, we argue, like others, that policy is a dynamic process (Rallis, Rossman, Cobb, Reagan, & Kuntz, 2008). Written policy is not necessarily the same as enacted policy, much like *espoused theories* are not the same as *theories-in-use* (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Research suggests that implementation contingencies such as district and school leadership, capacity, and will; stability of people and policies; and communication and sense-making of policy intent affect how policies are enacted and the outcomes they produce.

One key implementation contingency is district and principal leadership. Active commitment to the policy’s success on the part of district leaders is essential (McLaughlin, 1989, 1990). In the enactment of state policy, the district plays a key role in interpreting and mediating implementation in schools (Louis, Febey, & Schroeder, 2005). Building principals, in turn, play a crucial role in helping teachers make sense of a policy and influencing how teachers respond (Coburn, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002).

The capacity of district and school leaders as well as other role-players affects a policy’s success. Capacity refers to an individual’s or organization’s ability to enact change. The existence of capacity at all levels is needed to implement a policy (Abelmann & Elmore, 1999; Duke, 2004; Firestone, Fuhrman, & Kirst, 1989; McLaughlin, 1987, 1989; Zald, 1978). This often includes the state, which designs the policy and supports and monitors its implementation, and districts and schools, which must implement the policy (Elmore, 2004; McDermott, 2006). Teachers’ capacity also shapes how a policy plays out at the classroom level (Anagnostopoulous, 2003; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). Similarly, Corcoran and Goertz (1995) underscore “instructional capacity” as central to the ability of systems to fulfill the potential of policy reforms.

In addition to role-players’ capacity, individuals’ motivation—initial or developed over time—to implement a policy is critical. This refers to their attitudes, motivation, and beliefs (Elmore, 1995; McLaughlin, 1990). The degree to which a policy is persuasive to those who are asked to implement it affects a policy’s success (Desimone, Smith, & Phillips, 2007; McLaughlin, 1987; Zald, 1978).

A policy’s success is also affected by the degree to which key stakeholders remain involved over time. A policy’s short-term success depends in part on its coherence with existing policies, as noted above. But its long-term prospects are shaped by the extent to which the policy environment remains stable. Stability of policies and people over time leads to deeper and more successful implementation at the local level (Berends, Chun, Schuyler, Stockly, & Briggs, 2002; Fowler, 2009; Huberman & Miles, 1984).

The degree to which a policy’s message is accurately transmitted to implementers affects success (Coburn, 2001, 2005; Louis et al., 2005; Zald, 1978). Education policy

that is framed to promote “district and local sense-making” through professional development to help implementers co-construct (Datnow, 2006) an understanding of the policy’s demands on them has a better chance of success (Louis et al., 2005). As might be expected, the more divergent the policy is from past practice, the more opportunities for sense-making are required to create will and capacity at the local level.

The High Leverage Policy Framework

We summarize these factors and their relationships in the HLP framework. This framework posits that interrelated policy factors influence whether a policy produces systemic improvements in districts, schools, and classrooms, and whether those improvements lead to positive student outcomes. Key to the framework is this policy triumvirate made up of *leverage points*, *design features*, and *implementation contingencies*.

Leverage points refer to the target of education policy or the entry points within the education system that policy makers intend the policy to influence. Leverage points can bring about fundamental change in organizational behavior. Prior to the development of policy, policy makers should be able to identify viable levers in the system. The Common Core State Standards Initiative, for example, is intended to drive instructional change by focusing on the levers of curriculum and, secondarily, assessment. Once adopted and implemented by states, teaching and learning across the nation should, in theory, be fundamentally changed. Curriculum standards can serve as powerful levers for change, but enactment of standards requires attention to several conditions.

Design features represent operational characteristics of the policy. Policy design features typically include guidance as to how the policy ought to be carried out. As noted above, policy design features that are related to policy outcomes include policy instruments, reach and scope, and coherence.

The third factor, implementation contingencies, consists of issues that arise during the implementation of the policy and influence how it is interpreted and enacted at the local level. As with any contingency, these should be anticipated prior to enacting the policy or considered as part of the policy itself. However, as we will illustrate, some contingencies may be anticipated but cannot be addressed fully in the policy design. As noted above, successful policy outcomes are contingent upon strong educational leadership: organizational capacity at both state and local levels; alignment with organizational values, will, stability of personnel and leadership over time; and sense-making on the part of implementers.

We represent these three “success factors” as anchor points of a triangle (Figure 1) to signify the dynamic and interdependent relationship among them. We call them success factors because, if attended to, they can affect the degree of leverage achieved by any policy.

The policy success factors do not constitute the entire framework. The enactment of a policy should influence changes in the system and ultimately produce a desired end. A high leverage policy outcome is realized when such fundamental change occurs. Changes that are transformational in nature, often referred to as second-order change, bring about changes to the educational system (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Chapman, 2002). The expectation of systems change refers to a transformation in the organization—new forms

of schooling that work their way down to the smallest unit of practice (e.g., the classroom). More specifically, we define systems change as change that (a) shifts the fundamental structures, systems, and culture of districts and schools, to positively influence the “instructional unit”—the relationship between teacher, student, and curricular materials (Cohen & Ball, 1999), and (b) initiates multiplicative effects in the educational system.

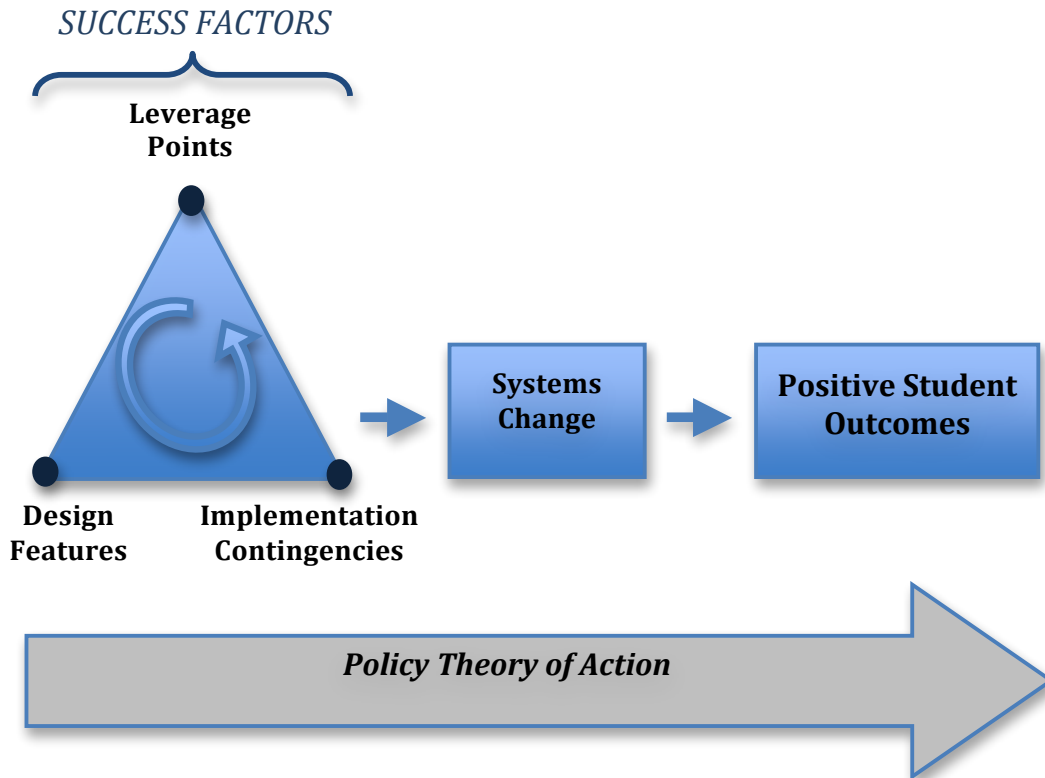


Figure 1. The HLP Framework

Changes in the system, in turn, should produce improved outcomes for students. As indicated earlier, positive student outcomes refer to increased learning, achievement, or attainment and, importantly, increased equity related to learning, achievement, or attainment. As depicted in Figure 1, improved and more equitable student outcomes are the result of fundamental systems change. Outcomes policy makers might wish to pursue include mastery of 21st century learning skills, higher graduation rates, and higher college enrollment rates, particularly among underrepresented populations.

Finally, we view the development, implementation, and ultimate impact of any policy as occurring within a complex ecology. An undergirding logic and set of beliefs and assumptions constitute a causal chain of events that describe what the policy will produce and how. We refer to this as the policy *theory of action* (Argyris, 1997). The policy

theory of action helps explain what policy makers believe to be the relationship among the leverage point targeted by the policy, the policy design features, and the policy implementation contingencies. The policy theory of action captures how policy makers believe the above relationships will lead to systemic changes and improved student outcomes (see also Weiss, 1998).

Leveraging What Types of Outcomes?

Policies can be high leverage—but for what purpose and to what end? As researchers, we started by establishing a guiding definition of high leverage policy. There are certainly other ways to define what constitutes “high leverage.” This is our definition, which is shaped by our worldviews and backgrounds in education policy, organizational change, leadership development, and program implementation. We assume a policy is high leverage if it achieves three distinct outcomes. That is, the policy must:

1. expand learning and increase achievement or attainment for all students;
2. increase equity in learning, achievement, or attainment among students; and
3. initiate multiplicative effects in the educational system.

The first two outcomes focus directly upon the results that arguably matter most, outcomes ultimately realized by students. These outcomes move beyond measures of achievement as captured in state standardized assessments and include broader definitions of learning and measures of educational attainment. Attainment indicators include graduation rates, drop out rates, college enrollment rates, post-secondary remediation rates, and college completion rates, among others. In addition, this definition adopts a decidedly social justice stance, reflecting the primacy of equity in any assessment of a policy’s success (Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, & Koschoreck, 2001). We assert that a high leverage policy does not simply improve learning, achievement, and attainment for some students but increases the equity of outcomes among students of all social backgrounds and ability levels, and particularly improves the learning, achievement, and attainment of those who have been historically underrepresented at the post-secondary level. The first two outcomes may simply help to define “effective” education policy. The third outcome helps to illuminate whether a policy is high leverage by suggesting that the policy should trigger systemic improvements within the district, school, and classroom. As an example of the latter, consider how a new policy on mastery-based grading could fundamentally change teachers’ academic expectations of their students, curricular and pedagogical choices, and construction of performance assessments; consider also how the policy potentially affects students’ own academic expectations and approach to learning; lastly, consider how the policy may influence a principal’s evaluation of teacher performance.

An Illustration of the HLP Framework

In the following section, we illustrate the HLP framework through an analysis of the development, implementation, and reported effects of Rhode Island’s Secondary

Regulations of 2003 and 2008.³ We developed this case study based on multiple sources of data. First, we examined current Rhode Island state education policies to identify those that had the potential to be high leverage. State statutes, regulations, and other formal policies found on state government websites were considered for their potential to achieve our three HLP outcome criteria. Second, we solicited nominations of potential high leverage policies from key informants, including state department of education officials and board of education members, asking these individuals to nominate policies that might qualify as high leverage per our definition. We invited two state department of education officials with direct knowledge of secondary school policy and all members of the state board of education to participate in this focus group and included all individuals who accepted our invitation. We conducted a focus group with these key informants to understand the nature of the policy and their views on its theory of action and potential effects.

We then examined how these policies were implemented within schools and districts by interviewing superintendents and principals. We recruited our sample by asking the NESSC liaison to Rhode Island to identify superintendents and secondary school principals from a range of school districts. We requested that districts be selected to maximize variation in district size and student demographics, including race, free- and reduced price lunch status, and English language learner status. We then conducted four 90-120 minute interviews in role-alike focus groups (i.e., only principals or only district leaders) with these 20 educators from 10 diverse districts to learn about the nominated state policies' influence on local practices. During this time, we asked the participants to write an open-ended journal entry wherein they explained what, if any, influence the nominated state policy had had on practice and HLP outcomes in their district or school. We asked them also to indicate any design features or implementation contingencies that were particularly relevant as the policies "landed in their schools and districts."

Transcripts and thematic summaries from focus group interviews were coded using open and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).⁴ Documents and other policy artifacts were analyzed in a similar fashion. Key documents included *Regulations of the Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education Regarding Public High Schools and Ensuring Literacy for Students Entering High School* (Board of Regents, 2008b) and *K-12 Literacy, Restructuring of the Learning Environment at the Middle and High School Levels, and Proficiency Based Graduation Requirements (PBGR) at High Schools* (Board of Regents, 2008a), as well as Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) publications *Middle-level and High-School 2008 Regulations Guidance* (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2008) and *Rhode Island High School Diploma System Technical Assistance Bulletin* (Rhode Island Department of Education 2005). Emergent themes were identified within and across sites via the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

³ In addition, we conducted this data collection and analysis process for policies in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Connecticut. We highlight Rhode Island's policy here because it offers the most complete illustration.

⁴ Codes included elements of the HLP framework (e.g., "stability," "coherence," and codes arising from the data such as "standardized testing" and "unions."

History and Structure of Rhode Island’s Secondary Regulations of 2003, 2008

The Rhode Island state board members and commissioners identified a well-established policy as high leverage. In January 2003, the Rhode Island Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education adopted their *Secondary Regulations* (Board of Regents, 2008a), a set of interrelated policies designed to significantly reform high schools. The regulations were amended on September 3, 2008. The amended regulations deepened the support and flexibility afforded to local school districts first established by the 2003 regulations. The updated regulations provided districts autonomy to design diploma policies that met the needs of the communities they served.

The 2008 Secondary Regulations emphasized K-12 literacy, restructuring of the learning environment in middle and high schools, and proficiency-based graduation requirements (PBGRs) in high schools. This last feature, the introduction of a new diploma system, was considered particularly high leverage. Through the PBGRs, the policy sought to personalize education and provide students several pathways to demonstrate proficiency. The intent of the policy was to ensure *all* Rhode Island high school graduates would be proficient in both standards-based content and applied learning skills *and* would be ready for college. The diploma system placed strategic emphasis on providing students with meaningful opportunities to exhibit proficiencies in the six core academic areas of English, mathematics, science, social studies, technology, and the arts. In addition, the Secondary Regulations called for demonstration of proficiency in applied-learning skills, such as oral and written communication, ability to work on teams, and critical thinking.

Following specific process and product guidelines developed by the state, districts were required to develop their own graduation policies and proficiency standards. In mathematics, reading, writing, oral communications, and science, proficiency was measured against state standards or grade span expectations. District policies and standards were subject to continuous feedback from state peer review teams and had to be approved by the education commissioner prior to their roll out in 2012. By 2012, students were required to demonstrate proficiencies through several sources of evidence, including coursework, the state exam, and performance-based assessments such as digital portfolios, exhibitions (capstone projects), end of course assessments, or Certificates of Initial Mastery (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2008). Additions to the 2008 Regulations include requiring the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) assessment to increase from 10% to 33% of the measure of proficiency in English language arts and mathematics. The 2008 Regulations also required specialized assistance, including personalized literacy plans, for all students performing below grade level in reading. For teachers, the 2008 version added fifteen hours of common planning time focused on discussing the diploma system, student work, and instruction.

Policy Design Features

Rhode Island’s Secondary Regulations have served as both systems-changing and capacity-building policy instruments. According to our data, the Regents approached high school reform policy by targeting a key leverage point, high school graduation, to fundamentally alter teaching, learning, and assessment in Rhode Island schools. The *policy theory of action* considered key dimensions of the larger system: It not only

required specific changes in graduation requirements, it provided explicit direction in professional development, student support, and local policy development to achieve sustained change.

Our focus group data suggest that several aspects of the policy facilitated its implementation. First and most important, the policy required districts to adhere to the implementation process outlined by RIDE, but permitted them to develop their own “local criteria, policies, and procedures to implement graduation-by-proficiency components of their high school Diploma System” (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2005, p. 9). Overall, our focus group data suggest that local educators felt a mandated *process* coupled with locally determined *outcomes* led to real changes in local practice. In effect, the state placed the work in the hands of local educators who knew their contexts and students well, thereby creating ownership or will among those responsible for implementing the reforms.

Moreover, the developmental phase of the policy implementation seemed to facilitate enactment of the policy. The state had a one million dollar grant from the Gates Foundation to develop the beginning toolkit for supporting local implementation. In this initial phase, districts were required to provide documentation of their systems and participate in a peer review and feedback process, providing support and pressure to other districts.

According to our data, the various components of the regulations appear to internally cohere. They do not seem to contradict other state or local policies, save for some union contract issues. The scope of the policy is both targeted and far-reaching. It calls for deep changes in teaching and assessment: proficiency-based education matched with student needs and interests.

Policy Implementation Contingencies

Districts have been working toward meeting their obligations for several years. Some have achieved more progress than others. RIDE has provided general guidance to middle and secondary schools and direct technical assistance to districts. The small size of the state allows RIDE staff to visit and work closely with district leadership teams; they can respond to nearly every request for assistance. In addition, a cadre of district educators acts on RIDE's behalf to provide consultation in key areas described by the regulations.

Superintendents felt that state leaders have provided clear communication of the policy and its intent. District and school leaders spoke informatively on the foundational aspects of the policy: development of PBGRs, personalization of learning, and emphasis on K-12 literacy. They reported that changing the culture of high schools was hard work, but it was something they believed in and felt supported in by the state. Local administrators indicated that stable leadership at the state level facilitated the state's reform agenda. The recently retired state education commissioner had been in that position for nearly three decades and had attained a great deal of respect from Rhode Island educators. The policy itself has remained uncommonly stable; administrators pointed to a consistent and forward moving state agenda that has pushed their schools to engage in a sustained reform effort.

Administrators reported that the Secondary Regulations provided an appropriate balance of pressure and support. One administrator commented, “[Withholding

preliminary approval] was hitting people; so no longer were you just a school that didn't meet [the state assessment] but you also weren't approved to be a diploma system. So there was a carrot—or a stick.” Some mentioned a lack of clarity with respect to final products, but simultaneously asserted the importance of owning their own work. Local will was generated from within, not imposed upon districts through a hollow mandate. A school administrator remarked, “The policies that . . . we're talking about . . . give you an end outcome. The good part of that is every school has to invent itself to get that outcome. That's buy-in, that's ownership, that's responsibility—you know, that's a level of acceptance.”

Finally, it appears that communication of the policy's intent has been reasonably consistent and clear since its origin in 2003. That said, some of the administrators in our interviews were concerned with recent shifts in the regulations—namely, the increased weight of the state assessment from 10% to 33% in ELA and math proficiency scores. Many lamented the possibility of undoing all the good will established by the state and the good work completed by districts by reversing the trend back toward a reliance on high stakes tests. A heavier emphasis on state assessments could contradict these regulations, which hinge on multiple ways to demonstrate proficiency. One administrator questioned, “Are we standing by that system that we've developed?”

As noted above, a key design feature of the Secondary Regulations is that they rely on districts to do creative work within the parameters that RIDE sets. This approach has its advantages. From the administrators' perspectives, local context matters considerably. One school leader remarked, “Each district really has its own struggle. Our struggle . . . is getting every kid across [the stage at graduation]. Whereas in another system, the issue might be a language barrier, another district might be an uncooperative staff or union contracts . . . So it's hard . . . for RIDE to say, ‘this is what everyone needs to be doing.’”

Systems Effects

The Secondary Regulations were intended to fundamentally alter teachers' approaches to teaching and learning. We found evidence suggesting this was achieved on several fronts, and even at different levels in the system (i.e., elementary and middle grades). One superintendent reported, “I'd say forty percent of the classrooms . . . I generally tell people—are doing things differently than they used to.” For example, the policy has appeared to foster a new professional culture focused on the learning needs of each student. Teachers began to consider a range of ways students could demonstrate their learning. A superintendent noted: “[O]ur high school was the pioneer, basically of that process. Now the shift . . . it moves to the middle level and the elementary level as well—and that really has given us a system. The culture has been built.”

The policy resulted in the development of common tasks at many schools, which in turn prompted teacher discussions of what proficiency looks like in student work. One administrator noted, “We noticed that when the portfolios [were] reviewed by other teachers, they became acutely aware of the fact that the task they were giving to kids [was inadequate] . . . Being reviewed by other teachers . . . made them feel a lot more responsible.” Another administrator contrasted the processes required by the Secondary Regulations to the New England Association of Schools and Colleges accreditation experience. “NEASC had . . . few lasting effects and changes. And I think that this high

school redesign has had many lasting changes in our school for many reasons. This has sustained over many years....I think all of our teachers understand that...this process does not end.”

High Leverage Outcomes

It is still early to begin assessing the impacts of the policy on student attainment and equity indicators. One principal suggested that the “introduction of the common task has helped improve student achievement . . . [and] expanded meaningful reading and writing in all classrooms.” There is also some evidence that the regulations raised awareness of inequities, as another school leader noted, “The depth of the work involved revealed long held misconceptions” about why gaps in achievement scores and graduation rates existed.

The impact of the high school regulations has resulted in some ripple effects throughout the system. In the words of one Rhode Island school leader, “Changes in practices were widespread” and appeared to reach areas not originally foreseen. Another administrator credited the senior capstone requirement for prompting a fifth and eighth grade capstone in her district. The emphasis on personalized literacy instruction has led some districts to create important new roles such as literacy specialist that otherwise would not be considered.

Lessons Learned

Several key aspects of this case appear to explain how Rhode Island Secondary Regulations have gained traction in the state. We offer these influences as lessons learned.

The policy as written and designed should take into account its implementation. Policy implementation success may depend on the degree to which the policy accounts for the actual implementation. Rhode Island’s policy, which included measurable goals, data systems for measuring progress towards those goals, and developed networks to facilitate the sharing of information in its initial design features, seemed to have the broadest impact on local practice of all the policies we studied. This finding echoes prior research highlighting both the importance of capacity (see, e.g., Abelmann & Elmore, 1999) and sense-making (Coburn, 2001; Louis et al., 2005) so that stakeholders exchange important information as they implement the policy.

Coherence with other, concurrent policies is important; the less aligned the policy in question is, the less likely it will effect positive change. Like Abelmann and Elmore (1999), Fuhrman and Elmore (1990), and others, we found that policy coherence was a key factor in Rhode Island’s progress towards HLP outcomes. The Secondary Regulations were informed by other policies and practices ongoing at the state and district level. Most obviously, the 2008 regulations built directly on their 2003 predecessors. As a result, the Regulations generally cohered with concurrent policies and reinforced developments in practice.

Stability and capacity at the state level facilitates deep reform through a sustained, coherent policy focus. Rhode Island Department of Education’s stable and skilled leadership facilitated the development of policies that approached the high leverage definition, consistent with the work of Fowler (2009). The lengthy term of Rhode Island’s education commissioner Peter McWalters and other individuals at RIDE

improved the likelihood that the policies cohered with their predecessors, thus contributing to a focused, long-term trajectory of improvement. Stable leadership also seemed to contribute to more consistent policy interpretation among state department staff, which resulted in greater fidelity in local implementation.

Local will and capacity are critical for the success of policies and leveraging more equal educational opportunities. The ultimate fate of policies depends on local will and capacity, as suggested by McLaughlin (1987, 1990). In Rhode Island, for example, the state policy provided considerable latitude for districts to shape their local policies as they saw fit. Simultaneously, the state instituted a peer review process to provide both support and accountability for local implementation. Agency and authorship at the district level in the context of support and accountability seemed to foster implementation of the Regulations in Rhode Island. However, while educators in Rhode Island appeared to implicitly share the policy creators' goals for more equal educational opportunities, the policy itself did not explicitly have safeguards in place to ensure that district administrators maintained a focus on equity during implementation.

Moreover, across all five New England states in which we collected data for a larger study, most of the policies nominated as high leverage by state actors relied on inducements, rather than mandates, to entice districts and schools to implement them as intended. In so doing, they reinforced local control. If this is the primary mode of policy design in these settings, state departments of education will need to think carefully about how to increase the incentives for districts and schools to implement policies fully and with fidelity.

Moreover, mandates will likely do little to overcome a culture of local control. Given this context, it is not surprising to find that nominated policies tended to focus on changing student behavior and did not specifically seek to modify teachers' practice. Thus policy design will need to include a process for building local leaders' understanding of the theory of action behind the policy and structuring opportunities for teachers and leaders to develop new ways of achieving policy goals. They will also have to spend more time creating space for implementing agents and policy makers to develop a shared understanding of the theory of action behind the policy and equity goals. In addition, carefully considered mandates that take implementation contingencies into direct account and pay particular attention to local will and capacity issues appear to have some advantages over inducements alone.

Conclusion

Effective policy-making calls for a deep understanding of how policies can bring about fundamental change, how they are interpreted and implemented at the local level, and what externalities may hinder or help implementation. Part of our task, then, has been to illuminate the complexities of policy design and implementation and bring to the surface aspects of the policy process that yield leverage. We presented Rhode Island's Secondary Regulations against the backdrop of our HLP framework to illustrate a high leverage policy. We did not examine potential differences among stakeholders at the various levels of implementation here, but future policy analyses would benefit from this sort of analysis. For instance, we can imagine that state, district, school, and classroom leaders view and react to the same policy differently depending on their particular

contexts. Understanding better how they perceive and act upon a single policy could lend insights to improve fidelity of implementation.

The framework also extends theoretical understanding of the policy process at a time when federal and state governments are intent on transforming schools through policy. Our framework contributes to the field by drawing together key findings from research on policy design and policy implementation and focusing attention on the key outcomes of equity in learning, achievement, and attainment. Our framework's consideration of both policy design and implementation and its contention that equity is a critical standard against which any policy's success should be measured make the HLP framework unique and important.

Due to the many factors influencing policy implementation, we cannot conclude that equity-oriented policies are the only way to eliminate unequal educational opportunities in Rhode Island's urban and rural settings. However, we contend that policy should be used more often to explicitly promote social justice goals. We recognize that the criteria we chose to define the success of a policy were subjective. Our criteria represent a particular set of assumptions and understandings about our current system of education. In Rhode Island and the other states we studied, we found most policies did not include explicit equity goals against which the relative success of a policy might be measured. When policy makers do not set explicit equity-oriented goals for new policies, there is the chance that new policies will further the advantages held by those with material wealth and, in turn, extend the disadvantages of members of lower classes. By positioning equity as an explicit standard against which a policy's success should be judged, we hope the High Leverage Policy framework and this article in general will further the dialogue and action related to policies that seek to fundamentally transform secondary schooling for greater equity and access for all students in states across the nation.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol: State actors

We are conducting a study on secondary school policies in your state that could be considered “high leverage.” We consider a policy “high leverage” if it achieves three outcomes:

- (1) expanding learning and increase achievement or attainment for all students;
- (2) increasing equity in learning, achievement, or attainment among students; and
- (3) initiating multiplicative effects in the educational system in that it triggers systemic improvements within the district, school, and classroom

1. Do any secondary school policies come to mind as fitting this description?

For each policy:

- What is the goal of this policy?
- How did this policy come about?
- How was the policy implemented? *Probe for local involvement*
- How has this policy affected local districts and schools? *Probe for:*
 - Learning
 - Achievement
 - Attainment
 - Equity
 - System effects
- Why is this policy successful, in your view? What is it about the policy that allows it to produce these positive results?
- Is there anything else about this policy that is important for me to know?

Interview Protocol: Superintendents and Principals

Key informants at the state level here in your state have nominated several secondary school policies as high leverage. We consider a policy “high leverage” if it achieves three outcomes:

- (1) expanding learning and increase achievement or attainment for all students;
- (2) increasing equity in learning, achievement, or attainment among students; and
- (3) initiating multiplicative effects in the educational system in that it triggers systemic improvements within the district, school, and classroom

Individuals at the state level nominated _____ policies as high leverage.

1. FREE WRITE: Are these high leverage policies as they play out in your district? Why or why not? What’s your evidence?

Ask the following for each policy:

2. FOCUS GROUP
 - a. Tell me about _____ policy. How did this policy land in your district?
 - a. Tell me more about this policy.
 - b. What was it supposed to achieve?
 - c. Has anything changed in your district because of this policy?
 - d. Has it had an impact on systems change/student learning/achievement/attainment? Probe for examples and evidence.
 - e. How did the change come about? Probe for facilitators, what helped the change take hold.
 - f. What obstacles does the policy encounter in your district?
 - b. Generally, do state policies make much of a difference in this district? Why or why not?