



State-level Autonomy in the Era of Accountability: A Comparative Analysis of Virginia and Nebraska Education Policy through No Child Left Behind

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Abstract: Following the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report and culminating in No Child Left Behind (NCLB), states designed and implemented accountability policies to evaluate student achievement. External assessments of these policies identified substantial variability in the level of stakes associated with each system. This paper presents a comparative analysis of accountability policy prior to and during implementation of NCLB. Using the Virginia Standards of Learning and the Nebraska School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System, it explores the role of the historical and political context in shaping assessment policy through the lenses of the processes, conditions, and consequences of the policy process. It concludes that the influence of Nebraskan historical culture embedded the role of local action in the design and interpretation of accountability policy, which when combined with the collaborative efforts of the board of education, legislature, and executive branch, resulted in an atypical assessment model involving actors across the policy process. The Virginia experience was characterized by a strong political identity of centralization, yielding a top-down accountability system that constrained resources and opportunities for transforming policy at local levels. Findings demonstrate how comparable policy intentions for accountability are transformed due to existing state-level conditions and local policy culture.

Keywords: accountability; policy analysis; No Child Left Behind

Autonomía a nivel estatal en la era de la rendición de cuentas: Un análisis comparativo de la política educativa de Virginia y Nebraska a través de *No Child Left Behind*

Resumen: Siguiendo *A Nation at Risk* (1983) y culminando en *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), los estados diseñaron e implementaron políticas de responsabilidad para evaluar el rendimiento estudiantil. Las evaluaciones externas de estas políticas identificaron una variabilidad sustancial en el nivel de intereses asociados con cada sistema. Este documento presenta un análisis comparativo de la política de responsabilidad antes y durante la implementación de NCLB. Utilizando los estándares de aprendizaje de Virginia y el sistema de evaluación y presentación de informes dirigido por docentes de Nebraska, explora el papel del contexto histórico y político en la configuración de la política de evaluación a través de los procesos, las condiciones y las consecuencias del proceso de la política. Concluye que la influencia de la cultura histórica de Nebraska incorporó el papel de la acción local en el diseño e interpretación de la política de rendición de cuentas, que cuando se combinó con los esfuerzos de colaboración de la junta de educación, la legislatura y el poder ejecutivo, dio como resultado un modelo de evaluación atípico que involucra actores a lo largo del proceso político. La experiencia de Virginia se caracterizó por una fuerte identidad política de centralización, lo que produjo un sistema de rendición de cuentas de arriba hacia abajo que restringió los recursos y las oportunidades para transformar las políticas a nivel local. Los hallazgos demuestran cómo se transforman las intenciones de política comparables para la rendición de cuentas debido a las condiciones existentes a nivel estatal y la cultura de política local.

Palabras-clave: rendición de cuentas; análisis de políticas; *No Child Left Behind*

Autonomia no nível estadual na era de prestação de contas (accountability): Uma análise comparativa da política educacional de Virgínia e Nebraska por meio de *No Child Left Behind*

Resumo: Após *A Nation at Risk* de 1983 e culminando em *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), os estados elaboraram e implementaram políticas de accountability para avaliar o desempenho dos alunos. Avaliações externas dessas políticas identificaram uma variabilidade substancial no nível de participações associadas a cada sistema. Este artigo apresenta uma análise comparativa da política de accountability antes e durante a implementação do NCLB. Utilizando os padrões de aprendizagem da Virgínia e o sistema de avaliação e relatórios baseado em escolas em nebraska e liderado por professores, explora o papel do contexto histórico e político na definição da política de avaliação por meio das lentes dos processos, condições e consequências do processo político. Conclui que a influência da cultura histórica do Nebraska incorporou o papel da ação local na formulação e interpretação da política de accountability, que, combinada com os esforços colaborativos do conselho de educação, legislatura e poder executivo, resultou em um modelo atípico de avaliação envolvendo atores em todo o processo político. A experiência da Virgínia foi caracterizada por uma forte identidade política de centralização, gerando um sistema de accountability de cima para baixo que restringia recursos e oportunidades para transformar a política em níveis locais. Os resultados demonstram como as intenções de políticas comparáveis para a prestação de contas são transformadas devido às condições existentes no nível estadual e à cultura de políticas locais.

Palavras-chave: prestação de contas (accountability); análise de políticas; *No Child Left Behind*

Introduction

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released the *A Nation at Risk* report, identifying a crisis in American education and highlighting the perceived failures of the American educational system. This report sparked a new “standards based reform movement” (Carnoy & Loeb, 2002) to improve student achievement, culminating in the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as No Child Left Behind ([NCLB]; Duke, Grogan, Tucker, & Heinecke, 2003).

Though NCLB was the apotheosis of the standards movement, the first collaborative response to *Nation* was enacted during the 1989 education summit held in Charlottesville, VA. Throughout the 1980s, governors began to recognize the electoral importance of demonstrating a link between increased investment in education and improvements in academic outcomes. Under their leadership, states would showcase considerable interest in educational standards, with individual governors and the National Governors Association being recognized as “among the most active and effective leaders of the school reform efforts” (Vinovskis, 1999). Among the many participants in the Charlottesville summit, key players included President George H. W. Bush, who pledged to be an education president in his 1988 campaign and later championed America 2000, Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton, who as the next president would operationalize the summit through Goals 2000 (a list of goals for standards-based education reform and seen as a precursor to NCLB) and the 1994 ESEA reauthorization, and Michael Cohen, the director of education policy at the National Governors Association (Klein, 2014). The reauthorization of ESEA in 1994 under the Improving America’s Schools Act, the last major revision prior to NCLB, formally introduced standards for math and English/language arts and the concept of adequate yearly progress, and also authorized states to waive federal requirements under select circumstances. Later in 1996, the nation’s governors convened again at the National Education Summit in Palisades, New York, to focus on improving student performance through creating state and local standards and developing assessments (Carter, 1996).

Prior to No Child Left Behind, many states channeled their enthusiasm for standards-based education towards creating local assessment policies. Considered a state at the forefront of the standards and accountability movement (Berliner, 2006), Virginia created the Standards of Learning (SOL) in 1995. Approved by the Virginia Board of Education, the first iteration of the Standards of Learning encompassed four main content areas of math, science, English, and social studies and assessed students throughout primary and secondary school years. Each SOL examination included a corresponding curriculum framework that teachers used to ensure proper lesson planning and content coverage. Under the SOLs, failing schools were subject to academic reviews and must submit school improvement plans, including new teaching programs grounded in research in student achievement. Failing these changes, schools could be closed, combined with a more successful school, or be reconstituted which included complete school restructuring.

Similarly, the Nebraskan state board of education recognized the need to improve educational opportunities and help its schools be “the best in the nation” (Christensen, 2004). Authorized during the 2000 session of the Nebraska legislature, the School-based, Teacher-led Assessment & Reporting System (STARS) combined state standards with a portfolio of locally designed assessments to create a low-stakes approach to student assessment, and was a partnership between local school districts and the state department of education. Individual schools or school

clusters developed a package of assessments to meet state standards, resulting in an assessment policy grounded in the local context of the student and school experience. In creating STARS, the Nebraskan State Department of Education reviewed all locally created assessments to ensure criteria alignment.

The Virginia Standards of Learning was characterized as a “high-stakes” testing system, due to the critical educational decisions that were made for students based on results, in contrast to the more locally-constructed Nebraska STARS. The SOLs were found to place considerably high external pressure on schools, students, and teachers based on an external assessment of test frequency, accountability, and repercussions of poor performance (Carnoy & Loeb, 2002). The independently created Accountability Pressure Rating, which presented an empirically-derived judgement of pressure due to tests pooled across current and past accountability policies, rated Virginia as 3.09, briefly increasing to the maximum score of 5 in 2004 (Nebraska was not reviewed) (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2006). Separate subjective reviews of STARS concluded that it was low-stakes (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Carnoy & Loeb, 2002).

With the passage of No Child Left Behind, “a much larger accountability role for the federal government [was specified], including requiring schools and states to report student achievement and be subjected to federal standards” (Brookhart, 2009). Despite mandating that all states assess students, NCLB did not provide a nationalized system of standards or a systematic method of assessment. This allowed for state-level variation in standards and testing policy (Wenning, Herdman, Smith, & McMahon, 2003). Many states responded to NCLB by revising state learning standards, creating accountability regulations, and implementing standardized assessments, a number which came to be considered as high-stakes. Three years after its enactment, the Education Commission of the States found that all fifty states had met or were on track to meet half of NCLB requirements, and all but two had met 75% of them. Nearly every state had met NCLB requirements for testing new teachers, assessing all students, and establishing safe schools.

In 2010, the standards movement continued with the adoption of the Common Core State Standards Initiative. Created to address the lack of standardization in state learning standards and the definition of proficiency, the CCSS received both praise and criticism from experts and policymakers alike across the United States. Notably, both Virginia and Nebraska are non-members of CCSI, with then-Virginia Governor McDonnell stating “we don’t need the federal government telling us how to run our schools in Virginia. We’ll use our own system, which is very good. It’s empirically tested”.

Finally, No Child Left Behind was replaced in 2015 under President Barack Obama by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). A bipartisan congressional effort, ESSA was viewed as a return to normalcy, correcting the previous overreach of the federal government into state education policy. In announcing ESSA, the US Department of Education recognized that the prescriptive requirements of NCLB had become increasingly untenable (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2018). While still maintaining the annual standardized testing requirement as established by NCLB, ESSA shifted other previously-held federal accountability provisions to the states. In particular, ESSA restored a considerable level of control over standards and testing to states and districts, which would now be required to submit goals and standards to the US Department of Education for approval. In this way, ESSA wrestled power away from the US Department of Education, which had, under Secretary Duncan, assumed oversight of many the federal lawmaking procedures.

Given the historical role of states in the standards movement, the ebb and flow of federal oversight throughout the accountability era, and the varying stakes of state assessment systems, the policy process as experienced in Virginia and Nebraska over the preceding periods can be used to explore how individual states designed their own assessments and demonstrated autonomy in

accountability policy. This paper presents a comparative analysis of the policy process in each state prior to and during No Child Left Behind. With a special focus on local political culture, it chronologically and spatially explores the conditions, processes, and consequences of each policy across multiple spaces and levels of design and implementation, including state legislatures, state departments of education, boards of education, and local school districts. Findings show how actors in these spaces leveraged the specific political and historical contexts within each state to implement and interpret policy and how these narratives drove decision-making at multiple levels of the policy processes. As shown, both states attempted to enforce their autonomy throughout the policy process, resulting in two different accountability systems.

Review of the Literature

The emergence of national and statewide accountability systems due to ESEA and NCLB significantly altered the landscape and context of the classroom instructional process, resulting in the revision of state standards, an increased focus on test-based content, and a shift in school culture towards accountability (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003; Adams & Karabenick, 2000; Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Greene, Winters, & Forster, 2004; Koretz, Barron, Mitchell, & Stecher, 1996; Madaus & Clarke, 2001; McNeil, 2000; McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Vasquez Heilig, 2008; Rapp, 2002; Roderick & Engel, 2016). In the annual *Quality Counts* report published by Education Week in 2005, it was reported that a number of states created a single standardized assessment used to make critical educational decisions for students, such as graduation or retention ("No small change," 2005). Due to the considerable stakes associated with individual standardized tests, researchers began to explore the intended and unintended consequences of state high-stakes testing policy.

The focus on the policy processes of Nebraska and Virginia emerged from the substantially different design and associated stakes of each state accountability policy. Understandably, the rise of standards-based accountability tests designed to assess state standards has had lasting effects on teachers and students. Proponents of high-stakes testing argue that they clarify expectations, challenge students to reach high standards, bring attention to achievement gaps, and can boost student performance (Ananda & Rabinowitz, 2000; Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Wenning, Herdman, Smith, McMahon, & Washington, 2003). Further, high-stakes testing has shown to result in an increased focus on professional development for educators, accommodations and greater attention to students with special needs, a more informed and knowledgeable teacher workforce, transparency in student performance for parents, a heightened focus on high quality testing systems, and improvements in student achievement (Cizek, 2005). Comparatively, many of the positive outcomes of high-stakes testing are either misidentified or overstated (Camilli, 2003), and while the standards movement has resulted in a greater focus on excellence and efficiency, it has done so at the expense of traditional ideals of equity (Roach & Frank, 2007). Other research suggests that testing may be detrimental to at-risk students (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Jacob, 2005, 2016; Marchant & Paulson, 2005; Nichols, 2007; Roderick, Jacob, & Bryk, 2016), has a negative impact on curriculum (Chudowsky & Behuniak, 1997; Firestone et al., 2002; Jones et al., 1999; Jones, Jones, & Hargrove, 2003; Koretz et al., 1996; McNeil, 2000; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001), limits instructional practices (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2016; Corbett & Wilson, 1991; Gordon & Reese, 1997; Jones et al., 2003; Smith, 2016), and decreases student motivation and self-esteem (Adams & Karabenick, 2000; Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Jacob, Stone, & Roderick, 2004).

The ability of states to develop their own sets of standards and associated assessment systems resulted in considerable variability in both assessment quality and stakes. For example, 74%

of Kentucky schools demonstrated federal adequate yearly progress in 2004, but over 95% of schools passed state standards. This gap in state versus federal performance was found in many other states (Linn, 2005; Porter, Linn, & Trimble, 2005). Further, some states adopted a high-stakes, standardized approach to student assessment, while others pursued a more holistic, low-stakes approach to evaluation. As the Every Student Succeeds Act shifted even further responsibility of accountability to states, the causes and consequences of variation in state-level accountability policy remains a novel and important area for research. In a 1986 study of state policy mechanisms and education, researchers showed how state-level history, political battles, and the action styles of policy actors were critical to explaining the differential power and influence held by select policy groups in different states (Marshall, Mitchell, & Wirt, 1986). With the considerable unintended consequences associated with high-stakes testing, exploring this power dynamic in states using assessment policies of varying stakes may lead to greater understanding of the state accountability process.

Methods

Theoretical Framework

Comparative analysis of the STARS and SOL policies was conducted using an interpretive framework, focusing on the situation-specific contexts of the policy experience, the language in policy debates and official statements, and individual acts from policy actors (Erickson, 1986; Yanow, 2007; Yin, 1989). Under the interpretivist paradigm, experience, meaning, interpretation, and social action are critical, and social problems are defined as a process of negotiation. Policy is therefore the negotiated result of conflicting values and ideologies in a sometimes irrational political process, often resulting in ambiguous policies and multiple meanings being assigned to them (Marshall et al., 1986; Rein, 1976). Actors within the policy process are sensitive to the history and intentions of the desired policy, which subsequently influences meaning-making. These actors interpret policy through individual systems of values and ideologies that may or may not align with the intentions of the original policy maker. The true meaning of policy is thus a process enacted in local practice through a complex system of multiple interpretations across levels and sites of policy enactment and implementation.

Analysis further framed the policy process as a transformation of intentions (Hall & McGinty, 1997), in which policy is a practical accomplishment constructed through human interaction. Specifically, the policy process is “a dynamic transformation of intentions across phases and sites, time and space, where policy content, practices, and consequences are generated” (Hall & McGinty, 1997). Policy intentions are viewed through the lens of conventions, organizational context, linkages from site to site, resources, and contingencies. Intentions are the “aims, purposes, and goals that motivate multiple actors to action in the policy arena”, while conventions are “taken-for-granted ways of understanding, communicating, and doing” that take away from contingency (Hall & McGinty, 1997). Resources are anything available on a tangible level that actors use to reach their goal, and actors with more available resources shape culture, interpretation, and conditional interaction. The organizational context deals with how power and resources are distributed among policy actors, which can have a significant impact on policy consequences for various contexts.

Throughout analyses, it was assumed that the policy process is spatially linked across multiple policy sites over time. These spatial and temporal points in the policy process are interpreted through the conditions, processes, and consequences of policy: conditions are the pre-existing events that contribute to the formulation of the action context; processes are the actions or interactions that collectivizes the policy process through the conventions, interests, and experiences of key policy actors; consequences are the implications of this collective activity. Finally, the local

conditions and personal perspectives that policy actors bring with them further add to the original policy, creating an evolutionary policy process over time (Hall & McGinty, 1997).

Approach

Virginia and Nebraska were purposefully selected for this study based on external assessments of the level of “stakes” associated with the accountability policies created in each state. In reconstructing the policy environment, activities included reviewing executive, legislative, and judicial records relating to the SOL and STARS policies, such as house bills, senate bills, joint resolutions, and general assembly meeting minutes, as well as other policy artifacts relevant to the policy process including press releases from local and state boards of education, speeches, interview comments, and presentations made by policy actors. All materials were available online or through official records at state governmental offices. Legislative publications over were obtained via searching respective databases at the Virginia General Assembly (www.virginiageneralassembly.gov) and the Nebraska Unicameral Legislature (www.nebraskalegislature.gov). Similarly, GA-related education legislation and responses by the Virginia Department of Education were accessed online (www.doe.virginia.gov/boe/legislation), as were Nebraska board of education meeting minutes using archival records (www.education.ne.gov/stateboard). Individual policy documents for Virginia included legislative bills, Board of Education meeting minutes, Department of Education resolutions, and technical reports (Harris, 2003). Nebraska sources included legislative bills, state Department of Education reports, and external planning guides and background reports (Roschewski, 2004; *STARS: School-Based Teacher-Led Assessment and Reporting System. A planning guide for Nebraska schools*, 1999). Included research material for both states is presented in Table 1.

Further insights into the individual policy processes were derived from interviews conducted with key policy informants. Interviewees included Doug Christensen, a former teacher and principal in the Nebraska public school system who then served as the State Education Commissioner for Nebraska for 14 years and oversaw the development of the STARS, and a former Assistant Superintendent at the Virginia Department of Education. Interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes and were conducted over the phone, audio-recorded, and transcribed. Transcriptions were analyzed using grounded theory (Creswell, 2009), through which codes were created following thematic observations and individual interviewee responses were categorized into each code. Code-matched qualitative responses were analyzed using Nvivo 9 (2010) for presentation. Following analysis, original transcriptions were destroyed. Together, these documents and interviews were used to reconstruct the development, implementation, and response to the policy process in each state.

Analysis of accrued policy documents and data from interviews proceeded using a three step process: pre-analysis, consisting of the systematic reading, processing, categorizing, preliminary analysis, and reduction of accumulated materials; analysis, consisting of a recursive process of interpretation of the previously organized material and the creation of links between elements according to the conditions, actions, and consequences of the policy process; and explanation and theory building, whereby causal sequences within the policy process were identified (Yin, 1989). Through this analysis, the policy process in each state was first framed thematically as the specific actions and sequences of policy development and implementation that informed eventual outcomes. These themes were then arranged chronologically and spatially, demonstrating the links between the levels of the policy process.

Table 1
List of included documents and reports for analyses

Source	Item	Available URL or Reference
Virginia Legislature	(a) 1999 Senate Joint Resolution 498, Establishing the Commission on Educational Accountability	lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?991+ful+SJ498+pdf
	(b) House Joint Resolution 599 (1997 session), Expressing support for testing students upon completion of required courses in schools of the Commonwealth	lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?971+ful+HJ599ER
	(c) 2006 Code of Virginia, Title 22.1 Chapter 13.2 (Standards of Quality), Instructional programs supporting standards of learning and other educational objectives	law.justia.com/codes/virginia/2006/toc2201000/toc220100000130000200000000.html
	(d) 2001 House Bill 2847, Standards of Learning Assessment Advisory Commission	lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?011+ful+HB2847
	(e) 2001 House Bill 2794, Independent review of the Standards of Learning Assessments	lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?011+ful+HB2794
	(f) 2001 House Bill 2777, Standards of Learning Resource Guides	lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?011+ful+HB2777
	(g) Implementing No Child Left Behind, Virginia Legislative Issue Brief #34, September 2003	dls.virginia.gov/pubs/briefs/brief34.htm
Virginia Board of Education	(h) Report from the Board of Education's Standing Committee on the Standards of Quality, February 2002	doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/VA_Board/Meetings/2002/feb05agenda.pdf
	(i) First Review of Proposed Amendments to Virginia's Consolidated State Application Accountability Plan Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, February 2006	doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/VA_Board/Meetings/2006/feb15min.pdf

Table 1 (Cont'd.)

List of included documents and reports for analyses

Source	Item	Available URL or Reference
	(j) First Review of Proposed Additions, Deletions, and Modifications to the Board Approved List of Supplemental Educational Services Providers Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, April 2006	doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/VA_Board/Meetings/2006/apr26min.pdf
	(k) First Review of Timeline for Submission of Additional Evidence to the United States Department of Education for Review of Virginia's Assessment System, July 2006	doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/VA_Board/Meetings/2006/jul26min.pdf
	(l) First Review of Plan to Identify Provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 that are not integral or Necessary to the Commonwealth of Virginia's Statewide Educational Program (HB 1427 and SB 410)	doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/VA_Board/Meetings/2006/sep27min.pdf
Virginia Department of Education	(m) Resolution #2000-15, October 19 2000, Student Advisory Committee	doe.virginia.gov/boe/resolutions/2000/2000-15.shtml
	(n) Resolution #2000-1, March 23 2000, Establishing the Accountability Advisory Committee on the Board of Education	doe.virginia.gov/boe/resolutions/2000/2000-01.shtml
	(o) Resolution #1999-3, April 28 1999, Establishing SOL Technical Advisory Committee	doe.virginia.gov/boe/resolutions/1999/1999-03.shtml
Nebraska Legislature	(p) Nebraska Statute 79-760, The Educational Quality Accountability Act	nebraskalegislature.gov/laws/statutes.php?statute=79-760.03
	(q) Legislative Bill 812, 2000 session, To provide for academic content standards and assessment and reporting of student learning	nebraskalegislature.gov/FloorDocs/96/PDF/Slip/LB812.pdf
	(r) The State Department of Education's School-Based Teacher-Led Assessment and Reporting System	Legislative Audit and Research Office Committee Report V14(1) February 2007

Table 1 (Cont'd.)

List of included documents and reports for analyses

Source	Item	Available URL or Reference
	(s) Nebraska Statewide Assessment and Reporting System for 2009-2010 and subsequent years, State Statute 79-760.0e	Nebraskalegislature.gov/laws/statutes.php?statute=79-760.03
Nebraska Department of Education	(t) STARS Summary Report, 2006, Statewide Assessment Office	nde.ne.gov/Assessment/pdfs/STARSbooklet.2006.pdf
	(u) Regulations and Procedure for the Accreditation of Schools, Title 92 Chapter 10	nebraska.gov/nesos/rules-and-regs/regtrack/proposals/0000000000000318.pdf

Findings

Virginia SOL: Overview and Design

Virginia state statute §22.1-253.13:1 authorized instructional programs supporting the Standards of Learning, establishing a fundamental accountability goal of the Virginia General Assembly (GA) to “enable each student to develop the skills that are necessary for success in school, preparation for life, and reaching their full potential” (Table 1, item b). Announced shortly after the reauthorization of ESEA by the Improving America’s Schools Act on 15 December 1994 and enacted by House Bill (HB) 797, this statute defined and delegated responsibilities for the design and implementation of the SOLs to other organizations in the policy process, including the State Department of Education, local school boards, and schools. Three years later, House Joint Resolution (JR) 599 mandated the additional need for assessment testing of standards, authorizing the implementation of an assessment program developed by the Virginia Board of Education (Table 1, item b) to match the SOL objectives, which were revised in 1995.

The GA distributed JR599 to the Secretary of Education, the President of the Board of Education, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Director of the Virginia School Boards Association, the Virginia Association of School Superintendents, and the President of the Virginia Education Association, directing them to further disseminate JR599 to their constituencies in preparation for the implementation of the accountability policy that was authorized by the GA. In response, the State Department of Education worked within the General Assembly directives to design an effective assessment of student achievement, based on the Standards of Learning.

Thus by the time of the passage of No Child Left Behind, Virginia was already well established with its own accountability system and considered itself to be a champion of the modern accountability movement. In a 2006 Virginia Board of Education (BOE) review of NCLB and the Virginia SOLs as mandated by the General Assembly (Table 1, item k), it was reported that,

Through a focused statewide educational reform effort, Virginia has had a rigorous set of content standards in the Standards of Learning (SOL) program and accompanying assessment system for over ten years. As a result, Virginia supports the primary goal and basic tenets of NCLB since they are in direct alignment with the system of standards and accountability already established in the state. The challenges Virginia faces in meeting the requirements of NCLB relate to the policies

and procedures required by USED [United States Department of Education] in implementation of the components of the law. Virginia believes that certain policies and procedures have resulted in unintended consequences and are not representative of sound educational practice.

Virginia policymakers believed that the previously-established state goals for accountability were reflected in those of NCLB, however there is evidence from both the board of Education and the General Assembly that there were inherent challenges with the latter that were deemed incongruent with current practice. In response, the Virginia GA directed the State Board of Education to draw up a list of federal mandates that were incompatible with Virginia's views on accountability in a provisional noncompliance plan, as described by Dr. Linda Wallinger, Assistant Superintendent for Instruction, at a 27 September 2006 Board of Education agenda meeting (Table 1, item m), House Bill (HB) 1427 and Senate Bill (SB) 410 directed the Board of Education to develop a plan to identify provisions of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) that are not integral or necessary to the Commonwealth of Virginia's statewide educational program. The bills also requested that the Virginia Attorney General's office provide information related to the cost of noncompliance of certain provisions of NCLB. The attached report provides the requested information in HB 1427 and SB 410.

From 2003-2007, the Virginia General Assembly, state BOE, and state Department of Education thus attempted to re-frame federal NCLB in light of the existing state standards. This is perhaps best demonstrated through annual reports from the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) summarizing state requests for amendments to their educational accountability systems under No Child Left Behind, which reported Virginia's requests for modification including adjusting the calculation of AYP and delaying its reporting, revision of AYP consequences and reporting, and altering which student subgroups were included in assessments (Forte & Erpenbach, 2006).

Throughout this process of policy design and leading up to the interaction between state and federal levels following NCLB, the implementation of the Virginia SOLs proceeded across multiple levels.

Virginia SOL: Implementation and Interpretation

The dissemination and implementation processes of the Virginia SOLs were characterized by centralized efforts that were guided across policy spaces. From 1995-2002, many actors and organizations were involved in the implementation of SOL policy across multiple phases and levels: federal (manifested as the response to NCLB and subsequent modification of state standards), state, school district, and school (Table 2). Policy conditions within Virginia were constrained by a number of processes. With a political culture of traditional policymaking and a one-term governor, the General Assembly was extremely powerful with respect to defining policy. Furthering this control, while the Board of Education was appointed by the governor, it was confirmed by the General Assembly. As a result, the Standards of Learning policy process, which encapsulated Virginia policymakers' conceptualization of best practice in education, was principally housed under one governing body. Despite occasional efforts to engage with lower policy levels, the SOL policy process was driven largely by a top-down approach.

During the design phase of the Virginia SOLs and subsequent assessment tests, the Virginia State Legislature was responsible for creating the conditions under which the actors and organizations at lower levels responsible for the implementation of the policy were to operate. In

June 1998, Virginia Board of Education President Kirk Schroder responded to the mandates of the state legislature by solidifying the goals and membership of the Standard Setting Advisory Committee (SSAC) for SOL tests (Duke et al., 2003), which reported directly to the Virginia Board of Education. The SSAC was a general advisory council responsible for designing proper statistical procedures for passing the requirements of the SOL tests, and was comprised of twenty-six accountability policy stakeholders, including representatives from the Virginia Education Association, parent and teacher associations, school division superintendents, school principals, higher education representatives, and the Virginia School Boards Association. Teachers and curriculum experts were also included in the committee. Shortly after the creation of the SSAC, the first implementation of the SOL tests was conducted.

During the first implementation phase of the SOLs (Table 2, Phase I), state representatives collected data to evaluate the tests in areas of standards alignment, teacher and student reactions, and test administration logistics. September 1998 saw the solidification of scoring mechanisms that were set by the SSAC in June and an assessment of the reliability of the SOL exams. To extend the validity and reliability assessments, Virginia enlisted the assistance of outside evaluation experts whose studies yielded sufficiently high reliability results, effectively authorizing the Virginia State Department of Education to make high-stakes decisions from test results (Duke et al., 2003).

Table 2

Sites, phases, and activities of the Virginia SOL policy

Level/Linkage	Phase	Year	Activities
Level 1: Federal	Phase I	1998-2001	No Child Left Behind established, Virginia already in process of state-level accountability policy
Level 2: State/State BOE	Phase I	1995-1997	Virginia State Legislature mandates Standards of Learning and SOL Tests
Level 2: State BOE	Phase I	1998	Virginia BOE responds to state legislature, creates SSAC
Linkage: BOE to School Districts	Linkage Level 2 to Level 3	1998-1999	Linkage of state process to local activity through BOE-sponsored public hearings
Linkage: State legislature to BOE and School Districts	Linkage Level 2 to Level 3	1999	Linkage of state legislators to education leaders and public citizens through General Assembly action: Commission on General Accountability
Level 3: School District	Phase I: Initial Implementation	1998-1999	SOL Phase I implementation

Table 2 (Cont'd.)
Sites, phases, and activities of the Virginia SOL policy

Level/Linkage	Phase	Year	Activities
Linkage: Phase I-II	Linkage Phases	1999	Linkage of Phase I to Phase II of policy implementation, creation of SOL Test Advisory Group and Outside Experts Panel: BOE and Virginia educators/citizens
Level 3: School District	Phase II: Second Implementation	1999-2000	Substantial increase in assessment goal attainment
Linkage: Schools – State BOE	Linkage Level 2 to Level 4	2000-2002	Schools request assistance for problem areas/failing subjects, BOE and Executive create PASS
Levels 1-4: State and School Response to Implementation	Phase III: 5- year assessment of SOL accountability policy	2002	Results show continual gains in progress on SOL goals, Virginia state legislature and BOE shift focus on other educational policies

At the completion of the initial implementation year, the State Board of Education began to involve lower-level policy actors, including teachers, parents, and students, in the accountability process. The Board of Education sponsored public hearings to involve these local actors in discussing the form and function of the SOLs. These hearings had noticeable immediate impact, resulting in modifications to the SOL Limited English Proficiency (LEP) scores and the testing period, although little was accomplished regarding actual standards and the high-stakes environment associated with the tests.

Prior to disseminating to the classroom, the final SOL accountability policy was reviewed by the General Assembly and the Board of Education. This reinterpretation set off Phase II of the SOL policy process. In 1999 the General Assembly created the Commission on Educational Accountability, comprised of state legislators, state officials, education leaders, and public citizens (Table 1, item a). This commission, maintaining the locus of power and resources within the legislature, reviewed the first results of the initial implementation of the SOL tests from the spring of 1998. Only 2.2% of Virginia schools met accreditation requirements in all four core subject areas. However, the Board of Education reported that initial school performance aligned with expectations, and an achievement gap was a natural reaction to adopting more rigorous standards. Additionally, Governor James Gilmore declared the results were a call to action.

In response to local policy forces, mainly parents and teachers pushing for more classroom instructional time, SOL test implementation was changed in Phase II to be conducted at the end of school semester. Additionally, the final pre-implementation act of Phase II was the creation of the SOL Test Advisory Group and Outside Experts Panel, authorized by the Board of Education in April 1999 (Table 1, item o). This group was comprised of Virginia educators, parents, citizens, and business representatives, and was tasked with making recommendations to improve the SOL accountability policy. In support of the new advisory group, Board of Education President Kirk

Schroeder released a statement, saying “We are committed to making the SOL testing program as sound, fair and effective as it can possibly be. [This group] will help us fulfill that goal”. Technical issues surrounding the SOL tests would be addressed by a panel of evaluation experts, chaired by Board of Education member Jennifer Byler and Henrico County Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Mark Edwards. However, despite this lower-level involvement in the policy process, no recommendations by either group were adopted by the General Assembly.

The second formal implementation of the SOL tests came in July 1999, resulting in substantial increases in K-12 student performance. Post-implementation in Phase II in 2000 subjected the Standards of Learning to a formal review process. In a November 2000 report to the Virginia Board of Education, the SOL Test Technical Advisory committee concluded that “the Standards of Learning tests meet or exceeded nationally accepted reliability standards for standardized assessments”, and that acceptable methods were used to set performance standards for students (Schroder, 2002). Academic reviews conducted in under-performing Virginia schools found that some schools did not have curricula aligned with standards content. In response to school division requests for help in aligning curriculum with the Standards of Learning, the Virginia Department of Education designed and released curriculum development resource tools in June 2001. These resources were created in English, math, and science to help teachers plan SOL-based instruction in a logical, sequential, and meaningful manner.

In order to directly focus improvement initiatives on under-performing schools, newly-elected Governor Mark Warner launched the Partnership for Achieving Successful Schools (PASS) in 2002. This partnership combined business and community leaders, state educators, and local school and government officials to increase student achievement. Schools received intervention from academic review teams that assessed curricula and instructed administrators and faculty on effective strategies to increase performance. Virginia Secretary of Education Belle Wheelan discussed four goals of PASS: increase reading and math achievement in under-performing schools, make schools able to post high achievement on their own, engage business and community groups as partners for student achievement, and expand parental involvement in student education.

Phase III in 2002 consisted of the first five-year assessment of student performance on the SOLs. New Virginia Board of Education president Mark Christie reemphasized the original intentions of the SOLs: to increase achievement for all students, especially those who perform lower on achievement tests. The SOL data reflected progress towards achieving this goal. After the five-year assessment, focus on the policy process of the Standards of Learning decreased. Virginia began to focus on other policy goals such as NCLB Adequate Yearly Progress and Governor Warner’s Project Graduation. In 2006, Superintendent of Public Instruction Jo Lynne DeMary, who as superintendent directed the “successful implementation” of the Virginia Standards of Learning, retired (Pyle, 2005), stating

The commitment of successive administrations, the General Assembly, and the Board of Education to the Standards of Learning has allowed Virginia to increase student achievement and provide students and schools with a foundation for even greater success. I am confident that those who come after me will sustain and build upon our reform.

Virginia SOL: Conditions, Processes, and Consequences

Within Virginia, a powerful General Assembly with conventional links to the State Board of Education and Department of Education allowed for the continuation of the preexisting political culture of a centralized focus on assessment. Additionally, key policy champions within the boards

of education, particularly superintendents, played a large role in driving the design and implementation of the SOL policy. As such, the overall conditions of the accountability process were set by the state legislature to maintain an identity of champions of accountability, further setting conditions for the state department of education and board of education, with both operating under the auspices of the legislature either directly or through the implementation of policy (Table 3, Conditions). More locally at the school level, operating conditions were typical of a high-stakes assessment system, whereby teachers were expected to teach all required SOL content as mandated at the higher levels of the policy process and students expected to pass.

Table 3
Conditions, processes, and consequences of the SOL policy process

	State Legislature	State Department of Education	Board of Education	Local schools
Conditions	<p>HB 797 (1995), § 22.1-253.13:1</p> <p>Joint Resolution 599 (29 January 1997 House; 29 February 1997 Senate)</p> <p>Maintain identity of champions of accountability</p>	<p>Respond to state mandate for SOL benchmarks and tests</p> <p>Operate within the mandates of the General Assembly</p>	<p>Standard settings advisory committee: assess scoring of SOL tests</p> <p>Implement SOL requirements for standards and assessments</p> <p>Professional capacity authorized by the General Assembly</p>	<p>Students expected to achieve educational achievement levels created by school districts</p> <p>Teachers expected to teach all SOL content knowledge</p>
Processes	<p>Directed the state board of education to identify parts of NCLB that were incompatible with SOLs into a provisional noncompliance plan</p>	<p>Maintain a website for public teachers to submit recommendations for improving SOLs</p> <p>Superintendent of public instruction to develop criteria for student performance</p> <p>DOE conducts technical assistance for local school districts</p> <p>Conduct evaluative studies to establish best practices and support schools in increasing quality of instruction</p>	<p>Conduct public hearings prior to establishing SOLs</p> <p>Develop programs of instruction for K-12 emphasizing reading and writing</p> <p>Develop and implement remediation programs for at-risk students; provide teachers and principals in-service training for test preparation</p>	<p>Students participate in tests</p> <p>1st year scores not counted on transcripts</p>

Table 3 (Cont'd.)
Conditions, processes, and consequences of the SOL policy process

	State Legislature	State Department of Education	Board of Education	Local schools
Consequences	State General Assembly sees comprehensive effort from State DOE, BOE, and local educators to implement SOLs	Tests shown to be valid and reliable	School performance on SOLs increase from 2.2% proficiency to near 90%	Schools became responsive to SOL standards in implementing new curriculum and managing testing process
	Through noncompliance, Virginia enforced its autonomy from federal oversight of accountability			SOL standards changed with local input, but tests aligned with legislative requirements

Nebraska STARS: Overview and Design

A comprehensive statewide accountability system in Nebraska was mandated by the unicameral state legislature in 1998 through state statute §79-760, The Educational Quality Accountability Act (Table 1, item p). This act was amended in 2000 by Legislative Bill (LB) 812 to support the School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System, or STARS (Table 1, item q). Under LB 812, the State Board of Education was tasked to create measureable academic content for at least three grade levels in math, reading, writing, science, and social studies by 1 July 2001. STARS was subjected to a number of modifications from 2000-2008, designed to assist in the implementation process and impacted by the growing influence of No Child Left Behind. STARS had four main purposes: improve learning for all students, give instructional assistance to teachers, increase local assessment quality, and give educational information to local and state policy leaders. In contrast to the Virginia experience, the Nebraska STARS was characterized as a locally-driven effort with teachers, administrators, parents, and students playing key roles in the policy process.

Like Virginia, the Nebraskan political culture strongly influenced the design and implementation of STARS. Structurally, the unicameral legislature cooperated frequently with actors at the State Department of Education and a two-term governor who had a demonstrated history of collaboration. The elected State Board of Education appointed Doug Christensen as Commissioner of Education, empowering him with the design and implementation of a state assessment policy. As stated by Commissioner Christensen, the historical political culture of Nebraska was important in influencing the direction of STARS,

The Nebraska STARS really is a reflection of “this is kind of the way we do things”. Our history has been taking local control to the ultimate, basically meaning “leave us the heck alone”. But even though [most people] think it’s a local system of schools, it’s not, it’s a state system of schools and the trusteeship is local. So we’ve allowed this local control to be a way to carry on as we’ve been doing. We tried to reenergize the local control notion; we believe local people should run the show.

Further, there was a dedication to a collaborative effort in policy design,

STARS was a natural evolution of the culture we already had. But there is a partnership there, local schools or the state cannot get it all done by itself, so how do we come together to make it work?

Thus, the political culture of Nebraska reaffirmed the influence of and preference to local action in educational policy, supporting a partnership dedicated to the design of an effective assessment system. The collaboration between the Commissioner of Education, the legislature, and state Board of Education led to an atypical model involving schools, teachers, and the community in the accountability policy process.

From 2000 to 2004, the growing influence of Goals 2000 and No Child Behind challenged Nebraska's historical identity. Commissioner Christensen perceived a need to reaffirm its traditional autonomy,

In Nebraska we have a culture of local control which means from anything that [is] outside of a local community, we believe that decisions are best made by those people in contact or being served. In schools, it's the person who works with schools and teachers. When it comes from Washington it tends to be rejected. There was an automatic response [to NCLB], with a majority being in opposition simply because it was so far away and coming from people with little local knowledge of our community.

However, this response to the national context of accountability within Nebraska was not universal. Nebraskan Governor Mike Johanns (1999-2005), who also served as chairman of the National Goals Panel of the National Governors Association, felt uneasy at the prospect of Nebraska being the only state without a state-wide assessment policy. This push for more rigorous, measureable accountability tests was in conflict with STARS, and the state DOE-supported STARS faced growing opposition within the state legislature, resulting in debate over effective and appropriate perspective. Speaking on assessment policy, Commissioner Christensen noted,

A huge policy action shift [was] going on here from external outside tests that looked objective, but didn't really measure anything [compared] to those that looked soft but measured a whole lot more. That was always shifting underneath [with policymakers] and you never knew quite where that was. We were gaining ground but there was still a sense underneath of one-hundred years of testing being turned on its ear.

Nebraska STARS: Implementation and Interpretation

The design and implementation of STARS occurred across multiple organizations (Table 4). In response to NCLB, every state except Nebraska incorporated (or had already incorporated, as in Virginia) norm-referenced or high-stakes tests (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2005). Though many in Nebraska were still supportive of the more locally-grounded STARS assessments, opposition was growing. In 2001, select members of the Nebraskan legislature attempted to reframe the culture of accountability by proposing a bill for the design and implementation of a standardized, statewide assessment more in line with NCLB mandate. However, due to budget constraints, the bill was delayed and STARS was granted a one-year implementation. Speaking of the results from an independent report on the performance of STARS, Christensen stated,

I'm deeply committed to this system, as most every Nebraska educator knows, so I am especially pleased that this independent report shows that teachers and administrators have made important gains in assessment literacy through a high level

Table 4
Sites, phases, and activities of the Nebraska STARS policy

Level or Linkage	Phase	Year	Activities
Level 1: Federal	Phase I	1998- 2003	No Child Left Behind established, Nebraska already in process of state-level accountability policy
Level 2: State DOE/State BOE	Phase I	2000- 2001	State Board of Education creates system of acceptable standards for accountability policy as well as accountability policy itself
Level 3: School Districts	Phase I	2000- 2003	Create measureable academic standards that meet state standards or are of same quality
Linkage: State DOE to BOE	Internal Linkage, Level 2	2000	Linkage of state processes through Doug Christensen and the State DOE to the State BOE through policy meetings
Level 3: School Districts	Phase I: Implementation	2000	Preliminary implementation of STARS in select schools
Level 2: State legislature	Phase II: Intervention/ transformation by state legislature	2000	State legislature attempts to pass bill to change state accountability policy into standardized, state-wide assessment
Linkage: Local voters to legislatures	Linkage Level 3 to Level 2	2000	Local citizens contact BOE and legislature to give support to STARS. Implementation trial granted by legislature
Linkage: Phase I-II	Linkage Phase, Involving Levels 1-3	2001- 2003	Modification of STARS standards for NCLB alignment, validity and reliability tests of STARS, cost-benefit analyses, tracking implementation process at local level
Level 2 and 3: State policy organizations and School Districts	Phase II: Full implementation of Nebraska STARS	2003- 2004	State Department of Education, administrators, superintendents, and Board of Education members meet to discuss implementation
Linkage: State DOE to School Districts	Linkage Level 2 to Level 3	2003- 2004	State Department of Education officials report school level response to STARS implementation
Level 2 and Level 3: State legislature and state media organizations	Phase III: Intervention/intention transformation	2004	Legislators and newspapers push for quantifiable assessment. State DOE modifies accountability policy to include state-wide reading assessment
Level 3: School Districts	Phase III: Intervention/intention transformation	2004	Small, low-budget schools attempt to bypass STARS implementation protocol. State DOE responds with creation of regional service units for consortium cooperation

of professional development. To me, that says the system is working—out teachers are assessing daily what they are teaching so they know what each student knows and is able to do. Most importantly, that means teachers know what they need to re-teach.

Due to the strong performance from students in critical STARS subject areas, local support of the STARS policy grew and the previous proposal for a more traditional, high-stakes assessment system was defeated by a vote of 48 to 1.

In 2003, STARS was formally approved by the US Department of Education, receiving a federal waiver authorizing the continued use of localized assessments and solidifying Nebraska's commitment to local engagement in the accountability process. Commissioner Christensen, state director of federal programs Marilyn Peterson, and the US Education Secretary Rod Paige were all involved in the approval. In both a reemphasis of their traditional culture and a demonstration of autonomy, Governor Mike Johanns stated,

Nebraskans value local control of education. This decision by the U.S. Department of Education acknowledges that Nebraska's system for accountability both makes sense for our children and fits with the objectives of No Child Left Behind.

The implementation process of the approved STARS demonstrated continued integration of actors at lower levels of the policy process. At higher levels, Commissioner Christensen organized school administrators, superintendents, and board of education members to discuss the implementation of STARS, while personnel at the state department of education replicated this process at the local level, gathering feedback on implementation from students, teachers, and administrators. Finally, independent consultants went district to district, interviewing students, teachers, principals, superintendents, board members, and parents to see how implementation was proceeding and being received, and where help was needed. An overwhelming majority of schools showed growth in implementation, commitment to STARS, and overall approval of the policy, and external reviews of STARS concluded that the quality of local assessments was good (Brookhart, 2005).

Although the overall STARS implementation process was a collaborative effort, there were continued attempts to transform STARS to be more aligned with traditional assessment models. First, due to a combination of local control of assessments and the use of criterion-referenced tests, comparing performance across schools and districts was difficult, and Nebraska found itself at the bottom of external rankings of state accountability systems. In board of education meetings, superintendents voiced a need for performance rankings so as to better target under-performing schools, leading the Nebraskan State Department of Education to create a statewide standardized reading assessment to be given along with the local assessments in other critical subject areas. Second, representatives from smaller, less affluent schools reported a lack of adequate staffing to properly administer STARS. In response, the Nebraskan DOE and Board of Education authorized small schools to combine into consortiums of three to fifteen schools, collaborating on STARS implementation to alleviate the burden. However, this transformation of the STARS policy when implemented at the local level had unintended consequences. While some schools relied on these consortiums as intended, others assigned the design of local assessments and implementation strategy to one school in the group, while others would simply adopt the same assessment system to save time and money. Though still more local than a state-administered high-stakes test, this transformation of policy restricted the original intentions of STARS.

In a February 2007 legislative audit of STARS, it was reported that the STARS policy was largely, but not completely, in compliance with the mandate of the Quality Education Accountability

Act, recommending steps for full compliance. Further, it reported that the US Department of Education had notified Nebraska that STARS was out of compliance of NCLB and given non-approved status for its standards and assessment system. In response, the Nebraska State Department of Education issued a letter to the USED and scheduled the collection of additional information to show that, in fact, the STARS system was in compliance (McClelland & Arp, 2007). In August 2007, guidelines and requirements for documenting assessment quality were released to assist school districts in rating the quality of local assessments. Legislative Bill 653, passed in May 2007, authorized the implementation of STARS for the 2008 school year. To further integrate the STARS implementation process, the Nebraska Department of Education created three advisory groups, one each for standards, assessment, and reporting. These groups advised policy implementation decisions made by the State Board of Education.

Concurrently, the mid-2000s saw multiple structural changes in Nebraska that had substantial impacts on the STARS policy. First in 2005, Governor Johanns, a known supporter of the STARS policy, resigned and was replaced by Dave Heinemen, a proponent of more traditional accountability systems. Second, a constitutional amendment became effective in 2006 establishing term limits for Nebraska lawmakers. As Nebraska had a unicameral legislature, this meant that lawmakers could not seek reelection in separate chambers, severely constraining the long-term vision of assessment policy. Importantly, 44 new legislators were elected in just four years after enactment, bringing new support for the use of a more rigorous, quantitative measure of accountability. Finally, Commissioner Christensen announced his retirement in April 2008, removing the most visible champion of STARS. Together these changes contributed to the termination of STARS in lieu of the Nebraska State Accountability Assessments (NeSA), a statewide initiative to support greater reporting for AYP as required by NCLB (Table 1, item s).

Nebraska STARS: Conditions, Processes, and Consequences

In Nebraska, a traditional political culture of “go it alone” resulted in a locally-driven accountability policy that was resistant to both federal regulation and growing opposition within the state. In contrast to Virginia’s centralized approach to accountability, Nebraska put control over the design and implementation of standards assessment in the hands of those with direct, day-to-day experience with education. However, despite the documented success of STARS, a changing political culture and the retirement of key policy champions precipitated a quick transition to more traditional high-stakes testing.

Conditions for the Nebraska STARS across policy space (Table 5) include initial legislative action in the form of statute 79-760, the Education Quality Accountability act and LB812, which officially created STARS. Intentions for this policy at the legislative level were similar to that of Virginia in improving learning for all students and providing assistance to instruction, however it differed in placing autonomous control of this process in the hands of local educators. This formal delegation of responsibility most directly manifested in the state department of education and state board of education, which led the push for local, context-driven accountability policies and coordinated efforts between the legislature, the BOE, and the governor in support of a unified accountability model. The BOE, for its part, was primarily tasked with creating the measureable academic content in key subject areas by July 2001 and further delegated control of local standards and a proposed assessment protocol by July 2003. Finally, these initiatives filtered down to the local level, with schools coordinating teachers to discuss possible assessment systems meeting or exceeding state expectations.

Table 5
Conditions, processes, and consequences of the STARS policy process

	State Legislature	State Department of Education	Board of Education	Local Schools
Conditions	<p>State Statute 79-760, Education Quality Accountability Act</p> <p>LB 812, STARS: Improve learning for all students, assist in instruction to teachers, desire for local assessment quality, provide information on achievement to local and state policy leaders</p>	<p>Push for local-context driven accountability policies</p> <p>Involve legislature, BOE, and Governor in support of accountability model</p>	<p>Create measureable academic content in reading, writing, science, and social studies by July 2001.</p> <p>School districts to create local standards and possible assessment protocol by July 2003</p>	<p>Teachers come together to discuss possible accountability assessments that meet or exceed state expectations</p>
Processes	<p>Push for standardized statewide test, constrained by budget considerations</p> <p>Authorized trial implementation of STARS policy to allow for time to resubmit original intention</p> <p>Introduction of term limits to lawmakers</p>	<p>Designed state expectations for standards</p> <p>Subject locally submitted standards and assessments to external evaluation</p> <p>Organize school district administrators and superintendents along with Board of Education to discuss implementation</p> <p>Direct independent consultations to schools to discuss implementation process with principals, teachers, and parents</p> <p>Retirement of Commissioner Christensen</p>	<p>Work with DOE to direct STARS implementation process</p> <p>Assist school districts struggling with implementation through regional service units that could combine efforts for policy implementation</p> <p>Implement locally created assessments</p> <p>Interact with DOE-based advisory committees on standards, assessment, and reporting for STARS implementation decisions</p>	<p>School districts create local assessments reflecting contextual nuances</p> <p>Occasional attempt at transforming intentions by funding deficient schools through bypassing assessment design protocol</p>

Table 5 cont.

Conditions, processes, and consequences of the STARS policy process

	State Legislature	State Department of Education	Board of Education	Local Schools
Consequences	LB 653, Sec. 79-760.03 to reauthorize STARS New group of lawmakers together with link to new governor led to stronger support for and passage of NeSA, new standardized assessments	Engagement of delinquent school districts through regional service units Maintained communication with local districts	Comprehensive reviews of standards after implementation year	Strong support from teachers and principals for continuation of STARS Local created assessments had high performance ratings, meeting NCLB performance expectations

These conditions and subsequent actions dictated the initial processes of the STARS policy cycle. At the legislative level, there was a back and forth between those embedded in the more traditional culture of local control and those pushing for a more standardized statewide test. However, budget constraints created the opportunity for the initial implementation of STARS. In this phase, the state department of education was primarily focused on designing expectations for local standards, ensuring that the locally submitted standards and assessments submitted by local districts were externally evaluated, and ensuring that STARS was aligned with NCLB mandates. In this way, the state DOE operated as a link between the local districts and the state legislature and between the state and federal levels. The actual implementation process of the STARS was primarily driven by the board of education, which worked with the state DOE to direct the implementation process, assisted with schools struggling with implementation, and interacted with advisory committees created by the state DOE for monitoring standards, assessment, and reporting of STARS implementation. Schools created local assessments and generally implemented STARS with little issue, though some attempted to transform the policy at the local level through consortiums.

Finally, the consequences of this STARS implementation process led to an initial reauthorization of STARS through legislative bill 653 (Section 79-760). The state DOE was involved in engaging with delinquent school districts and maintained communication with local districts. The BOE conducted comprehensive reviews of the established standards after the implementation year, while the local schools gave strong support from teachers and principals to continue with STARS. For their part, the local assessments had high performance ratings and met NCLB performance expectations. However, the combination of processes across cycles resulting in legislative term limits, a new governor, and the retirement of the Commissioner of Education led to revived support for standardized, traditional assessments and the passage of NeSA.

Discussion

In this study, we explored the conditions, processes, and consequences of accountability policy design and dissemination in Virginia and Nebraska prior to and through No Child Left

Behind. Adopting the view that policy is a sequence of policy cycles linked across sites and experienced by individual policy actors, we assumed that the intentions and processes of policy are constrained or enabled by historical culture, organizational operation, resource availability, and conceptualizations of power (Hall & McGinty, 1997). Our findings demonstrate the influence of the local policy context in shaping the development, interpretation, and outcomes of accountability policy in response to federal mandate and may have considerable implications for understanding the future of state-level accountability policy that may emerge under the Every Student Succeeds Act.

Both states began with similar policy intentions: develop an assessment that adequately assesses student learning that can be used to hold teachers and schools accountable to student success. However, the design of each policy was heavily influenced by the policy conditions within each state, which in turn shaped the processes and consequences of policy implementation at lower levels. Virginia had a culture of centralization and a desire to align varying local standards with a standard set of expectations. As a result, Virginia implemented a top-down policy model of standardized testing, constraining the resources and opportunities for policy transformation at the lower policy levels. Virginia enacted its accountability policies before the passage of No Child Left Behind, and consistently attempted to opt out of NCLB components that were considered in violation of Virginia's approach to assessment. The General Assembly had powerful historical control over accountability policy, being the first organization within Virginia to call for standards alignment and then spearheading the process of creating an assessment test aligned with state standards. Further, the GA had exceptional resource availability through its formal and informal oversight of the Board of Education and the Department of Education, allowing most accountability policy to be controlled at the upper echelons of the state policy hierarchy.

In contrast, the historical political context in Nebraska supported local control of policy. Like Virginia, initial reaction to the passage of NCLB was met with opposition, though it manifested in different ways. Taking advantage of budgetary limitations that constrained the actions of policymakers committed to a more traditional standardized testing policy in the Nebraskan unicameral legislature, those in support of STARS were able to strengthen local support through successful implementation and positive responses from teachers and administrators. Additionally, a continued championing of the locally-driven identity of STARS via the state department of education was critical to the successful implementation of policy, with the office of the Commissioner of Education motivating and linking other organizations and actors through design and implementation phases. In response to NCLB, Nebraska invited representatives from the USED, including the United States Secretary of Education, to visit and observe the implementation of STARS in support of obtaining a waiver from federal mandate. However, in the end a changing political culture and the retirement of one of the foremost champions of the STARS local policy contributed to the termination of STARS in support of a traditional standardized assessment system.

Significance

This research has demonstrated the influence of historical political culture in the design and implementation of educational accountability policy and how states attempted to reinforce their autonomy in response to federal mandate. With the 2015 passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act, there has been a redistribution of power in the standards movement. While still maintaining a level of federal oversight, ESSA granted considerable autonomy to states and districts in developing state standards, setting goals, and assessing student achievement. With the deeper understanding of the accountability policy process in Virginia and Nebraska prior to and through NCLB presented here, additional study under ESSA could further contribute to the state-federal policy dynamic.

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