Critical Community Focus in School Improvement Plans: The Absent Imperative

Meredith Wronowski, Bryan A. VanGronigen, Wesley Henry, and James L. Olive

Abstract

School improvement plans (SIPs) have become a central feature of schooling. Educational leaders experience tension between balancing compliance with accountability demands and continuous improvement, and neither of these lenses is centered in the social justice necessary for closing opportunity gaps. We propose a new rubric for assessing the extent to which SIPs focus on policy compliance, students, organizations, or community. Assessing SIPs from four U.S. states reveals that schools view families and community stakeholders as external to the improvement planning process and that this issue is exacerbated for schools serving higher percentages of African American/Black students and higher percentages of economically disadvantaged students.

Key Words: school improvement plans, accountability, educational improvement, educational change, community involvement

Introduction

School improvement planning and data use have become defining features of the educational landscape in the United States (U.S.). Given continuing accountability policy demands as the U.S. transitioned from the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, these features persist (Adams et al., 2017; Rentner et al., 2019; Sparks,

2018). The literature describing educators' data use for school improvement highlights a tension between using data for compliance with accountability policies and using data to support a culture of continuous improvement and organizational learning; educators find themselves balancing both agendas (Lai & Schildkamp, 2016; Militello et al., 2013). As a way of satisficing this tension (see Simon, 1957), school improvement processes have, with increasing frequency, been directed towards meeting accountability policy demands (Mintrop et al., 2001).

The accountability policy model and continuous school improvement frameworks both explicitly aspire to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for *all* students. However, U.S. schools are not just situated within policy contexts—they are also situated in sociocultural community contexts that are defined by sociological and anthropological histories connected to race and class (Gerwitz, 2006). Myopically focusing on schools and educators allows policymakers to broadly ignore the generations of economic and racial segregation and oppression in communities that have created persistent opportunity gaps for scores of children and families (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Milner, 2012; Vasquez-Heilig et al., 2014). In this way, the traditional accountability model—which focuses solely on schools—cannot be focused on educational social justice. Educational social justice requires the redistribution of opportunities to redress the longstanding effects of economic and racial hegemony. The work of social justice that extends beyond the simple recognition of inequity must be contextualized within communities (Gewirtz, 2006). School improvement efforts that are not explicitly grounded in a commitment to social justice fall short of creating the cultural shifts necessary for closing opportunity gaps (Datnow & Park, 2018; Oakes, 2005; Valenzuela, 2005). Thus, a social justice counternarrative to neoliberal educational reforms, like accountability policy and school improvement processes that seek to comply with accountability policies, must—necessarily—be rooted in the community contextualization of schooling, particularly where communities have been marginalized and minoritized (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006).

The pursuit of school effectiveness using policy definitions—even when those definitions focus on closing *achievement gaps*—can be antithetical to social justice aims by defining and rewarding equity in the limited terms of scores on standardized assessments. This limited view of school improvement trivializes the relationship of community to schooling and fails to empower and address the needs of marginalized and minoritized communities (Sampaio & Leite, 2018). Scholars have suggested ways in which school improvement can be connected to a concept of educational equity grounded in social justice, including equity audits (Skrla et al., 2004), community-based equity audits

(Green, 2017), school culture audits, and self-evaluation processes (Sailes, 2008; Sampaio & Leite, 2017; Terrell et al., 2009). There have long been calls to redefine school decision-making and collaboration to include family, caregivers, and the broader community to improve schools (see Epstein, 2010). However, it remains unclear to what extent a community-based social justice focus is used in school improvement planning (Datnow & Park, 2018; Ishimaru, 2020). Thus, this study focused on school improvement plans (SIPs) as an artifact of the school improvement planning process and examined the following research questions:

1. How can we identify, characterize, and describe community connections and social justice aims that may be present in SIPs?
2. To what extent do SIPs have a community-based social justice focus?

To address our first research question, we developed what we have termed the School Improvement Plan (SIP) Focus Rubric (see Appendix) to characterize components often found in SIPs. The rubric's development was directed by applying a QuantCrit framework, defined below, in the examination of many aspects of the school improvement planning and data use literature base, including the policy and political context of school improvement, evaluation of school improvement planning processes and outcomes, and social justice and equity views of school improvement planning and data use. To address our second research question, we used the SIP Focus Rubric to assess the focus of a sample of 65 publicly available SIPs from four U.S. states.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows. We first discuss the conceptual and empirical literature that was reviewed to develop the SIP Focus Rubric, including critical literature that provides a framework for extending the focus of SIPs to include critical, community-based improvement processes, strategies, and outcomes. We then demonstrate the rubric's use as an assessment tool and present findings from that evaluation. Finally, we discuss implications of this work and future applications of the SIP Focus Rubric.

Conceptual Framework

Data use is a key component of school improvement planning, particularly in improvement approaches with roots in Total Quality Management (TQM) and the plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycle (Bryk et al., 2015; see also Deming, 1986). The historical lure of using *data to drive decision-making* is partially grounded in the notion that data are neutral. However, school improvement planning and data use are not power or politically neutral activities (Coburn & Turner, 2011). What data get noticed, how data are interpreted, and how those interpretations are connected to actions are attached to educator beliefs and

experiences as well as external policy demands (Coburn & Turner, 2011; Park et al., 2013). When social justice frameworks are absent from data use processes, data can be used to (a) affirm deficit thinking about students, families, and communities at the margins; (b) narrow or ration instruction and curriculum for marginalized students; and (c) create conditions where *opportunity gaps* and *educational debts* are ignored (Booher-Jennings, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012). Therefore, it is necessary to integrate social justice frameworks into data use and school improvement practices.

QuantCrit has emerged as a framework for *uncovering* the use of quantitative methods as a tool of oppression and *reframing* the use of quantitative methods as a tool for pursuing social justice aims (Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi, 2008; Garcia et al., 2018; Gilborn et al., 2018). QuantCrit is not a theory—rather it is a framework of principles for collecting, analyzing, and critiquing quantitative data that is guided by Critical Race Theory ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Gilborn et al., 2018). Specifically, QuantCrit explicitly acknowledges the centrality of racism, recognizes that: numbers are not neutral and should be interrogated, categories are neither "natural nor given" (for "race" read racism), voice and insight in analysis is vital (i.e., datum cannot "speak for itself"), and statistical analysis and quantitative data use does not have an inherent value, but numbers can be used for social justice (Garcia et al., 2018, p. 151; Gilborn et al., 2018).

School improvement that is grounded in social justice has key features that align with the QuantCrit framework. School improvement efforts that are grounded in social justice focus on both redistributive and recognitive social justice. While redistributive social justice aims to equitably redistribute educational resources and opportunity, recognitive social justice acknowledges that the experience and knowledge that resides in marginalized communities is valuable in terms of academic achievement, but should also be viewed as inherently valuable as an improvement end in its own right (Woods et al., 2014).

To date, QuantCrit has been described and applied within research (Garcia et al., 2018; Gilborn et al., 2018). However, there is an opportunity to use a QuantCrit framework as praxis for school improvement efforts and data use in K–12 contexts. Used in the practice of school improvement, QuantCrit offers a counterstory to the neoliberal accountability narrative that creates dissonance between school improvement efforts and social justice aims. Indeed, QuantCrit is used in this study to assess congruence between the school improvement planning process and social justice aims by interrogating what data are used, how data are used, and whose voices are valued and excluded in the construction of SIPs.

Brief Review of Relevant Literature

The Political Context of School Improvement

It is important to understand the political context of SIPs as tightly coupled to U.S. accountability policies, as efforts to centralize and standardize education reform have accelerated during the last 50 years. For example, *A Nation at Risk* (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and the Charlottesville Education Summit of 1989 (Vinovskis, 1999) inspired prioritizing increased standardization in education. In recent decades, accountability has become a cornerstone of U.S. federal education policy through the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) and Goals 2000: Educate America Act passed in 1994, NCLB passed in 2002, and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) passed in 2009 (Anfara et al., 2006; Fernandez, 2011; Huber & Conway, 2015).

Yet, the idea that schools—like private industries—should use strategic planning to improve is an idea that predates the modern accountability policy era (Fullan, 2000). The use of SIPs serves as a mechanism for implementing accountability policies (Gilborn et al., 2018; Mintrop & MacLellan, 2002; Mintrop et al., 2001). Under NCLB, for instance, all schools that were identified as not making "adequate yearly progress" (AYP; NCLB, 2002) were required to draft annual SIPs. However, many states began requiring all schools to prepare annual SIPs before NCLB, and, by 2000, most U.S. public schools reported having a SIP, with 33 states noting more than 90% of their public schools created an annual SIP (Fernandez, 2011). The high percentage of schools creating SIPs seems to indicate that even the more diffuse accountability policies—IASA and Goals 2000—were leveraging SIPs. The ARRA, however, can be viewed as the height of policy-directed SIPs because it connected the SIP process to large-dollar School Improvement Grants whose application required a SIP focused on one of three school improvement approaches: transformation, turnaround, or restart (see U.S. Department of Education, 2009 for a full explanation of these approaches). Given the evolution of this political context, SIP data sources, strategies, and outcomes are largely dictated by external demands and implementation guidance, thereby shifting the purpose of SIPs to one driven by accountability mandates and away from contextualized, local goals.

Structures and Aspects of School Improvement Plans

Given the coupling of SIPs to accountability policies, it is unsurprising that SIPs emphasize the strategies and outcomes of those policies. In an analysis of 194 short-cycle SIPs produced by underperforming schools, VanGronigen

and Meyers (2017) found 17 priority areas for the SIPs, but that three areas in particular—student achievement, data use, and instruction—comprised nearly half of all the priority areas identified in the SIPs. The next five most common focus areas—school climate and culture, professional growth, student behavior and discipline, program implementation, and school organization—accounted for an additional third of all identified focus areas. Overall, VanGronigen and Meyers (2017) conclude that the areas emphasized by SIPs prioritized student achievement goals, data use, and instructional reforms—including teacher accountability—because accountability policies emphasized these areas. Other empirical studies suggest that state accountability policies, rather than federal accountability policy, are a particularly important influence on SIPs (for examples, see Mintrop et al., 2001; Mintrop & MacLellan, 2002; Strunk et al., 2016).

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that schools—particularly those under intense accountability policy pressures because of historical failures to meet requirements like making AYP—are more likely to approach school improvement planning as an externally motivated activity rather than a process intrinsic to their schools and communities. This coupling of school improvement planning to accountability policies may become tighter when the "quality" of SIPs is evaluated using the same, narrow standardized test score criterion that informed the creation of SIPs in the first place. However, there are few studies that evaluate the "quality" or "effectiveness" of SIPs (Fernandez, 2011; Strunk et al., 2016; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2022). The few studies that conduct these evaluations, however, have used improvement in standardized test scores as the primary indicator of SIP effectiveness. For example, Fernandez (2011) assessed SIP effectiveness using change in a school's aggregated individual student growth scores on the Iowa Basic Skills Assessment. Using this standardized test criterion, Fernandez (2011) concluded that only a subset of SIP aspects—those related to Goals (achievable, measurable, specific, and relevant), Implementation (master plan, professional development gaps, and professional development focus), and Assessment (evaluation, monitoring, and monitoring frequency)—differentiated SIP effectiveness. Using this narrow criterion led the author to conclude that inclusion of a Parental Involvement aspect in the SIP did not influence its effectiveness. In determining the effectiveness of specialized SIPs written to obtain federal School Improvement Grant funding as part of ARRA, Dee (2012) also used a narrowly defined standardized test score outcome—Academic Performance Index (API)—to determine which federal school improvement approaches (transformation, turnaround, or restart) were most effective. While the study seemed to demonstrate that turnaround was the most effective school improvement model with respect to raising test

scores, Dee (2012) acknowledged that how schools implemented the prescriptive federal approaches, which included using community-based services, was not addressed by this work. Again, these examples illustrate that using standardized test scores to evaluate SIPs written to improve standardized test scores facilitates a closed policy–improvement loop. In this tight coupling of accountability policy and school improvement, authentic discussions of social justice, equity, community engagement, and the sociopolitical context of schooling are exchanged for a narrative that places all of the responsibility for student "success" on the technical core of a school's work (e.g., curriculum and instruction; Lee & Orfield, 2006; Sunderman, 2008).

School Improvement Planning, Communities, and Social Justice

Although school improvement has been tightly coupled to the narrow definition of student achievement as measured through standardized test scores, district and school leaders do not necessarily view accountability-driven school improvement and social justice as mutually exclusive (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Carpenter et al., 2017). The stance that some aspects of accountability-driven SIPs are positively related to social justice may be connected to a broader definition of social justice employed by educational leaders as doing what is best for all students. This understanding of social justice is also framed by educational leaders' historical, political, and organizational contexts, and, in this era, improving achievement for *all* students has been framed as a social justice and equity issue (DeMatthews, 2016; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004).

Indeed, research has suggested that educational leaders, particularly in district and school contexts which accountability policy definitions have deemed "challenging," are frequently engaged in a prioritization of social justice aims (e.g., closing within-school academic opportunity gaps or developing connections to the marginalized and oppressed communities that their schools serve). This prioritizing is necessary given the finite fiscal and time resources allotted for improvement in these contexts. Studies of both district superintendents (e.g., Alsbury & Whitaker, 2006) and a school leader (e.g., DeMatthews, 2016) demonstrate that when prioritizing social justice behaviors, instructional equity—that is, equity focused on improving the classroom instructional experience for diverse learners—is favored over community connections and democratic educational processes that involve communities in defining the school's role and setting the school's educational goals.

Prioritizing instructional equity and improving educational outcomes over community and democratic educational outcomes, like community participatory decision-making, may be viewed as a way of finding congruence between accountability policy demands and social justice aims—or engaging in social

justice in a way that is satisficing, or minimally acceptable, to the policy context. However, we question whether this within-school-only approach to social justice can be considered social justice work if it does not recognize the community-contextualized nature of educational opportunity (Gewirtz, 2006).

There are extant examples of school improvement efforts that are more closely aligned with social justice. For example, Skrla and colleagues (2004) describe the application of an equity audit process that (a) identifies inequities in teacher quality and programmatic or curricular practices that lead to inequity in achievement, and (b) leverages community stakeholders to work alongside educators to propose and implement solutions and monitor their effectiveness. Additionally, Sailes (2008) extends the equity audit process beyond teaching and programming to include school culture by calling for an audit of cultural proficiency. While equity audits and cultural proficiency audits provide an important foundation for connecting social justice aims with school improvement efforts, they are limited with respect to their community connections—in both processes, community members serve in roles that are defined by within-school stakeholders and engage with data that have been selected by within-school stakeholders.

Green (2017) addresses the power imbalance between schools and communities that may persist in other equity and cultural proficiency audit processes by describing a *community-based equity audit process*. In a community-based equity audit process, Green describes that the roles of the "community outsiders" (e.g., many within-school stakeholders like teachers and administrators who may not live near their schools) and community members are reversed to elevate the voices of community members and working with the community. This call for a role reversal is a recognition that, particularly in marginalized communities, teachers and administrators often do not live in the communities where they work. As a result of this role reversal, community-based equity audits begin where the community deems necessary, require school outreach that is appropriate for the community, and call for cultural humility on the part of educators as well as a commitment to asset-based co-learning with the communities they seek to empower (Green, 2017; Minkler & Hancock, 2003).

Although there are frameworks and some examples of community-engaged school improvement, these approaches remain rare in practice. Where community members are included in school improvement efforts, they are—at best—relegated to the periphery and viewed as data sources used to inform improvement, or—at worst—viewed as barriers to improvement (Ishimaru, 2020). Thus, in the present study, we propose a school improvement framework, presented in the form of a rubric for SIPs, that facilitates an examination of schools' current approaches to improvement. The framework both captures

and critiques the current way in which an accountability-driven, standardized test score-driven school improvement planning approach is applied in U.S. schools. In addition, we see potential for the SIP Focus Rubric to assist educational leaders in assessing congruence between meeting accountability demands and social justice aims in their SIPs.

Methodology

A QuantCrit framework informed our methodology. First, we created the SIP Focus Rubric as described below. Because we also sought to ground this work in a praxis for community-based school improvement, we then used a two step process to assess the rubric's usability. We presented the rubric to educational leadership graduate students at a large Midwestern public university who were also current educational practitioners (e.g., teachers, teacher leaders, curriculum and instructional specialists, administrators, and support professionals, e.g., special education or English Language Learner coordinators) and solicited their feedback via reflective questioning. In addition, our research team used the SIP Focus Rubric to assess publicly available SIPs from multiple states.

Development and Description of the School Improvement Plan Focus Rubric

The SIP Focus Rubric (see Appendix) was developed by contrasting (a) literature relating SIPs to accountability policy and to technocratic continuous improvement processes and (b) literature describing approaches to social justice-informed school improvement efforts. The literature review section of this paper presented the literature bases that informed the rubric's development.

We created four "levels" in the SIP Focus Rubric for the purposes of delineating SIP content with respect to key tensions between school improvement directed towards policy compliance, continuous improvement, and TQM approaches, compared with school improvement directed towards social justice. A first level—*Compliance*—represents an external policy level of focus where data sources are limited to those provided by policy actors at the state or federal level, and analysis and improvement planning activities are focused on meeting policy demands. A second level—*Student Focused*—represents an internal organizational focus where data sources, analysis, and improvement planning are centered at the student level with little to no consideration of other organizational or community factors that are interconnected to educational outcomes. A third level—*Organization Focused*—represents an internal organization focus where data sources, analysis, and improvement planning are centered at the organization level. At this level, there is a clear recognition of the various

organizational factors that are related to diverse educational outcomes, and this organizational focus is reflected in the SIP's data sources, improvement goals, and improvement strategies. A fourth level—*Critical Community Focused*—represents a focus on the sociocultural and historical context of the community that the educational organization serves and the organization's relationship to the community. Diverse data sources from within the organization and community are used, and improvement planning behaviors are collaborative among a diverse group of community and organizational stakeholders.

The rubric's left side offers five components that are frequently included and/or required by policy mandates in SIPs: Data Sources, Data Use and Analysis, Improvement Goals, Improvement Planning and Strategies, and Research Use. We chose to divide the four above-mentioned SIP focus levels by these five SIP components based on the recognition that schools may have a different focus level for different components (e.g., schools may include increasing engagement of families and caregivers, but families and caregivers may have little involvement in the improvement planning process).

Assessment and Feedback on the Rubric by Educational Stakeholders

The SIP Focus Rubric was introduced to graduate students in educational leadership master's degree programs at a large Midwestern public university. This group of graduate students was selected because they are practitioners in an urban district that serves a community that is more than 60% African American/Black, 7% Hispanic or Latino, 6% multiracial, 1% Asian or Pacific Islander, and is less than 25% White. The community this district serves has experienced historical economic oppression and currently experiences increasing levels of gentrification. Due to this urban community's sociopolitical context, a majority of the district's schools have been identified as "F," or failing, on their state report cards. However, a few magnet schools in the district, which enroll significantly more White, middle- to high-income students, have received "A" grades on their state report cards. Thus, this district is an important example of a "high-needs urban district" that is often the target of accountability policy demands, including mandated school improvement planning. We believe introducing our rubric in this community was a necessary step for centering at least some of this work in critical contexts.

These graduate student educational practitioners were asked to reflect on the SIP Focus Rubric as part of their course activities in multiple lessons of a course titled "Data-Informed Decision-Making" and as part of a special seminar series in school improvement titled "Family–School–Community Partnerships Teacher Leadership Seminar." While we wanted to understand how these educational practitioners would respond to the granular aspects of the rubric, we

also wanted to determine their general perception of the four SIP focus levels. For this reason, students were provided with a rubric in which the four SIP focus levels were alphabetized from left to right (*Compliance→Critical Community Focused→Organization Focused→Student Focused*), which differs from the rubric shown in the Appendix. Students were then guided in their reflection on the rubric using the following questions: "What looks familiar in the rubric? What looks new or different? What looks challenging? Is there anything that you would add, delete, or change?" The final format, language, and level descriptions of the SIP Focus Rubric were informed by the feedback from these educational practitioners balanced with the research literature that informed the rubric's initial development.

Evaluating SIPs Using the School Improvement Plan Focus Rubric

We catalogued publicly available accountability (e.g., ESSA) guidelines (see Table 1) to assess whether a SIP is focused beyond compliance with accountability policies. SIPs were assessed according to the SIP Focus Rubric. While formally submitted SIPs may not be indicative of the full school improvement process, they are the publicly available documents that represent that process and can be considered part of the school's orientation towards its community. To assess SIPs using the rubric, we reviewed a convenience sample of SIPs from four states—Florida, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin—because all four states had publicly available SIPs that could be easily accessed either from state education agency databases or from local educational agency or school websites. The next sections provide a brief description of each state's school improvement planning requirements and/or approach.

Florida

The Florida Department of Education provides a state template—the "Continuous Improvement Management System (CIMS)"—that all traditional public and charter schools must use to construct and submit their SIPs. CIMS is connected to the statewide accountability data collection system and provides public access to accountability data and SIPs. The CIMS template does not require schools to include families or community members in the construction of the SIP. Only Title I schoolwide program schools, identified by federal guidelines as serving high percentages of low-income families, are required to create a "Parent and Family Engagement Plan" and to describe student social–emotional supports, student transition plans, how schools will provide individual student interventions, and strategies for advancing college and career awareness.

Tennessee

The Tennessee Department of Education provides a state template—"e-Plan"—that all public schools must use to construct and submit their SIPs. The ePlan system also provides public access to SIPs. Tennessee also has a statewide comprehensive data dashboard that schools use to prepopulate their ePlans with required achievement data (English language arts [ELA] and mathematics in elementary and middle schools; ELA, mathematics, and science in high schools), disaggregated by ESSA-identified student subgroups. This data dashboard also provides additional measures related to school climate and to Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) data. In addition to identifying trends in achievement data, the ePlan template also requires schools to explain how families were engaged in the SIP's creation and create goals and identify action steps for addressing chronic absenteeism, discipline including suspensions and expulsions, student instructional interventions, technology access and use, staff professional development, and parent involvement (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.).

Texas

Texas has a longstanding data system that supports academic indicator reporting, and—like Florida—was an early adopter of public-facing School Report Cards (see Texas Education Agency, 2020a). In contrast to Florida and Tennessee, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) does not provide a SIP template. However, schools are only required to create a SIP—known as a "Campus Improvement Plan"—if they are identified as a federal Title I schoolwide grant school or as a "turnaround" school (the latter label coming after being identified as "unacceptable" for two consecutive school years). The TEA does provide both templates and completed examples of SIPs for these kinds of schools. These templates require parents and community members to be included on SIP committees, and turnaround schools must publicly disseminate their SIPs and solicit feedback through public meetings (TEA, 2020b).

Wisconsin

Similar to Texas, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction does not provide a SIP template. Rather, SIP templates and contents are determined by local education agencies or school districts. While all templates consistently require sections for setting goals and implementing activities related to ESSA indicators, the extent to which community engagement is discussed, measured, and planned for is largely connected to school district policies and/or federal Title I guidelines.

Table 1. Summary of Accountability Indicators in State Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Approved Plans for States Included in Pilot Study

ESSA Indicators	Florida	Tennessee	Texas	Wisconsin
Summative Classification	A–F Grades	A–F Grades	A–F Grades	Performance Index Score
Academic Achievement	ELA and math	ELA and math	ELA and math	ELA and math
Other Academic Indicator	ELA and math proficiency and growth	ELA, math, science proficiency and growth in ELA and math	ELA and math growth over a two-year period	growth in ELA and math
Graduation Rate	4-year only	4-year only	4-year only	4-year and 7-year
School Quality/Student Success	Science achievement, AP, IB, dual enrollment, career and tech ed.	AP, IB, dual enrollment, career and tech ed., chronic absenteeism	*High School*: AP, dual enrollment or earned associate's degree in high school, military enlistment, industry certification, completion of a college prep course, *Elementary/Middle Schools*: achievement on ELA, math, science, social studies, and writing assessments	chronic absenteeism
English Language Proficiency	WIDA proficiency and growth	WIDA proficiency and growth	Composite rating on Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS)	WIDA growth
State Improvement Plan Template	Yes	Yes	No	No
Parent Involvement Required in SIP	Title I Schoolwide Program Only	Yes	Title I Schoolwide Programs and Turnaround schools	Determined by local educational agency/Title I requirements

Sources: Education Commission of the States (2018); Education Week (2018).

School Accountability, Demographic, and Achievement Information

School accountability ratings and performance index scores were obtained from publicly available school report cards from the prior academic year

(2017–18; see Table 2). School demographic information—including percent African American/Black, Asian, Hispanic, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Multiracial, Native American, and White student enrollment, percent disabled student enrollment, percent economically disadvantaged or free/reduced lunch student enrollment, and percent Limited English Proficiency student enrollment (see Table 3)—was obtained from publicly available state education agency data dashboards or school report cards.

Table 2. State Assigned Accountability Rating of Pilot Schools

State Accountability Rating	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No Rating	8	12.3	12.3	12.3
A	11	16.9	16.9	29.2
B	10	15.4	15.4	44.6
C	8	12.3	12.3	56.9
D	8	12.3	12.3	69.2
Exceeds Expectations	7	10.7	10.7	80.0
Meets Expectations	6	9.2	9.2	89.2
Meets Few Expectations	5	7.7	7.7	96.9
Significantly Exceeds Expectations	2	3.1	3.1	100.0
Total	65	100	100	
	Min	Max	Mean	SD
State Accountability Score (n = 63)	24	98	68.89	18.22

Note. Tennessee does not provide performance level ratings. Three Florida schools were not assigned a rating because the schools did not have a sufficient data history.

Scoring of School Improvement Plans

SIPs for the 2018–19 academic year were given a numerical rating for each component (Data Sources, Data Use and Analysis, Improvement Goals, Improvement Planning and Strategies, Research Use) based on focus level (0 = *Compliance*, 1 = *Student Focused*, 2 = *Organization Focused*, 3 = *Critical Community Focused*). Based on feedback on the SIP Focus Rubric from our educational practitioners, SIPs were not given an overall rating because SIPs frequently included a mixture of focus levels for different components.

Table 3. Demographic Characteristics of Schools

Percentage of Student Demographic Group	*N*	Minimum Percentage	Maximum Percentage	Mean Percentage	Std. Deviation
American Indian Students	65	0.00	2.20	0.29	0.41
African American Students	65	0.00	96.00	23.31	23.10
Asian Students	65	0.00	17.90	3.76	4.15
Hispanic Non-white	65	2.20	92.60	30.62	20.94
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	65	0.00	49.00	0.83	6.07
Two or More Races	59	0.00	14.10	4.16	3.44
White	65	0.00	91.00	38.05	26.35
Students with Disabilities	65	0.80	27.60	12.54	4.97
Economic Disadvantage	65	6.90	94.30	53.30	24.79
Limited English Proficient	65	0.00	51.10	15.26	11.40

One research team member was identified as "Rater 1"—the "main rater"—because she conducted the literature review and drafted the initial version of the SIP Focus Rubric. Thus, she was uniquely positioned to understand how the rubric's initial version could be used to evaluate SIPs. Four additional research team members acted as independent raters who each rated a randomly assigned subset of SIPs so our research team, as a whole, could determine interrater reliability of the SIP Focus Rubric (see Shenton, 2004 for more explanation on establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research studies). Our research team also came to the work of scoring SIPs with the recognition that our positionalities influence our use and understanding of the rubric and the lens through which we view SIPs broadly:

- The main rater—Rater 1—is a former urban high school educator, administrator, and current educational leadership faculty member. She also came to this work with considerable training and experience in educational improvement science, data-informed decision-making, and school improvement planning from her K–12 teaching and leadership contexts, specifically from working in schools that were identified as "F" schools and schools "in need of improvement."
- Another faculty rater—Rater 2—taught and served as a teacher leader in an urban public school before becoming a university administrator and later a faculty member. He has professional and research experience in urban and rural communities and has engaged in the K–12 school improvement planning process and improvement science initiatives across multiple higher education institutions.

- Another faculty rater—Rater 3—taught and was a school leadership team member in an independent school in an urbanized area before becoming a faculty member. He has professional and research experience in collaborative school improvement approaches and has conducted numerous studies on the school improvement planning process.
- Another faculty rater—Rater 4—is also a current educational leadership faculty member, but he has no practitioner background in K–12 contexts. However, his scholarly work focuses on intersectionality and marginalization in both K–12 and higher education spaces.
- A final rater—Rater 5—is a graduate student in the field of counselor education. The graduate student team member has academic training in school counseling and educational psychology but has only internship experiences in schools.

Examining the Relationship of SIP Focus Level and Components With School Characteristics

Given the link between accountability policy and school improvement planning, we also examined the relationship between the focus level of the Improvement Planning and Strategies component of the SIPs and several school demographic and achievement characteristics. We selected this component of the rubric for increased scrutiny because this component is where schools' actions reside, and it is these actions that are the very work of improvement. We conducted separate ANOVA tests to examine differences in economic disadvantage, racial makeup of schools, and accountability ratings (see Table 2) between focus levels (*Compliance*, *Student Focused*, *Organization Focused*, *Critical Community Focused*) and the Improvement Planning and Strategies component.

We chose to examine differences in economic disadvantage, racial makeup of schools, and accountability ratings for three reasons. First, all state report card grades and accountability ratings for our four states are connected to standardized test scores in ELA and mathematics—and, historically, this narrow measure of school success has been consistently linked to the numbers of economically marginalized and racially minoritized students served by a school (see Lee, 2002; OECD, 2019; Reardon, 2011; Reardon et al., 2012; Sirin, 2005; Tienken, 2012). Second, in states like Texas, only schools identified for "turnaround" due to poor performance on academic indicators are required to complete SIPs. Finally, among the four states sampled in the present study, all Title I schoolwide program schools, a policy measure of economic disadvantage, are required to include some aspects of parent, caregiver, family, or community participation or engagement in SIPs.

The school improvement planning process is often wrapped in intersections of economic disadvantage and race/ethnicity. Title I program identification has a direct policy connection to percent economically disadvantaged students, and percent economically disadvantaged students is frequently correlated with percent racial/ethnically minoritized students (Orfield et al., 2012), both of which are often negatively correlated with standardized achievement measures (Dixon-Román et al., 2013; Huntington-Klein & Ackert, 2018; Lee, 2002; Reardon, 2011; Reardon et al., 2014). However, this intersection of economic disadvantage and racial and ethnic minoritization and segregation is often correlated with longstanding structural inequities in communities (Orfield et al., 2012) that schools may or may not seek to address as a part of the school improvement planning processes. Due to the complexity of the interactions among demographics, achievement, accountability policy, and school improvement planning, we view the analysis in the present study as exploratory but necessary for gaining an initial understanding of the connection between improvement planning and the context of schooling.

Findings

Perceptions of the School Improvement Plan Focus Rubric by Practitioners

As noted earlier, we wanted to understand how educational practitioners responded to the specific aspects of the rubric along with their general perception of the SIP focus levels. With regards to the SIP components listed on the rubric's left side, there was considerable agreement that the components captured the current parts of their SIPs, although different templates may present components differently (e.g., for a single goal, SIPs may provide data, analysis, strategies, and an accompanying evidence base). There was also wide agreement that the SIP Focus Rubric was considerably more detailed in its descriptions than any current SIP template these practitioners had previously been exposed to—and that the focus levels were a unique feature. There was some debate and confusion about the organization of the SIP focus levels. Students were accustomed to reading rubrics as rankings from left to right (lower score to higher score), leading them to assume that *Student Focused* was the most desirable type of SIP.

When students were informed that the focus levels were alphabetized, there was additional debate about which SIP focus level was the most desirable for their schools. This point led to additional debate about whether the rubric should be used to "grade" SIPs or if it was a "tool that could be used to write SIPs." Several students suggested that the rubric could be used for

both purposes. Regarding what students found challenging, most reported that their schools did not have the capacity (e.g., time, financial, and/or technical resources) to execute many of the aspects of the *Critical Community, Organization,* and *Student Focused* SIP focus levels, even if they aspired to do that work. Finally, these practitioners thought it would be valuable to be able to work at different focus levels for different SIP components to create a document that would be useful for meeting their individual schools' needs.

Usability and Interrater Reliability of the School Improvement Plan Focus Rubric

While we hope the SIP Focus Rubric is useful for practitioners as both a SIP assessment and design tool, we also hope it may be a useful research tool. To examine this type of usability, we had five separate raters assess a randomly assigned subset of the 65 SIPs that were initially examined by Rater 1.

A broad comparison of Rater 1 and Raters 2–5, collectively, shows that for the Data Sources and Data Use and Analysis components, there was some disagreement between the *Student Focused* and *Organization Focused* levels. However, the profiles of Rater 1 and Raters 2–5 were more comparable for the Improvement Goals component, and differed in the *Compliance* and *Organization Focused* ratings for the Improvement Planning and Strategies component, with Rater 1 scoring this component as being *Organization Focused* rather than *Compliance Focused*. There was broad agreement among all raters, though, that the Research Use component was dominantly *Compliance Focused* across the SIPs in this study.

An examination of kappa values and percent agreement shows that Rater 5 had generally high interrater reliability with Rater 1. Raters 3 and 4 had marginal agreement with Rater 1, and Rater 2 had little agreement with Rater 1 (see Table 4). Although we broadly consider this initial work with the rubric to be exploratory, we were surprised by these findings. The rater with no K–12 practitioner or scholarly experience—Rater 5—had ratings that were most closely aligned with Rater 1, and the two raters with similar professional experience to Rater 1—Raters 2 and 3—had ratings that were least closely aligned with Rater 1.

However, because they have experience in K–12 school leadership, Raters 2 and 3 also provided qualitative comments clarifying how they arrived at their ratings when they had difficulty arriving at a final rating. Raters 2 and 3 typically assigned a lower rating if part of a SIP component was listed, but not contextualized or connected with evidence. For example, Rater 2 assigned a *Student Focused* rating for the Improvement Goals component if a school listed organizational goals but did not connect them to any current

Table 4. Agreement of SIP Ratings by Component Between Rater 1 and Raters 2 Through 5

	Data Sources		Data Use		Improvement Goals		Improvement Strategies		Research Use	
	κ	% Agree	κ	% Agree	κ	% Agree	κ	% Agree	κ	% Agree
Rater 2 (*n* = 28)	-0.06	21.43	0.11	35.71	0.00	25.00	0.02	14.29	-0.03	78.57
Rater 3 (*n* = 12)	0.12	58.33	-0.14	25.00	0.21*	33.33	0.09	33.33	1.00***	100.00
Rater 4 (*n* = 45)	0.19*	55.56	0.09	42.22	0.19*	48.89	0.05	34.09	0.66***	97.78
Rater 5 (n = 27)	0.80***	88.89	0.67***	81.48	0.51***	70.37	0.70***	81.48	0.74***	96.30

Note. Crosstabs were constructed where comparisons were to the main rater. Numerical values were assigned to focus areas where Compliance Focused = 0, Student Focused = 1, Organization Focused = 2, and Critical Community Focused = 3. Therefore, positive kappa values indicate that the main rater scored an SIP with a "higher" focus category compared to the alternative rater.

or future indicator, measure, or improvement strategy. Similarly, Rater 3 assigned a rating of *Compliance* for the Improvement Planning and Strategies component, even if there were action steps for teachers or other staff—such as professional development—if the SIP only included ELA and mathematics in their Improvement Goals and Data Sources components. This approach to rating indicates that the two raters with K–12 experience were examining SIPs through a coherence lens and looking for connections across components. This finding can be contrasted with Raters 4 and 5 who were largely unable to use a coherence lens because they did not have enough K–12 experience to identify if or how SIP components should connect to one another. Rater 1 also rated each component independently because she had piloted the rubric with the group of graduate student educational practitioners described above who viewed their own SIPs as having components that should be rated at different focus levels compared to other components within the same SIP.

The findings presented in the next sections are connected to our first research question, which focuses on the usability of the SIP Focus Rubric as a tool for assessing SIPs. The remainder of the findings are focused on identifying social justice and equity orientations in SIPs and are connected to our second research question. The latter findings are connected only to Rater 1's ratings, however, because she was the only rater who independently scored all 65 SIPs.

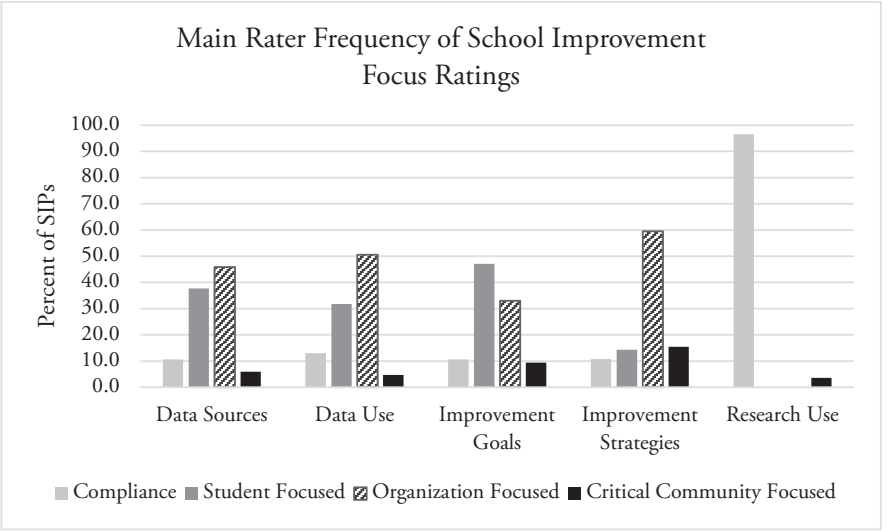
SIP Focus Levels

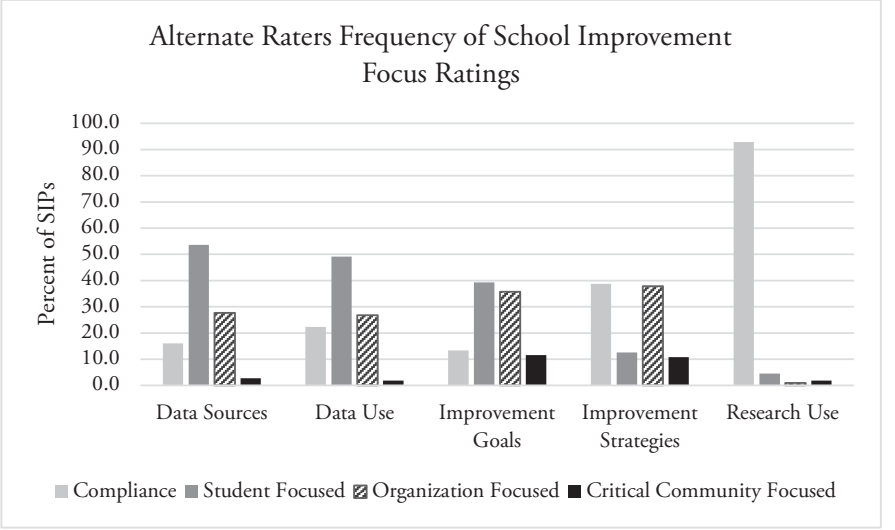
The majority of SIPs reviewed by Rater 1 were rated as being either *Student Focused* or *Organization Focused* across the components of Data Sources, Data Use and Analysis, Improvement Goals, and Improvement Planning and Strategies (see Figure 1). The majority of schools referenced and utilized data beyond what are included in state data management systems. These internal data sources were diverse and included local and nationally normed academic benchmark assessments, student behavioral data, student perception data, teacher work behavioral data (e.g., PLC meeting minutes, lesson plans, teacher attendance). These data were used to create and evaluate progress towards both student-oriented and organization-oriented goals.

Few SIP components (see Figure 1) could be classified as *Critical Community Focused*, and no single SIP examined had a *Critical Community Focused* rating across all components. While some SIPs referenced some aspects of community relationships—such as using culturally relevant practices, providing for family and caregiver input through school or parent advisory committees, or partnering with businesses and organizations to provide resources for the school or families—there was little evidence that these interactions had an influence on the goals or improvement strategies cited in the SIP. Only 14.0% of schools

had a parent/caregiver represented on their SIP development teams, and only 55.4% of SIPs cited collecting or using any parent/caregiver/community perception data. The overall finding is that family and community involvement in school improvement planning is limited to one-way data collection rather than a two-way engagement model where co-creation of knowledge between schools and their communities is prioritized (Ishimaru, 2020; Weiss et al., 2013).

Figure 1. Frequency of School Improvement Plan Critical Data Use and School Improvement Planning Rubric Ratings



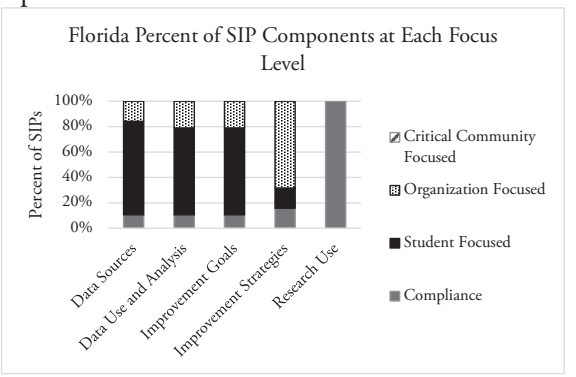


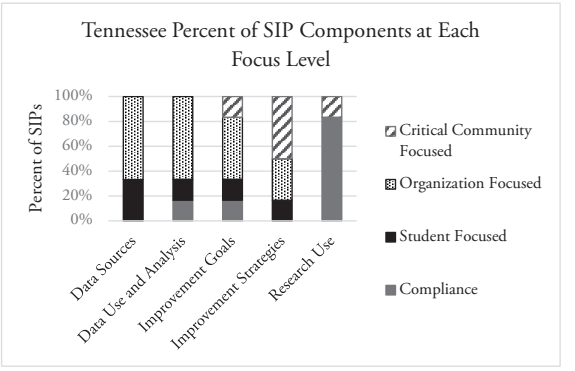
Differences in SIPs Between States

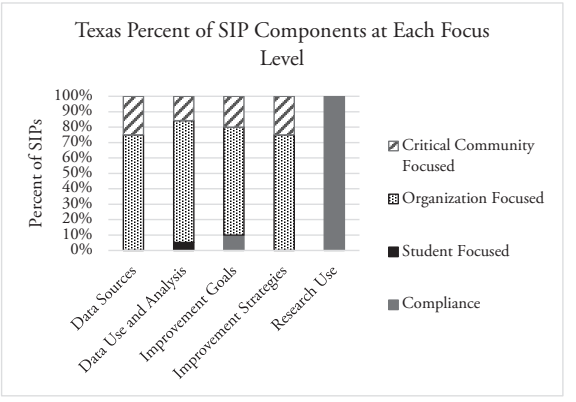
ESSA increased states' abilities to create more flexible accountability policies, and the four states examined in this study had key differences in their SIP templates, including no statewide template at all in Texas. We found that there are also differences in focus levels for SIP components (see Figure 2). Texas SIPs had approximately 20% of all components except Research Use rated as being *Critical Community Focused*, but only one of the 20 Texas SIPs had coherence, with all components except Research Use being rated as *Critical Community Focused*. Tennessee SIPs had the largest percent of Improvement Planning and Strategies (50%) that were rated as *Critical Community Focused*. SIPs from these two states differ from Florida SIPs, which had no components that were rated as *Critical Community Focused*.

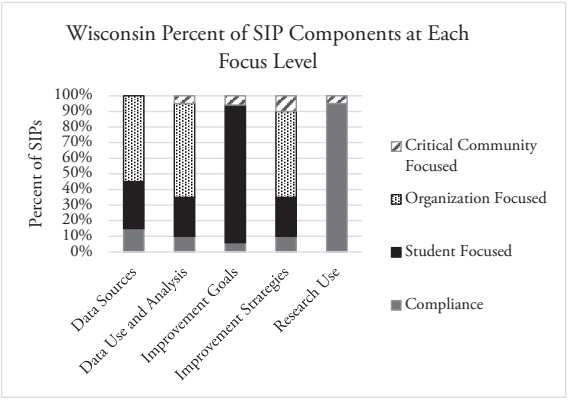
Texas, Tennessee, and Wisconsin SIPs had similar percentages of schools that used an *Organization Focused* approach to Data Sources and Data Use and Analysis, and Florida, Texas, and Wisconsin had similar percentages of SIPs that used an *Organization Focused* approach to School Improvement Planning and Strategies. A contrast between the Florida SIPs and the SIPs from the other three states, though, is that Florida schools tended to connect *Organization Focused* strategies to *Student Focused* Data Sources, Data Use and Analysis, and Improvement Goals (see Figure 2). Another key contrast was between Wisconsin SIPs and SIPs from the other three states in that nearly all Wisconsin SIPs have Improvement Goals that are *Student Focused*, but, in many cases, leverage organizational data and strategies to work towards those goals.

Figure 2. State Comparison of Percent of Components at Each School Improvement Plan Focus Level



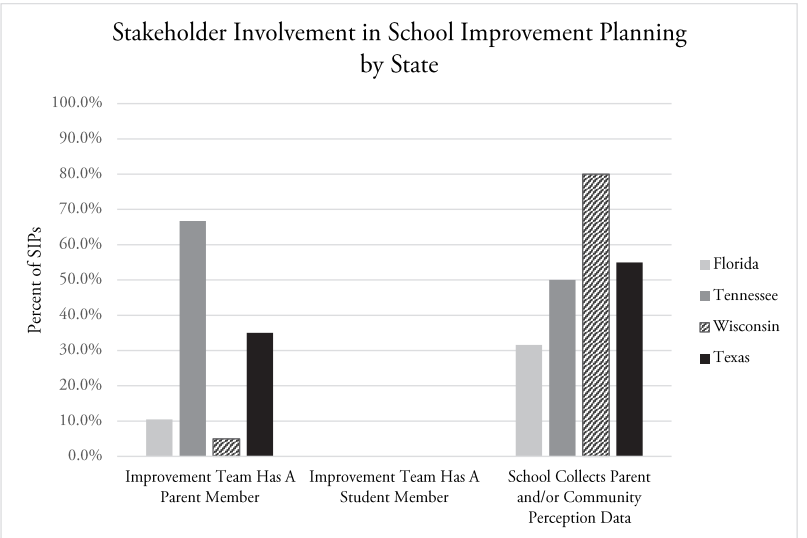






Family and student stakeholder involvement also differed between states (see Figure 3). Tennessee SIPs had the highest percentage (66.7%) indicating that at least one parent/caregiver was part of the school improvement planning team, but the Tennessee SIP template required schools to indicate how they are engaging families/caregivers in the improvement planning process. Unlike Tennessee, though, Florida does not require parent/caregiver participation in the school improvement planning process, and Florida had the lowest percentage (10.5%) of SIPs indicating parent/caregiver involvement. Across the states where there was parent/caregiver participation in the school improvement planning process, the parent/caregiver was directly serving on the school improvement planning committee. Some schools, however, engaged families through a family and community engagement liaison employed by the school. No SIPs from any state, though, indicated that students served on school improvement planning committees. Wisconsin had the highest percentage of schools (80.0%) that reported collecting and using family and/or community perception data, but this high percentage was primarily driven by a survey administered to all schools within the Madison Metropolitan School District; this finding is not surprising given that Wisconsin does not have a statewide SIP process and that local school districts are responsible for creating and implementing SIPs. As was the case with parent/caregiver participation in the school improvement planning process, Florida also had the lowest percent of schools (31.6%) that collected parent/caregiver or community perception data.

Figure 3. State Comparison of Stakeholder Involvement in School Improvement Planning Process



Relationship of SIP Focus Level to School Demographic Factors

In our document reviews, we learned that Florida's statewide SIP template and Wisconsin school district templates connected parent, family, and community engagement activities to school Title I status. In addition, Texas only required schools rated as "unacceptable" (i.e., lowest state accountability rating) or those that receive Title I schoolwide grants to complete annual SIPs. The U.S. federal Title I program is part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, of which ESSA is the most recent iteration, and Title I funds are provided to schools to support students identified as "economically disadvantaged." Due to this connection and the long-documented relationship between school accountability "failures" and enrollment of racially minoritized students discussed previously, we sought to examine if SIP focus level in the *School Improvement Planning and Strategies* component was related to percent enrollment of students identified as economically disadvantaged and percent enrollment of American Indian/Indigenous, African American/Black, Asian, Hispanic non-White, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and multiracial students.

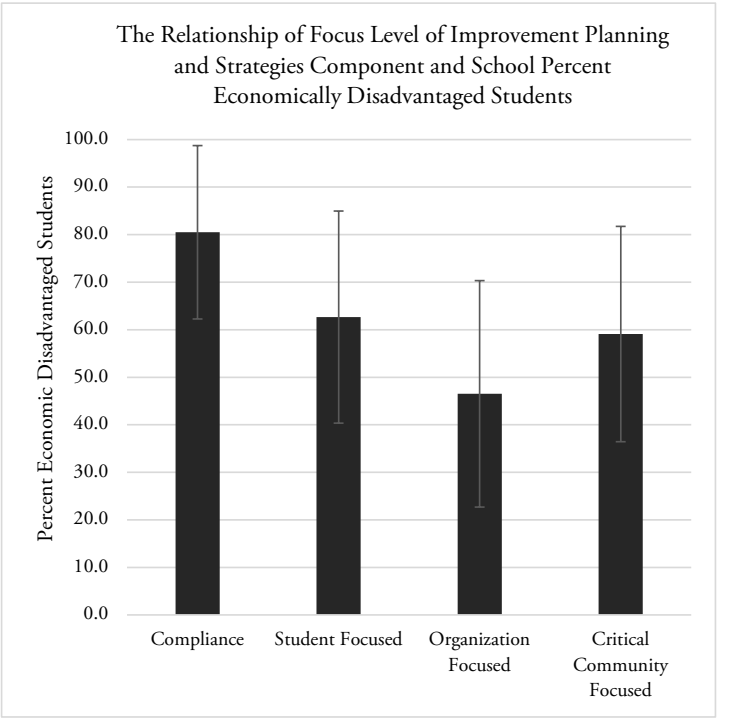
Prior to this examination, we explored the relationship of percent enrollment of economically disadvantaged students and percent enrollment of racial/ethnic student groups to overall accountability ratings (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics). We felt this exploration was important for two reasons. First, accountability ratings are often related to school demographics, with schools with lower accountability ratings often serving higher percentages of economically disadvantaged and/or racially/ethnically minoritized students and families. Second, in states like Texas, only schools with the lowest accountability ratings are required to complete SIPs. For this sample of schools, percent enrollment of economically disadvantaged students ($B = -0.34$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.20$) significantly related to school accountability rating, where schools that served a higher percent of economically disadvantaged students had lower accountability ratings.

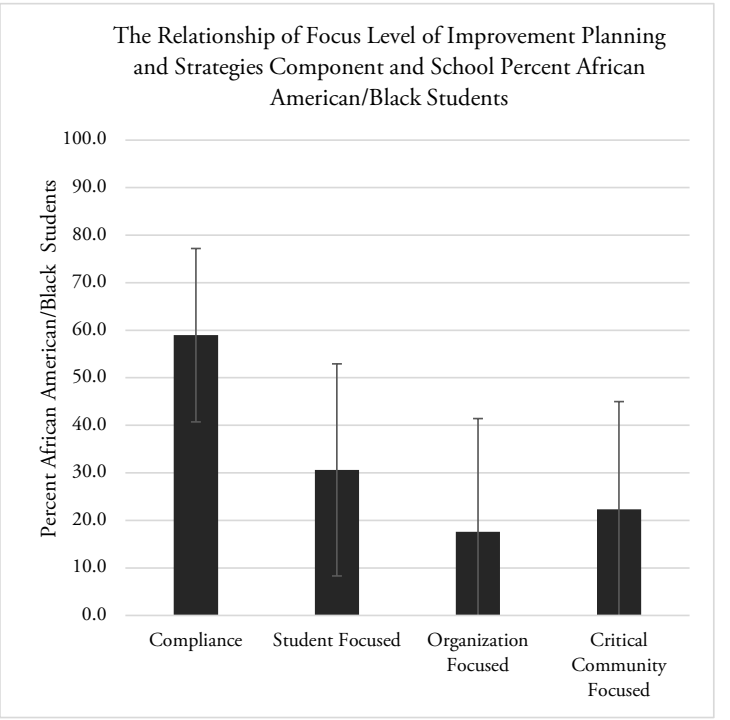
A multiple regression examination of the relationship of percent student enrollment by race/ethnicity found it to be a significant predictor of accountability rating ($F(3, 61) = 9.78$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.54$). Percent African American/Black student enrollment, though, was the only non-White race/ethnicity that was significantly related to accountability rating when compared to White student enrollment. Schools with higher percent enrollment of African American/Black students had significantly lower accountability ratings ($B = -0.53$, $p < .001$). Thus, this sample of schools is representative of historical trends that demonstrate the link between accountability scores and levels of community economic disadvantage and racial/ethnic minoritization.

Due to the policy relationship of Title I funding and the requirement for parent/caregiver involvement in the school improvement planning process, we hypothesized that a SIP's improvement strategies would be more likely to be *Critical Community Focused* if a school served a higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students. We conducted ANOVA tests to examine whether mean percent enrollment of economically disadvantaged students differed between the Improvement Planning and Strategies SIP component and SIP focus levels (e.g., *Compliance*). ANOVA results demonstrate a significant relationship between Improvement and Planning Strategies SIP component and percent enrollment of economically disadvantaged students ($F(3, 61) = 4.18$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .17$, observed power = 0.83). However, in contrast to the relationship we hypothesized that *Critical Community Focused* improvement strategies would correspond to schools with higher percent enrollment of economically disadvantaged students, we found the opposite relationship. Schools with more economically disadvantaged students were significantly more likely to have *Compliance Focused* improvement planning and strategies compared to *Organization Focused* (Mean Difference = 33.99, $p < .05$; see Figure 4).

Race/ethnicity is often linked to socioeconomic status due to structural economic oppression in communities of color (Dixon-Román et al., 2013; Huntington-Klein & Ackert, 2018; Lee, 2002; Reardon, 2011; Reardon et al., 2014), and Title I funding—which is tied to general SIP mandates and specific SIP components—is connected to school percent enrollment of economically disadvantaged students. Therefore, we also thought it was important to determine if there was a connection between the focus level of the Improvement Planning and Strategies SIP component and percent enrollment of students by race/ethnicity. A series of ANOVA tests were conducted to determine if the percent enrollment of students by race/ethnicity (see Table 3 for descriptive statistics) differed by focus level of Improvement Planning and Strategies. The only racial/ethnic student group that significantly differed between focus levels was percent African American/Black students ($F(3, 61) = 6.41$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .24$, observed power = 0.96). Schools with *Compliance Focused* ratings of their Improvement Planning and Strategies enrolled significantly higher percentages of African American/Black students compared to schools with *Organization Focused* (Mean Difference = 41.36, $p < .001$) or *Critical Community Focused* (Mean Difference = 36.62, $p < .01$) ratings (see Figure 4). No other race/ethnic group enrollment percentage had a relationship to focus level of the Improvement Planning and Strategies SIP component.

Figure 4. The Relationship of Mean School Percent African American/Black Students and Percent Enrollment of Economically Disadvantaged to School Improvement Planning and Strategies Focus Level





These results suggest the following: schools serving communities that are economically oppressed and/or African American/Black communities are more likely to have lower accountability ratings and use compliance-driven improvement strategies. As we discuss in the next section, the nuance of this argument and intersections of these specific sociocultural and political factors are critical areas for future study, but the initial characterization of these relationships aligns with the historical context of race, economic oppression, and the effects of accountability policies (see Vasquez-Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Vasquez-Heilig et al., 2014).

Discussion

School improvement planning and data-use have become widely accepted and ubiquitous features of schooling in the modern accountability policy era, especially in the U.S. There is, however, emerging recognition that being "data-driven" and overly focused on narrow measures of school success (e.g., standardized test scores) can contribute to and reinforce deficit views of nondominant communities (Vasquez-Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Vasquez-Heilig et al., 2014). Moreover, there have been ever-increasing calls for reimagining the role of family and community in schooling, specifically increasing family *engagement* (i.e., authentic partnerships) in schools and setting aside traditional family *involvement* models that maintain status quo power dynamics and also contribute to deficit views of nondominant communities (Ishimaru, 2020). The presence of blind spots in either of these common features of schooling—school improvement and data use and then family and community engagement—can lead to similar outcomes. At best, nondominant communities may be undervalued and their assets for schooling untapped, and, at worst, they are blamed for school and student failure (Ishimaru, 2020; Watson & Bogotch, 2015). Still, it is quite rare to see school improvement and family and community engagement discussed in the same empirical or conceptual work; in fact, these topics are siloed within separate areas in the educational research space (see Ishimaru, 2020).

In the present study, we sought to bring together the fields of school improvement and family and community engagement. We explicate the family–school–community–policy improvement connection through a rubric that can be used to assess the focus level of SIP components most frequently required by accountability policies. Scholarly work has repeatedly demonstrated the power of deep family–school–community engagement—not merely tangential involvement—that addresses historical opportunity gaps and education debts, particularly for bicultural families and children (Arriaza, 2004; Khalifa,

2012; Olivos, 2006). In fact, co-creation of knowledge between schools and communities may even be considered an imperative for school improvement. Our findings in the present study, however, demonstrate that families, caregivers, and community stakeholders are still viewed as subaltern voices in school improvement efforts. This study sought to understand the scope of this othering of community as separate from school in the improvement planning process and to provide a tool for coupling school improvement and family–school–community engagement. Our findings further highlight a need for work that seeks to return school improvement to serving communities.

The present study also echoes previous empirical work that shows schools' improvement planning efforts are closely connected to accountability policies (Mintrop & MacLellan, 2002; Mintrop et al., 2001; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017). Where states provide SIP templates that emphasize or require schools to include families and/or community members in their improvement planning activities (e.g., Tennessee's SIP template), schools are more likely to include these stakeholders and also have a stronger community focus in their improvement strategies.

We also find that significant equity blind spots remain in school improvement planning activities and in the SIPs themselves. Even when state or school district SIP templates require community engagement activities for schools receiving Title I funding (i.e., funding tied to percent enrollment of economically disadvantaged students), schools with the highest percentage of economically disadvantaged students—on the whole—were more likely to have a *Compliance* focus to their improvement strategies rather than a *Critical Community* focus.

We found a similar relationship between SIP focus level and percent enrollment of African American/Black students. Scholars have demonstrated that African American/Black families and caregivers often have diminished relationships with their children's schools that are related to families' and caregivers' failure to comply with normative stances of participation rooted in support for and deference to schools (e.g., Lareau & Horvat, 1999). The intersection of race and socioeconomic class, however, influences the ways that African American/Black families interact with schools as well; middle- and upper-class African American/Black families can leverage their social and cultural capital to interact with schools in ways that working-class African American/Black families cannot (Diamond & Gomez, 2004). Our study affirms that access to critical decision-making processes like school improvement planning continues to be connected to socioeconomic class and race. This finding is troubling and needs further investigation because it suggests that even state and federal accountability policy pressure might not overcome the barriers between schools whose faculty and staff continue to be predominantly White and

middle class and the economically oppressed communities that they may serve (Olivos, 2006; Weiss et al., 2013).

Implications, Limitations, and Next Steps

Although accountability policies in the U.S. have evolved from the state flexibility of IASA and Goals 2000 to the height of federal prescription under NCLB and ARRA to the return of state flexibility in ESSA, school improvement planning activities remain intimately connected to these policies' requirements. Although the return of more localized accountability flexibility under ESSA was in part premised on addressing NCLB's social justice failures, including NCLB's failure to adequately address opportunity gaps for marginalized and minoritized students and communities (Hursh, 2007), state ESSA plans remain problematically race-neutral (Diem & Welton, 2020). The perpetuation of race-neutrality and community disengagement in state ESSA plans has implications for SIPs due to a tight linkage between accountability policies and school improvement planning. Where ELA and mathematics scores are promoted by policy, ELA and mathematics scores remain a focus of SIPs; where states emphasize family and community engagement as a vital component of school improvement, SIPs include plans for engaging families and communities. Thus, the present study has implications for state- and district-level policymakers; if policymakers believe that schools should serve communities and that families and communities should have an active voice in determining the purpose and goals of schools and how those goals and purposes are best achieved, then data dashboards and SIP templates and guidance should center these voices.

However, we also suggest that there is potential for a school-based movement towards critical community-based school improvement. In fact, engaging with families and community stakeholders, shifting away from deficit views of children and families, and creating structures for collaboration around data and improvement have all been linked to closing gaps in student outcomes (e.g., Leithwood, 2010). Although schools may seem to be limited by SIP templates and requirements that are external to their organizations, educational leaders can choose to use the SIP Focus Rubric to engage in school improvement planning that goes beyond external requirements. Educational leaders who choose this path can also choose to engage in practitioner scholarship and policy advocacy by reporting their experiences with efforts beyond external requirements. In these ways, we see potential to partially decouple—if not wholly reclaim—school improvement efforts from external accountability policy requirements and return those efforts to serving school communities.

Yet significant work remains to be done that should more fully characterize this phenomenon and demonstrate the potential for critical community-based school improvement. At this time, we have only preliminary findings from SIPs from four states. We plan to continue this work, reviewing additional SIPs from other states. Adding cases to this study would also allow us to examine more relationships between school context and SIPs. Additionally, as we and hopefully others proceed to reviewing additional SIPs, it is also critical to consider the nuanced differences between community *engagement* and *involvement* as these conversations continue in the literature (Ishimaru, 2020; see also Ferlazzo, 2011).

Finally, we also recognize the need to determine the validity and reliability—including interrater reliability—of assessing SIPs using the SIP Focus Rubric. If we are suggesting that school, district, and state leaders use the rubric to create shifts in their school improvement planning approaches, we should continue to describe and critique the process of how researchers use the rubric. Although there is important work that needs to be done, we believe that reclaiming school improvement for families and communities is a worthwhile endeavor that can benefit *all* students.

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Meredith Wronowski is an assistant professor in the educational administration department at the University of Dayton. Her research interests focus on issues of equity, including the unintended effects of accountability policies on teachers/leaders, opportunity to learn, community-based school improvement, and resegregation of U.S. schools. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. Meredith Wronowski, University of Dayton, Educational Administration Department, 300 College Park Ave., Fitz Hall Room 665H, Dayton, OH 45469 or email mwronowski1@udayton.edu

Bryan A. VanGronigen is assistant professor of education specializing in educational leadership in the School of Education at the University of Delaware. His overarching research focus is on organizational resilience and change management in K–12 schools with specific interest areas in school improvement efforts, the preparation of educational leaders, and education policy analyses. Before completing doctoral studies, Bryan was a K–12 teacher, department chair, and school leadership team member.

Wesley Henry is an assistant professor of educational leadership and policy at Central Connecticut State University. Wesley began as a public high school teacher in the School District of Philadelphia and previously served as an assistant professor of educational administration and leadership at California State University Monterey Bay on the founding faculty for the principal preparation program. Wesley's research interests are rooted in better understanding educator preparation, the role professional learning can play in setting organizational dynamics within educational settings, and the role of school and community leaders in equity-focused school improvement and community development.

James L. Olive is a clinical associate professor in the University of Dayton's EdD in Leadership for Organizations Program. Dr. Olive's research foci include LGBT issues in education, exploring the ways in which social class, gender, race, sexuality, and ability shape the human experience (intersectionality), the intellectual and identity development of students, educational leadership, and educator trauma.

Appendix. School Improvement Planning Focus Rubric

Component	Compliance	Student Focused	Organization Focused	Critical Community Focused
Data Sources	Data sources are limited to accountability assessments and student subgroup demographic information defined by an external source (i.e., state or federal agency).	Data sources may include data beyond state mandated assessments; however, data sources are centered at the student level (e.g., student demographic information, student state assessments, student behavior data, local student assessments, student perceptions).	Data sources include data related to a range of organizational characteristics of the school or local educational agency (e.g., student data, teacher data including demographic and professional characteristics and/or teacher perception data, organizational structure, and process data).	Data sources include data emerging from and related to the broader community sociocultural and historical context (e.g., data that can be used to understand shifts in community demographics data, community perception data, community engagement data, community asset data, community needs data).
Data Use and Analysis	Data is not disaggregated by student subgroups. Analysis is limited to a single year of data with little or no consideration of historical trends in data. Analysis is conducted only on externally collected achievement data (achievement data collected as part of state/federal accountability). Analysis is used to identify student academic achievement goals for the entire student population.	Data is disaggregated by student subgroups (e.g., student race/ethnicity, economic characteristics, special needs classifications). Analysis may be limited to a single year of data with little or no consideration of historical trends in data. Analysis is conducted on a variety of student data sources (e.g., student demographic information, student state assessments, student behavior data, local student assessments, student perceptions). Analysis is used to identify student goals for a range of outcomes (e.g., academic proficiency and/or growth, attendance, behavior and/or social–emotional indicators, student perceptions).	Data in a variety of organizational areas is disaggregated by student subgroups, teacher subgroups, and/or other organizational subgroups (grade levels, departments, services). Analysis may be limited to a single year of data with little or no consideration of historical trends in data. Analysis may be conducted on a variety of school or local educational agency data sources (e.g., student data, teacher data including demographic and professional characteristics and/or teacher perception data, organizational structure and process data). Analysis is used to identify goals for a range of organizational members including students, teachers, service providers, and organizational structures and processes.	Data in a variety of organizational and community-focused areas is disaggregated by student subgroups, teacher subgroups, organizational subgroups. Analysis has a consideration of historical trends in data. Analysis may be conducted on a variety of school, local educational agency data, and community data (e.g., data that can be used to understand shifts in community demographics, community perception data, community engagement data, community asset data, community needs data). Analysis is used to identify goals for a range of organizational members including students, teachers, service providers, organizational structures and processes, and community needs and community engagement.

Appendix, Continued

Improvement Goals	Improvement goals address academic indicators required or emphasized by an external source (i.e., state or federal agency). The selection of goals is decontextualized with little to no explanation for selection of goals.	Improvement goals address a range of student indicators that may be established by external sources (i.e., state or federal agency) or internal organizational goals. However, goals focus on a range of student outcomes (e.g., academic proficiency and/or growth, attendance, behavior and/or social–emotional indicators, student perceptions). The selection of goals is contextualized with explanations of goal selections clearly articulated and grounded in student context and history.	Improvement goals address a range of organizational characteristics of the school or local educational agency (e.g., student goals, teacher goals including teacher quality and development, and/or organizational structure and process goals). The selection of goals is contextualized with explanations of goal selections clearly articulated and grounded in organizational context and history.	Improvement goals address a range of organizational characteristics and community needs and engagement. Goals are equity focused and address opportunity gaps identified through critical data use practices and community engagement processes and structures. The selection of goals is contextualized with explanations of goal selections clearly articulated and grounded in the community context and history.
Improvement Planning and Strategies	There is evidence that the improvement planning process was limited to organizational faculty, staff, and administration. Improvement strategies are limited to general curriculum and instruction practices with little to no emphasis on diverse needs of student subgroups or individual students.	There is evidence that the improvement planning process includes a student voice component (e.g., inclusion of students, student groups, student advocates). Improvement strategies are diverse and connected to a range of student outcomes (e.g., academic proficiency and/or growth, attendance, behavior and/or social–emotional indicators, student perceptions). Improvement strategies are differentiated for student subgroups or individual students.	There is evidence that the improvement planning process includes members from across the organization (faculty, staff, administration, service providers, students). Improvement strategies are diverse and connected to a range of organizational outcomes (e.g., student goals, teacher goals including teacher quality and development, and/or organizational structure and process goals). Improvement strategies are differentiated for student subgroups or individual students, faculty subgroups, and/ or specific organizational structures or processes.	There is evidence that the improvement planning process includes members from across the organization and community (faculty, staff, administration, service providers, students, families and caregivers, and community-based organizations or partners). There is evidence that members of the improvement planning process were identified with the intention of diversity in community representation. Improvement strategies are diverse and connected to a range of organizational and community outcomes. Improvement strategies are selected and differentiated based on student and community sociocultural and historical contexts.

Appendix, Continued

Research Use	Research may or may not be referenced. Research is limited to curricular and instructional strategies. Research is decontextualized and/or generalized to a program name or title (e.g., RTI, UDL, PLC) with little to no explanation of how the program or research will be implemented in the specific school, district, or community context.	Research is referenced to support improvement strategies. The research basis for improvement strategies draws on research related to multiple domains of student outcomes. The research is contextualized with explanations of the ways in which research-based programs or strategies will be implemented given the student context.	Research is referenced to support improvement strategies. The research basis for improvement strategies draws on research related to multiple domains of organizational outcomes. The research is contextualized with explanations of the ways in which research-based programs or strategies will be implemented given the organizational context.	Research is referenced to support improvement strategies. The research basis for improvement strategies draws on research related to multiple domains of organizational and community outcomes. The research is contextualized with explanations of the ways in which research-based programs or strategies will be implemented given the organizational and community context. The research base includes a cultural competency component.