Redesigning State Policy for Meaningful and Equitable Learning: Lessons from California, Iowa, New Hampshire, and Vermont

By Soung Bae and Elizabeth Leisy Stosich
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About the Authors:

Soung Bae, Ph.D.
Senior Research and Policy Analyst
Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education

Elizabeth Leisy Stosich, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership, Administration, and Policy
Fordham University Graduate School of Education

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# Table of Contents

Study Overview and Background.....................................................................................1

Theoretical Framework..................................................................................................2

Study Design................................................................................................................3

Findings:

   Education Policy in California.................................................................................5

   Education Policy in Iowa...........................................................................................21

   Education Policy in New Hampshire........................................................................33

   Education Policy in Vermont.....................................................................................47

Discussion.....................................................................................................................64

Conclusion.....................................................................................................................70

References.....................................................................................................................72
Study Overview and Background

The literature on American educational policy typically falls into two camps: reports that advocate for particular policies and research that analyzes how policy changes influence instruction and student learning. A third approach, describing and comparing state policies, fails to shed light on how differences in policymaking processes contribute to differences in policy design and its implications for educational improvement. What’s missing from the literature in general is a focus on the ways in which policy makers understand policy problems and how these understandings influence the policymaking process, including the choice of policy instruments and solutions (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987).

The federal government’s Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015) gives states greater responsibility for and flexibility in designing policies to support high levels of student learning than did its predecessor, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2001) (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). It is not yet clear how the majority of states will leverage this increased level of local authority for designing educational policies. Lessons may be drawn, however, from states that took significant steps in redesigning their educational systems prior to the introduction of ESSA.

We conducted a comparative case study (Yin, 2009) of policy reforms in four of these states—California, Iowa, New Hampshire, and Vermont. We aimed to understand how educational policy makers in these states define and frame policy problems; how they conceptualize and design educational policies to address these problems; and how the political and historical context of each state, as well as changes in federal policy, such as the passage of ESSA, shape these decisions. For each of the four states, we examined local issues, problem definition, enabling conditions, implementation challenges, and the role of ESSA on their policymaking process. Our goal in gathering this information was to more deeply understand how differences in the policymaking process influence state policies and the implications for redesigning educational systems to achieve more meaningful and equitable learning opportunities for all children.

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1 See Louis, Thomas, Gordon, and Febey (2008) for an exception to this propensity.
2 McDonnell and Elmore (1987) define policy instruments as “the mechanisms that translate substantive policy goals (e.g., improved student achievement, higher quality entering teachers) into concrete actions” (p. 134). They classify policy instruments into four types: mandates, inducements, capacity-building, and system-changing.
Theoretical Framework

We draw on frame analysis (Goffman, 1974) to understand how education leaders define or frame educational challenges and the implications of the framing process for policy design. As education leaders identify and interpret policy problems, they locate responsibility for these problems and authorize particular responses to them as part of the framing process (Benford & Snow, 2000; Stosich, 2017). Research on the policymaking process suggests that this framing process is informed both by changes in federal policy and the unique political, cultural, and historical environment in each state (Kingdon, 2011; Louis, Thomas, Gordon, & Febey, 2008).

Scholars in education (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2007; Coburn, 2005, 2006; Stosich, 2017; Woulfin, 2015), business (Edmondson, 2003, 2012), and public policy (Schön and Rein, 1995) have used frame analysis to understand and explain how leaders define the challenges they face and how they use frames to influence themselves and other system actors. These actors include both individuals—such as governors, teachers, superintendents—and groups—such as school boards, state legislatures, and unions. Given the shift in federal accountability policy from NCLB to ESSA and, specifically, the increased authority of states under ESSA, state education leaders may use educational policy redesign to redefine the nature of policy problems and, in doing so, their conceptualizations of solutions to these problems. Students take four academic core classes (English, history, math, and science) in a cohort from a team of four teachers who share the same students and act as advisors to those students.
**Study Design**

We conducted a comparative case study (Yin, 2009) of education reform in four states to answer the following questions:

- How do state education leaders define the problems that their education policies were intended to address?
- What policy levers do state education leaders select and implement, and why?
- How do state education leaders describe the influence of ESSA, if any, on their state policy trajectories?

We limited participation in this study to states that were members of the Innovation Lab Network (ILN), a working group of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). States in the network were committed to improving the public education system by implementing student-centered approaches to learning. We selected members of the ILN for this study to learn from states that were proactive in redesigning educational policies to better support student learning.

We further limited participation to states that had both passed legislation related to the state system of accountability and support policy prior to the passage of ESSA and had taken a different approach to policy design.

Within each state, we conducted semi-structured interviews with between nine and 13 education leaders who represented a diverse array of positions and organizations, including state chiefs, deputies, and directors of accountability in state education agencies (SEAs); directors of teachers’ and administrators’ unions; members of state boards of education and school board associations; legislative staff; and others. We used snowball sampling to solicit education leaders’ participation in the study. We began by contacting state chiefs and their deputies in state departments of education via email to request their participation. As participants agreed to take part in the study, we asked them to nominate other leaders whom they thought were knowledgeable about reform and the process by which education policies were designed and passed. We limited additional participants to current and former state education leaders who had intimate knowledge of their states’ education policymaking process. All interviews were conducted between October and December 2016. In addition, we collected and reviewed documents related to state education policies, including formal policy documents, information from state websites regarding legislation, working papers, board meeting minutes, and other relevant documents.

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3 At the time of the study, 12 states were members of the ILN: California, Colorado, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, New Hampshire, Ohio, Oregon, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.
We engaged in thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) to identify patterns in the policy-making processes, including the conditions that supported those processes and the challenges that arose or were anticipated. We developed themes inductively, beginning with descriptions from participants and comparing these descriptions with state documents. Notably, our semi-structured approach to interviewing meant that we asked a set of open questions that allowed each interviewer to explore relevant responses or themes further. Because participants contributed their own ideas to the discussions, any failure to mention a particular event or actor did not imply that the participant disagreed with the importance of this factor in the policymaking process. We conducted a member check (Merriam, 1995) by sharing initial findings with participants from each state to allow for input and to further verify the accuracy of our interpretations.

In this paper, we present four state case studies and then examine the cross-case themes that emerged. In doing so, we describe how policymakers in each state defined a root problem that a policy seeks to address, discussed enabling conditions that allow a policy to take hold and flourish as well as the challenges associated with implementing a policy, and report on the influence of ESSA on the state policies.

TABLE 1. TOTAL STUDY PARTICIPANTS BY STATE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATES</th>
<th>NUMBER OF EDUCATION LEADERS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>9</td>
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</tbody>
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Findings

EDUCATION POLICY IN CALIFORNIA

California is the most populous state in the United States. In the 2015–16 school year, the state had 6,226,737 students enrolled in its public schools (Ed-Data, 2017a). In that school year, the state funded 1,025 school districts, which included approximately 5,858 elementary schools, 1,298 middle schools, 48 junior high schools, and 1,339 high schools (California Department of Education [CDE], 2016). Of the students who attended public schools that year, 53.97% identified as Latino, 24.1% White, 8.85% Asian, 5.81% African American, 2.51% Filipino, and 3.09% as being of two or more races (CDE, 2016). Fully 58.9% of public school students qualified for free and reduced price meals; 22.1% were classified as English language learners (Ed-Data, 2017a). On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exams taken in 2015, 25% of California’s fourth graders and 21% of its eighth graders were proficient in math; 22% of fourth graders and 26% of eighth graders were proficient in reading (CDE, 2017).

Local Control Funding Formula and School Finance History

Modern education reform in California must be understood in the context of a patchwork of legislative choices, voter initiatives, and court decisions that, until 2013, shifted the responsibility of school funding from local governments to the state (Mosbacher, 2013).

Until the early 1970s, California, like most states, financed public education in large part through local property taxes, with supplemental support from both the state’s general fund and federal sources. School districts levied their own property tax rates, which created uneven levels of revenue for local public schools across the state. As a result, large differences in per-pupil funding began to develop and widen (Brunner & Sonstelie, 2006). In 1971, the California Supreme Court ruled in Serrano v. Priest that the state’s school finance system was unconstitutional. Noting that two school districts (e.g., an affluent district such as Beverly Hills and a lower income district such as Baldwin Park) could have the same tax rates, yet raise vastly different amounts for their schools, the Court ordered the state to reduce wealth-related differences in funding to less than $100 per pupil.

In 1976, legislators began equalizing funding across districts by creating revenue limits, that is, caps on total general purpose funding received by school districts. If a district’s revenues from property taxes met or surpassed its revenue limit, the state would not provide supplemental funding; if the district’s property tax revenues fell short of its revenue limit, the state would make up the difference.
Two years later, in 1978, California voters passed Proposition 13, which capped property tax rates at 1% of the property’s value at the time of its acquisition, thus radically lowering the amount of local tax revenue available to schools. The passage of Proposition 13 resulted in an estimated 50% reduction in local revenues for public education (Bersin, Kirst, & Liu, 2008), which shifted the responsibility for financing public education from local governments to the state (Bersin et al., 2008; Brunner & Sonstelie, 2006; Kirst, 2006; Mosbacher, 2013; Weston, 2010).

In 1988, in response to these deep cuts in public education funding, voters passed Proposition 98, which amended California’s constitution to establish a minimum annual funding level for K–14 education (Bersin et al, 2008; Mosbacher, 2013). Proposition 98 revenues, which came from local property taxes and the state’s general fund, accounted for more than 70% of all annual K–12 expenditures (Legislative Analyst’s Office [LAO], 2005). The majority of Proposition 98 funds supported the revenue limits funding category, which paid for basic school operations, and set a base funding limit for each school district. However, adjustments to the base revenue limits over the years resulted in wide variations in the funding amount each district received. For example, it is estimated that in 2010-11, some elementary districts had total revenue limit funding of about $4,750 per pupil, while some high school districts, or “basic-aid districts” had revenue limit funding above $7,600 (Perry, 2012). In these basic-aid districts, local property taxes equaled or exceeded what the districts would have received from their revenue limit funding. Those districts were permitted to keep their excess property taxes and did not receive non-categorical aid from the state (Kirst, 2006).

Proposition 98 also supported state categorical programs that funded a variety of initiatives, such as instructional materials, special education, bilingual education, educational technology, transportation, and teacher professional development, and were accompanied by very specific regulations regarding their use. The state’s categorical programs proliferated throughout the years, ballooning to 124 categorically funded state programs by the school year 2001–02 (CDE, 2002 as cited in Timar, 2004). Timar (2004) asserted that the dramatic expansion of categorical funding could be attributed to several factors:

- Enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 created regulatory compliance that has come to be associated with categorical finance in to guarantee that federal funds went to high-need children.

- Special purpose or categorical funding was not subject to the equalization provisions of Serrano.

4The remainder of K–12 funds (less than 30%) came from federal categorical programs, such as Title 1, and local sources, such as parcel taxes.
• Categorical lobbies relied on continued categorical funding for their continued existence.

• Legislative micromanagement of schools stemmed from legislators’ attempts to target funds toward specific educational needs and protect the funds from going to teachers’ salaries.

As a result, many of the special programs were “favored” by state legislators, and the distribution of funds was often based on historical participation in categorical activities that no longer existed or seemed logical (Perry, 2012). The California Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO) described the state’s K–12 finance system as “deeply flawed” due to the shortcomings of having so many categorical programs with overlapping goals but distinct requirements, which had increased administrative burden and which “over time have become increasingly disconnected from local needs” (Taylor, 2013a, p. 6).

On July 1, 2013, California governor Jerry Brown signed the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) into law, marking a historic shift in the way the state allocates funding to school districts, particularly in the way the state provides support and intervention to school districts that were not meeting their annual goals. The purpose of LCFF was to replace the various streams of funding the state used to fund its schools with a new, simplified funding formula, thereby removing the burdensome spending restrictions and regulations associated with categorical programs. This new law eliminated approximately three-quarters of the categorical programs (e.g., textbooks, tutoring, and training and professional development) and unrestricted or general purpose funds were directed to districts as part of the new funding formula (Taylor, 2013b).

Under the new formula, all California school districts receive the same per-pupil rates adjusted by a uniform set of criteria (Taylor, 2013b) and updated for cost-of-living adjustments. Specifically, districts receive the majority of their funding based on average daily attendance in four grade spans (K–3, 4–6, 7–8, and 9–12), which are targeted to recognize the differential costs of education at lower and higher grade levels. Specifically, LCFF includes funding adjustments to the K–3 and high school base rates to fund class size reduction in the lower grades and provide career technical education in high school.

The new funding formula also includes supplemental funding based on student groups (low-income students, English language learners, and foster youth), generating an additional 20% of the qualifying student’s adjusted grade-span base rate (Taylor, 2013b). LCFF also provides concentration funding to districts whose English language learners and low-income populations exceed 55% of their enrollment. These

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5 All foster youth meet the state’s definition of low income; thus, foster youth are subsumed in the low-income category.
districts receive an additional 50% of the adjusted base grant for each English language learner or low-income student above the 55% threshold (Taylor, 2013b).

LCFF provides an Economic Recovery Target (ERT) as an add-on to approximately 130 districts (Taylor, 2013b). The ERT addresses concerns that LCFF provides some districts with less funding than they would have received under the former school finance system. Thus, the ERT add-on represents the difference between the funding amount from the old system and the amount those districts are projected to receive from LCFF in 2020–21. In total, under LCFF, the majority of school districts receive significant increases in funding, and a “hold harmless” provision mandates that no district receives less state aid than it received in 2012–13.7

Two categorical programs, the Targeted Instructional Improvement Block Grant and the Home-to-School Transportation program, were not eliminated; they are included as add-ons to LCFF (Taylor, 2013b), but only districts that received those funds in 2012–13 would continue to receive them in addition to the funding LCFF provides.

However, LCFF eliminated the vast majority of spending restrictions that were tied to categorical programs.8 In exchange for the removal of spending restrictions that were tied to the categorical finance system, the new funding formula requires school districts to develop and adopt Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs), which specify how spending allocations support the district’s annual goals that are aligned to the state’s eight priority areas.9 Districts are required to use an LCAP template developed by the State Board of Education; within the template, districts must outline the actions they will take to achieve district-wide goals as well as goals for student subgroups.10 Districts must engage in outreach efforts and solicit input from various stakeholder groups in developing and adopting the LCAPs, stakeholders such as teachers, principals, administrators, other school personnel, local bargaining

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6 The 2020–21 year is used because it was predicted that it would take eight years for LCFF to be fully implemented.
7 Approximately 15% of districts do not receive any increases in funding because these districts have high existing per-pupil funding rates: basic aid districts; non-isolated, single school districts; and districts that had abnormally high funding levels due to peculiar categorical rules such as charter-school conversions or meals-for-needy-pupils add-ons.
8 Only a few spending requirements were instituted under LCFF: districts may use supplemental and concentration funds to improve or increase services to its unduplicated pupils in the state or any local priority area; districts must have no more than 24 students in their K–3 classrooms to receive the K–3 base-rate adjustment unless collectively bargained otherwise; districts receiving the Home-To-School Transportation funding as an add-on must spend the same amount that was spent in 2012–13; and districts were required to maintain the same level of funding spent on adult education and regional occupational centers and programs in 2012–13 during the first two years of implementation (2013–14 and 2014–15).
9 California’s eight priority areas, which represent the key ingredients of high-quality educational systems, are: student achievement, student engagement, school climate, basic services, implementation of the state’s academic content and performance standards, course access, parental involvement, and other student outcomes such as college and career readiness.
units of the school district, parents, and pupils. Each school district is required to develop a three-year plan, which must be updated and adopted annually prior to the adoption of its budget plan. Once the budget plans are adopted, the County Offices of Education (COE) are responsible for reviewing and approving the district LCAPs, expanding the oversight role for the COEs. Finally, LCFF establishes a system of support and intervention for school districts that do not meet performance expectations, for students overall and for specific subgroups identified in their LCAPs.

The LCFF legislation has significantly changed the way in which California funds its public schools. The new formula provides more fiscal resources to districts that serve students with the greatest needs. In addition, LCFF affords district officials more autonomy and flexibility with which to allocate funds to meet local needs and improve student outcomes. To ensure that district officials are held accountable for the increased fiscal flexibility and autonomy, LCFF requires that district officials develop and adopt LCAPs documenting the district’s annual goals, the allocation of resources, and the steps that will be taken to realize their goals. With its adoption of LCAPs, LCFF created a more streamlined and transparent system of school finance and accountability. Thus, California’s LCFF policy provides a rich learning opportunity with which to examine a policymaking trajectory centered on school finance reform. This case study examines the evolution of the LCFF policy in California. We detail how state education leaders defined the problem that LCFF was intended to address, the enabling conditions that allowed the LCFF policy to take hold and grow, the challenges involved in implementing LCFF, and next steps for the policy in light of ESSA.

**Problem Definition**

The California state education leaders that we interviewed identified two primary problems that LCFF was intended to address: a broken school finance system and the inequitable distribution of resources. Out of the 13 state education leaders, 12 (92%) framed the problem as a broken finance system. As an example, one leader said:

> Not only did we have an incoherent, irrationally based finance system, but we also had a governance system that most folks felt was, both the categoricals being overly constraining and just driven with a lot of bureaucratic red-tape. . . . It didn’t have an internal coherence to it. It was clearly an amalgamation of things over time.

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10 The performance data tracked in the LCAPs must be disaggregated by the following student subgroups: race/ethnicity, low income, English language learners, students with disabilities, and foster youth. The minimum subgroup size is 30 students, except for foster youth, whose minimum size is lowered to 15 students.

11 Prior to the LCAPs, COEs were responsible for monitoring school districts’ implementation of the Williams Act.
Another leader echoed that sentiment:

There was widespread recognition that the system of categorical supports for different kinds of programs while well-intentioned, and we had many, many, over 40 different kinds of categorical programs in some schools and districts, each one of them was put in place for a reason. But, which is very, very confusing and really prevented a holistic and integrated planning, particularly at the local level. So, LCFF was really born out of wanting to address that situation.

These statements exemplify the notion—which many state education leaders shared—that California’s school finance system was overly regulated and fragmented. The categorical programs required that funds associated with each categorical initiative be spent for specific purposes, which resulted in too many restrictions for how funding dollars could be allocated and limited the school district officials’ ability to engage in integrated and strategic planning.

Twelve California state education leaders (92%) also framed another goal of LCFF as addressing the problem of resource inequities within the system, signaling “that the status quo is indefensible.” As one leader related, LCFF was a way “to pursue the state’s objectives around equity in the sense of providing more resources to those who needed them most . . . because some students require more resources than other students.” Another leader explained that the former school funding system “had no relationship to pupil needs. It was essentially a basic flat grant. The wealthiest districts got as much as the poorest districts.” Another leader recalled that the creation of LCFF was “driven a lot by the equity conversation . . . those were the real discussions that were taking place . . . how you close achievement gaps, how you get the resources needed for all students, that was central to the conversation.”

Notably, 11 out of 13 California state education leaders (85%) framed the problem that LCFF was intended to address as both a broken school finance system and the need to improve resource equity for California’s most vulnerable students. This framing paved the way for leaders to redesign the state’s school finance system through the LCFF legislation. LCFF eliminated three-quarters of the categorical programs along with the spending restrictions associated with the funds, thereby increasing the fiscal flexibility afforded to California’s local education agencies and shifting the responsibility for strategic budgeting and planning from the state back to the local level. Moreover, LCFF attended to equity by ensuring that all school districts received the same per-pupil rates adjusted by a uniform set of criteria that allocated additional funding to districts for educating students with greater needs (e.g., low-income students, English language learners, and foster youth) and with higher concentrations of those student groups.
Enabling Conditions

The overhaul of California’s school finance system by means of the LCFF legislation would not have been possible without support from critical initiatives, events, and political maneuverings that preceded and smoothed the way for its passage. In the case of LCFF, the new funding formula was supported by these enabling conditions:

- Role of research,
- Passage of Proposition 30,
- Invocation of the principle of subsidiarity,
- Engagement of stakeholder groups, and
- Role of accountability.

Role of Research. Eight out of 13 California state education leaders (62%) identified research evidence as having an influential effect on the development of the LCFF policy. In particular, the leaders called out two research reports that primed stakeholders’ readiness for school finance reform: the Getting Down to Facts reports (Loeb, Bryk, & Hanushek, 2008) and the Getting Beyond the Facts report (Bersin et al., 2008). The Getting Down to Facts research project was conducted by scholars from 32 institutions and represented “more than 20 studies designed to provide California’s citizens with comprehensive information about the status of the state’s school finance and governance systems” (“Getting Down to Facts,” n.d.). The Getting Beyond the Facts report is a policy brief that outlined the need for reforming the state’s school finance system and put forth a reform proposal that “would result in a simpler, fairer, and more coherent system of school finance, one that is responsive to student needs and regional costs” (Bersin et al., 2008, p. 16).

For example, a California state education leader commented, “The catalyst was Mike Kirst and Al Bersin and Goodwin Liu’s paper they wrote in the aftermath of the ‘Getting Down to Facts’ reports . . . reports that were unanimous in saying the system just makes no sense.” Another leader further explained, “The empirical data showed that things weren’t working. And, I think that was something that everyone agreed upon. . . . There was an opportunity to try something radically different that had a pretty good research base around it.” From another leader’s perspective, the research provided evidence for the need to direct more resources to the students who needed them the most. She said, “There was a lot of policy research that pointed to those, that our system of funding did not provide sufficient resources to [those who] have the greatest needs. . . . On the research policy end, we had those pieces that compelled.” For these stakeholders, the research evidence that empirically showed
how the finance system was “not working” instigated, as one leader described, “the justification and the development of what ultimately became LCFF.”

**Passage of Proposition 30.** Prior to the time that the LCFF policy was being conceived and negotiated, California schools and school districts had experienced severe budget cuts as a result of the state’s financial crisis triggered by the Great Recession, which began in 2007. Between 2007–08 and 2010–11, the state reduced education spending by $3.6 billion dollars or 10.7% (California Budget Project, 2012, as cited in EdSource, 2012). Funding cuts to education translated into larger class sizes, teacher and staff layoffs, a reduction in the number of instructional days, and fewer summer programs (EdSource, 2012).

In 2012, Governor Brown put forth a tax initiative, Proposition 30, for the November ballot. The measure proposed to raise the state sales tax by one-quarter cent for every dollar for four years and increase the personal income tax for the wealthiest taxpayers (earning more than $250,000 per year) for seven years. The tax increase was projected to provide approximately $6 billion in additional state revenues annually (LAO, 2012). The revenues were positioned to fund K–12 schools, community colleges, and state universities. The measure passed, diverting the need for “trigger cuts,” the governor’s backup budget plan of reducing spending by $6 billion, estimated at $5.4 billion to K–14 education and $500 million to public universities (LAO, 2012).

From the perspectives of the California state education leaders that we interviewed, eight (62%) related that the passage of Proposition 30 had an enabling effect on the development of the LCFF policy. For example, one leader explained:

> Without the passage of Prop. 30 in 2012, I don’t think any of this would’ve been possible. If you think back to the fiscal crisis that we were going through at the time and coming out of the Great Recession into 2010, 20,000–30,000 teachers in the state had been laid off, schools were cutting left and right. School board meetings throughout the state were really just an exercise in budget reduction, because finances were just decreasing. But, then the state was able to pull out of that and Prop. 30 really helped provide a gigantic pressure relief valve in allowing people to be able to breathe and contemplate something other than dealing with emergencies, but dealing with the new and better future.

Similarly, another leader expressed:

> In absence of a funding mechanism to even have any money to try to change the system, it was all talk. Prop 30 was a huge impetus for
being able to do this work. . . . We couldn’t have done any of that work without the funding.

The passage of Proposition 30 restored much needed funding to schools caused by the Great Recession, which gave the legislature and the public the breathing room to tackle the problem of school finance reform.

Invocation of the Principle of Subsidiarity. All of the state education leaders with whom we spoke referred to the notion of “subsidiarity” as another enabling factor that influenced the design and adoption of the LCFF policy. Governor Brown first introduced the principle of subsidiarity in his January 24, 2013, state of the state address.

Subsidiarity is the idea that a central authority should only perform those tasks which cannot be performed at a more immediate or local level. In other words, higher or more remote levels of government, like the state, should render assistance to local school districts, but always respect their primary jurisdiction and the dignity and freedom of teachers and students. My 2013 Budget Summary lays out the case for cutting categorical programs and putting maximum authority and discretion back at the local level—with school boards (“Governor Brown” 2013).

The governor’s choice to invoke the principle of subsidiarity struck a chord with policy makers, educators, and community members. A state education leader explained, “Pointing to the opportunity of having local control, I think the opportunity of local control was so powerful, and that it, at the end of the day, won out.” Another leader said:

Through the LCFF and LCAP, part of what we approved then was: you’ve got local autonomy to decide where you want that money spent . . . that local control is better than federal or state control because the people who were impacted would be the ones making the decisions for themselves.

Another leader said the purpose of LCFF was to “devolve the responsibility for educational decisions to the local level because that’s where the teachers are, and that’s where the interaction had occurred with the students, and have the state step back dramatically from those very prescribed rules and regulations.” The notion of subsidiarity or local control resonated with California state education leaders and helped the LCFF policy succeed.

The success of LCFF stood in stark contrast to the governor’s January 2012 attempt to introduce school finance reform through what he then called a “weighted student
funding formula,” similar to the proposal in the policy brief by Bersin et al. (2008). Like LCFF, the weighted student funding formula would have shifted decision-making from Sacramento to the local districts and would have provided every school district with a base grant per student along with additional funds for low-income and English language learner students, and additional dollars for districts with large concentrations of those students (Fensterwald, 2012). Lawmakers and education groups, however, rejected the plan (Fensterwald, 2012). A state education leader explained:

> 2013 was Governor Brown’s second swing at this kind of public policy. He had proposed something very similar in 2012 that he then described as the “weighted student funding formula.” And the legislature basically blew him off—didn’t do it. So over the fall of 2012, he and his staff did a lot of outreach stakeholder meetings trying to figure out how they could get some traction on it. And so, they came back in early 2013 with this sort of a centerpiece for the budget. They had rebranded it as Local Control Funding Formula.

The rebranding of the weighted student funding formula and the strategic positioning of local control into the title of the new funding formula effectively communicated the notion of subsidiarity that “the locals are in the best place to make the decisions. . . . They’re the best, as situated, to make those decisions,” related a state leader. Another leader echoed, “The odds are better that the locals will get it right, than trying to come up with the one set of rules that applies to nearly 1,100 LEAs [local education agencies] and nearly the same number of charter schools across the state.”

**Stakeholder Engagement.** Eleven out of 13 California state education leaders (85%) identified stakeholder engagement, both with the community and the legislature, as a critical enabling condition for the LCFF policy. For example, one leader recalled as significant, “Those stakeholder sessions: the conversations where you were bringing together administrators, teacher groups, as well as state officials [and] advocates. . . to have very concrete conversations about what this would look like.” Leaders described how the stakeholder engagement sessions allowed the staffs of the governor and the Department of Finance, who were spearheading the reform, to “engage in a listening tour” and give stakeholders opportunities to provide “true feedback.” As a result, the stakeholder engagement sessions were seen as effective because they “helped build a public campaign.” As another leader said, “Because when you bring people—you have conversations with people around something like this, they feel part of the process, and they feel part of the solution when you land in a better place than where you started.”

Also important was the engagement work with legislators and their staff to negotiate the provisions of the LCFF policy and garner support for it. One state education
leader recalled that when the governor presented the new funding formula proposal in January 2013:

There was not unanimous support for his proposal in the first place. There were some members on behalf of the school districts they represented who thought this was great, because their districts were going to end up with significantly more money than they would have otherwise. There were lots of members, particularly in the Republican caucus, but also some significant members of the Democratic caucus, who didn’t like it much at all. Because in their districts, they tend to represent suburban districts, and their districts were going to end up on the short end of the formula.

Because LCFF was designed to redistribute funds based on student needs, large, urban districts that served a large proportion of low-income students, English language learners, or foster youth stood to see a significant increase in their funding levels. In contrast, suburban districts that served fewer high-needs students but had benefitted from the categorical system of funding were likely to see a decrease in their funding levels. To overcome this roadblock, state education leaders worked alongside their legislative colleagues to negotiate and modify the original proposal. From those sessions emerged “adjustments to the base formula and a couple of other provisions that made things a little more beneficial for those suburban school districts,” explained a state education leader. Specifically, the supplemental funding rate was lowered and the threshold that triggered the concentration funding was increased, which allocated more money toward the base funding. In addition, state education leaders and policy makers created an economic recovery target and added it to the funding formula. One leader explained:

[The] economic recovery target made sure that everyone got back to the level of funding they were at. Inflation adjusted prior to the fiscal collapse, prior to all of the cuts. So the combination of those [adjustments to the formula] satisfied folks like Buchanan and some of the others in Steinberg’s\textsuperscript{12} caucus that were objecting.

It is important to note that LCFF did not increase the total amount of funding for public schools; it only redistributed the funds that schools were entitled to pursuant to Proposition 98. Many state education leaders believed that the redistribution of funds through LCFF did not reflect the true cost of educating students and that public education in California remains profoundly underfunded. However, the stakeholder engagement process, specifically the negotiation of the economic recovery

\textsuperscript{12} At the time when LCFF was being designed, Joan Buchanan was Chair of the California State Assembly and Darrell Steinberg was the California Senate President pro Tempore.
target and greater allocation of funds toward the base funding, was critical for gaining consensus on the provisions of the new school finance system as well as garnering state-wide support for it.

**Role of Accountability.** Twelve (92%) of the California state education leaders identified accountability as an enabling condition for the LCFF policy. While LCFF was being designed and negotiated, critics argued that while the policy offered school district officials local control and flexibility to allocate funds to programs and services that best met the needs of their communities, it didn’t require accountability (Fensterwald, 2013). One leader recalled:

> You had both the folks in the civil rights community and advocacy groups and community groups who were really excited about the idea of [LCFF], but were very deeply concerned that there was nothing in there that made sure that this funding would actually result in the students who generate those dollars actually benefiting in any way, shape, or form. . . . They were very excited on one hand, but very hesitant because there was nothing on the accountability side.

California state education leaders were concerned that the LCFF legislation lacked “accountability for the dollars.” Under the categorical system, in contrast, one could trace the dollars to specific programs; people were more comfortable with that and had reservations about the “hands-off approach.” One leader explained:

> We need some accountability for how districts respond to the flexibility. . . . And I said, ‘Okay, currently, districts have to do all of these sort of state and federal reports. Maybe we should attempt to try and consolidate all of those into one planning document that focuses on outcomes. And requires districts to be transparent about how they’re spending the money to meet these outcomes.’ So that was the genesis of the LCAPs.

As many of the state education leaders related, the LCAP was “a strategic planning tool” “to guide how [district officials] are thinking.” For instance, one leader elaborated that the LCAP “is supposed to marry budget decisions with decisions [districts] need to make to further the priorities that the state has identified.” School officials are required to engage parents, educators, and members of the community in the development of the LCAP to provide transparency in how the funds are spent and for what purposes. Moreover, the LCFF statute requires that the LCAP be reviewed and updated annually. Thus, the LCAP serves as a fiscal accountability mechanism for how districts allocate and spend funds.

To ensure school accountability, the California legislature included provisions in the LCFF legislation for the development of an evaluation rubric to allow local educa-
tion agencies and county offices of education to self-evaluate strengths, weaknesses, and areas of improvement, and to identify schools in need of technical assistance (California Education Code 52064.5). Furthermore, the legislation specifies that the rubric reflects a holistic, multidimensional assessment of school and school district performance. A state education leader explained:

So the evaluation rubric was explicitly intended to be a step away from the API [Academic Performance Index]\(^{13}\) and the test score–based measurement of school and district performance. And go toward a system that was intended to look more broadly and hopefully deeply at other things besides just test scores that we value in public education. Equity measures, and things like that.

Moreover, the LCFF statute established a new state agency, the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), tasked with providing direct assistance to struggling schools and school districts as well as brokering assistance for improvement (California Education Code 52074). A state education leader reported, “The legislation was pretty specific . . . [it] specifies the technical assistance and school intervention in the law.” Another leader said, “It’s about support, and capacity building, and investment in human capital, and those kinds of things. That when schools, or districts, or systems are struggling, you help them get better as opposed to punishing them when they’re not successful.” Thus, a new vision of school accountability was born from the negotiations around the new funding formula. As leaders explained, the new school accountability system brings “accountability and continuous improvement together” and roots it in a system of multiple measures rather than reliance on a single test score.

**Implementation Challenges**

As with all policies crafted and legislation passed, the challenge becomes one of implementation. California state education leaders described three main challenges for implementing LCFF: unevenness in capacity (100%), overcoming a compliance mindset (9 out of 13, 69%), and lack of resources or tools (4 out of 13, 31%).

*Unevenness in Capacity.* All of the California state education leaders that we interviewed identified unevenness in capacity as a main challenge to implementing the LCFF policy. The LCFF statute requires each school district to adopt a budget annually and then for local officials to develop a LCAP that details the district’s goals and aligns them with spending allocations and specific activities. However, local officials’ capacity to develop robust, meaningful LCAPs has varied. One leader reflected:

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\(^{13}\) The Academic Performance Index was California’s former school accountability rating system.
We radically underestimated in some ways the capacity that would be required . . . the challenge that we gave to 1,000 school districts in the State of California, of creating a very high-quality, complex, nuanced strategic plan with a high-quality stakeholder engagement process folded in is a very tough challenge.

Another leader elaborated on the challenge of capacity:

Some school districts are better equipped and have been more nimble in responding to it and others have not . . . but it is a continuous improvement model, and the implementation is going to take some time to figure out what they’re doing and not just continuing to do what they’re doing and how we spend our money . . . but rather really look at the needs of the students and how can we be reactive at the local level to meet the needs of the local level.

Moreover, actors throughout the system must learn and take on new roles, which has placed added strain on capacity. For example, the expanded role of the COEs for reviewing and approving local districts’ LCAPs presumes that capacity to engage in that work exists at the county level. One leader reported:

We’ve got some counties that are just high-performing, again, like some districts are high-performing. No matter what we did, they would excel, right? So . . . how do we come up with a model so they can do that peer-to-peer work so they can all get better, knowing some will always be probably better than others. But how can we support them to continue to improve? Because the counties, obviously, are the backbone of the system we put together. So we really need them to perform.

As their statements demonstrate, all of the state education leaders we interviewed recognized that there are variances in capacity throughout the state that have presented challenges to implementation. However, none expressed a doomed outlook. Rather, they acknowledged that those capacity issues existed and they were actively working to ameliorate them (as will be described in the Next Steps section, below).

Overcoming a Compliance Mindset. Nine California state education leaders described overcoming a compliance mindset as a system constraint. One leader observed:

It’s a paradigm shift. . . . Early after LCAP came out, I’d still get calls from school districts and they’d say, “Can we do this with our money?” still looking at it as a categorical fund and/or with specific limitations to it . . . it’s like “Yes, it’s okay to make that decision at the local level, and we’re not going to come after you.”
Another state education leader talked about how working in schools or districts where your job is about “dealing with state policy” has trained people to have a compliance mindset so that they see everything as a “form-filling activity.” One leader predicted, “People want to make sure they are doing everything they need to do. I think getting away from the compliance mindset is one of the bigger overall challenges with being able to successfully implement this [policy].”

**Need for Training and Tools.** Four California state education leaders acknowledged that there was a paucity of training and tools that were available to district officials in regards to developing a high-quality and useful LCAP. One leader described, “The original LCAP template, which the state board was required to develop, was cumbersome, not that helpful, too dense, too long, you name it.” Another leader reflected that the lack of training for local education agencies (LEAs) and the lack of clarity around expectations was a missed opportunity. One leader explained that there had been intentionality behind the lack of clarity. He said:

> A lot of it was purposely left unclear. This was in part because they did not want [district officials] to get too compliance oriented, so if you start defining things too closely about what an LEA has to do then you become very sort of compliant. You move in that direction.

The state education leaders, however, spoke expectantly of the revised LCAP template that was soon to be released and adopted. One leader related:

> There wasn’t a lot of guidance, and so we have this opportunity now with the rubric coming out and with the new template that maybe we have an opportunity to kind of let districts restart in some places. I’m hopeful that that’s going to be good for the system.

**Next Steps and the Impact of ESSA**

Given the challenges that California system actors have experienced in implementing the LCFF policy, it should not come as a surprise that eight of the 13 state education leaders (62%) identified capacity building and nine (69%) called out finalizing the LCFF evaluation rubric and revising the LCAP template as the next steps for the policy. State education leaders, for example, viewed the CCEE as an essential component in building local capacity. One leader said, “We have an investment that’s been made in the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence. . . . We now have the California Collaborative, which is providing state-wide professional learning programs for LEAs around the rubrics and the LCAP process.” Specifically, the state made an initial $10 million investment in the 2013 Budget Act to establish the

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14 At the time of data collection for the study, the revised LCAP template had not yet been adopted. The State Board of Education adopted a revised template at its November 2016 meeting.
CCEE during the same time that the LCFF was being implemented, with an additional $29.6 million investment made in the 2016-2017 Budget Act. Another leader talked about how the California Department of Education (CDE) was working on further implementing the LCFF policy by “creating capacity within the building to support local education agencies.” The CDE will develop statements of model practices and provide exemplars of LCAPs or portions of them.

At the time of our interviews, California state education leaders were eagerly awaiting the release of the revised LCAP template and the completion of the LCFF evaluation rubric. Four of the leaders (31%) indicated that the next steps would be to “see how the accountability framework comes online” and to identify the local performance measures. One leader expressed:

Then the next step . . . is to look at in the rubric design, they’ve got to go in now and figure out, “Okay, what are acceptable levels of performance amongst all of these metrics? And where would we identify as one district as needing assistance?”

In regard to ESSA and its potential effects on the design of the state accountability system, the majority of California state education leaders (9 out of 13, 69%) related that it was too early to tell. As an example, one leader observed, “In my mind the jury is still out on how we’ll, be able to implement ESSA in a way that’s consistent with what we’ve tried to do.” However, the nine leaders asserted that the federal government would not drive the development of California’s state plan. One leader said:

The task is not so much to implement our policy such that it is consistent with ESSA, as it is to once we figure out what we want to do and how to do it, then figure out how to translate that into ESSA requirements.

Similarly, another leader reflected:

The federal government can do what they want to do. We’re going to do what we think is right. We think that we’ve been proven right on this. Repeatedly. Whether it’s Common Core implementation, linking of evaluations, flexibility on field tests for the assessments. It’s time after time. . . There’s still I think a fair amount of policy consensus that California is going to do this the way that we think is best. Then try to make sure we work in what we need to do to work with the ESSA.

In these statements, it is clear that doing “what’s right for California and our students,” as one leader described, is the mantra by which the California state education leaders are working. A year and a half before ESSA came on the scene, the state committed itself to reforming the school finance system along with its school accountability system. The consensus was that California would stay the course.
Iowa is a relatively sparsely populated state with just over 3 million residents (United States Census Bureau, 2016). In the 2015–16 school year 483,451 students were enrolled in PK–12 in Iowa public schools (Iowa Department of Education [IDE], 2016b). There are 336 school districts in the state and most are small. In fact, more than two-thirds of districts serve fewer than 1,000 students (IDE, 2016b). Of the students attending public school in 2015–16, 77% identified as White, 10% Hispanic, 6% African American, 2% Asian, and 4% as being of two or more races. Four percent were identified as English language learners. Twelve percent were identified as special education students, and 42% were eligible for free/reduced price lunch (IDE, 2016b). On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exams taken in 2015, the percentage of Iowa students scoring at or above proficient in mathematics in fourth grade (44%) and eighth grade (37%) was higher than the national public average; the percentage of students scoring at or above proficient in reading in fourth grade (38%) and eighth grade (36%) was not significantly different from the national public average (The Nation’s Report Card, 2015).

Teacher Leadership and Compensation System

In 2013, Division VII of House File 215 (Iowa HF 215; 2013) established the Teacher Leadership and Compensation (TLC) System. This categorical funding created the opportunity for increased teacher compensation and differentiated career pathways, and committed significant funding to support these opportunities, to reach $150 million per year by the time of full implementation in school year 2016–17.

The TLC System was established “[t]o promote continuous improvement in Iowa’s quality teaching workforce and to give Iowa teachers the opportunity for career recognition that reflects the various roles teachers play as education leaders” (Iowa HF 215, 2013, p. 39). Specifically, the legislation is intended to meet five central goals:

• Attract capable new teachers by offering competitive starting salaries and high levels of support for professional learning,
• Retain effective teachers by providing differentiated career pathways,
• Reward accomplished teachers with opportunities for increased leadership that come with additional compensation,
• Increase collaboration among teachers, and
• Improve student achievement by strengthening instruction.
Although participation is voluntary, all school districts in the state of Iowa had applied and had their locally designed TLC plans approved by the Commission on Educator Leadership and Compensation by school year 2016–17 (Iowa Department of Education, 2017a). Within each district, teachers can choose to apply to serve in a teacher leadership role and, if selected, agree to undertake additional leadership responsibilities and receive additional compensation. The legislation allows districts to adopt a career pathways model, an instructional coach model, or a comparable locally designed plan.

Most districts have chosen to design their own plan (Iowa Association of School Boards, 2015). Locally designed TLC plans must meet specific criteria, including: a minimum salary of $33,500 for full-time teachers; increased support for new teachers and, as appropriate, veteran teachers; differentiated, multiple teacher leadership roles with a goal of at least 25% of teachers in a leadership role; a rigorous selection process for both placing and retaining teacher leaders; and professional development facilitated by teachers and aligned with the expectations for professional development adopted by the state board (Iowa HF 215, 2013, pp. 51–52).

**Problem Definition**

According to nine of the 11 Iowa state education leaders we interviewed (82%), the TLC System was designed to address a problem of student achievement. As one leader explained:

> There was a case made, it was probably more political, I’m not sure I agree with it completely, that at one time . . . Iowa’s test scores were the leaders in the nation. It would have been in the early nineties. . . . By the mid, by 2010 or so, 25 years later, we were—in the political phrase of the time—“in the middle of the pack.” So there was some feeling that . . . other states had implemented accountability systems and reform efforts that had resulted in them growing at a faster rate than we were in Iowa.

Another state education leader, who was involved in defining the problem of student achievement using student assessment data, described the process of advancing the problem:

> Part of it, I think, was we relied on this narrative that Iowa once had this great education system that had sort of fallen from greatness and was mediocre now and that we could, by reinvesting in the teaching profession—something that a lot of Iowans really believed in and valued their teachers, that we could reclaim Iowa’s place among the great education systems by building the highest-quality teacher workforce in the country, if not the world. . . . The sort of approach to change was
first create a crisis, so . . . we did a lot of international comparisons, state-to-state comparisons on NAEP results showing where Iowa was in the early ’90s and where Iowa was in 2011. . . . Iowa was the top-performing state and now it’s sort of a “middle-of-the-pack” state.

This statement elucidates how state education leaders used national and international comparisons of student achievement to define the policy problem. In addition, this remark reveals how the problem and solution streams were intertwined from the initial phases of the policymaking process, pairing the problem of stagnating student performance with a call for strengthening the teaching force.

As noted by five education leaders (45%), two reports written by members of the Iowa Department of Education and the Office of the Governor helped to advance the problem of stagnating student achievement in Iowa and the solution of strengthening the teaching force. As an education leader explained:

When Governor [Terry] Branstad was elected back into office, he appointed Director [Jason] Glass as the director of the Department of Education. They began immediately talking about this issue, the fact that Iowa was—in their language—that . . . our students’ test results were declining as it relates to other states. Initially, they created a couple of different reports. One laid out the challenges. One of the things that they proposed as a solution was a very specific teacher leadership system.

That report, *Rising To Greatness: An Imperative for Improving Iowa’s Schools* (2011), focused primarily on defining the problem of stagnating student achievement: “Iowa’s achievement results, across multiple measures, show an alarming slide toward mediocrity” (p. 8). Specifically, the report acknowledged the strong history of education in the state and highlighted how Iowa students’ performance on the NAEP had stagnated while other states’ performance improved, how Iowa ranked below the national average and below many nations on international assessments, and the persistence of achievement gaps across race, poverty, and disability. The report also briefly addressed three general areas of focus for addressing the problem of student achievement: highly effective educators, clear expectations for students, and innovation focused on improving learning.

In response, *One Unshakable Vision: World-class Schools for Iowa* (2011), a report commonly referred to as the education “blueprint,” was released three months later and provided more specific guidance for policy solutions in these three areas. This

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15 In addition to the establishment of the TLC System, policy recommendations that were described in the report and implemented in the state included the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, commonly known as the “Iowa Core,” and the passage of an early literacy initiative.
report described great teachers and principals as the “centerpiece” to improving Iowa’s schools and offered multiple policy strategies, including higher beginning teacher salaries, improved hiring practices, creating teacher leadership roles, a transformed teacher salary system, and a peer-based evaluation system for administrators and teachers.

**Enabling Conditions**

Iowa state education leaders identified six conditions that supported the development and passage of teacher leadership legislation: governor support, research use, prior policies and practices related to teacher leadership, a task force composed of diverse stakeholders, local control, and a sustainable funding model.

*Governor Support.* Ten education leaders described Governor Terry Branstad as a central figure in the policymaking process, including defining the problem of student achievement and the solution of supporting and developing teachers. An Iowa state education leader said, “Our governor really wants to be known as the education governor.” Another leader explained:

Iowa was a top performer on NAEP in the early 1990s. . . . Iowans were very rightly proud of the quality of education in our state. When Governor Branstad, he left office in 1999 . . . and then came back and ran again in 2010. One of the reasons he ran again was to restore Iowa schools to best in the nation and give students a globally competitive education.

Notably, Iowa’s governor is responsible for appointing the director of the Department of Education, and interviews suggest that Governor Branstad selected each of the three directors in place during the course of the development and implementation of the TLC System (starting in 2011), in part, due to their knowledge of and support for teacher policy reform. State education leaders described the governor as supportive of the policymaking process because he made education reform a priority, garnered support for the focus on education reform through the use of—in the words of one leader—the “bully pulpit,” and was open to multiple solutions as diverse stakeholders worked together to identify an agreeable policy solution. After the education “blueprint” was released, a large education reform bill was floated but, according to two education leaders, most elements of the bill did not have any success in the legislature because the “testing-based” and “market-based” reforms, such as school choice through charter schools, were unpopular with Democrats as well as Republicans who supported local control. One education leader called the governor “pragmatic” and described working with him to identify a viable policy solution:

If you wanted to get something passed—and the governor was clear in that he wanted a reform bill to move—we were going to have to take
a different path. Out of that, the thing that got people’s interest was the teacher leadership component. We thought, “Okay, let’s double down on this. It’s something we think we can move.” . . . Part of it was just pure pragmatism. We had a governor who wanted a major ed reform bill passed, and this was something that we thought we could get done.

In this way, the pragmatism of the governor contributed to the focus on and support for teacher leadership as the centerpiece of educational policy reform in Iowa.

**Role of Research.** According to seven education leaders (64%), research, including prominent scholars and reports documenting the success of international educational systems, influenced the policy solutions identified. In July 2011, Governor Branstad and Lieutenant Governor (now Governor) Kim Reynolds held an education summit that brought together education leaders from research, policy, and practice to identify potential solutions for improving Iowa’s schools. The summit informed solutions presented in the education blueprint. One Iowa state education leader described how members of the SEA used research to “guide the conversation,” including research on successful international systems (McKinsey & Company, 2010) and remarked: “I could not believe the difference in the improvement in instruction through those systems. I’m a true believer.” The education leaders described drawing on evidence from both academic research and local districts’ success with teacher leadership to inform the design of the TLC System.

**Prior Policies and Practices.** Although Iowa’s TLC System represented a major transformation for the teaching profession in the state, 10 state education leaders (91%) described how previous policies and district opportunities for teacher leadership had both familiarized the public and developed educator capacity for implementing a teacher leadership system. For example, two leaders described how a previous policy, the Student Achievement and Teacher Quality Act (2001), had brought the idea of teacher leadership into the public’s awareness but was never funded. One leader described the legislation:

> It had a career ladder. It was much more rudimentary than what we eventually passed, but the idea of recognizing teacher leadership and better utilizing it to improve instruction and rewarding teachers financially for doing that work was not a brand-new idea here. . . . But when that act passed in 2001 it never got funded, and it kind of dropped off the face of the Earth.

In addition, state education leaders described learning from what one described as “pockets of excellence”—school districts that had a teacher leadership system in place and had seen some evidence of success with their system. Specifically, some districts had implemented an instructional coaching model or Teacher Advancement
Program (TAP) model and these existing models informed the guidelines for developing teacher leadership plans under HF 215 (2013). In an instructional coaching model, accomplished teachers are released from teaching full- or part-time to coach other teachers in improving their instruction. In a TAP model, teachers can earn additional pay and take on increased responsibilities as a “mentor” or “master” teacher and can also earn performance bonuses based on a combination of classroom observations and contributions to their students’ performance on assessments (Glazerman & Seifullah, 2012; Schacter & Thum, 2005). In the TAP model, mentor and master teachers provide coaching to traditional classroom teachers, or “career” teachers, and master teachers are also responsible for leading professional development for career and mentor teachers.

**Task Force Engaging Diverse Stakeholders.** When a larger education reform bill was unsuccessful, the Iowa Legislature established a Teacher Performance, Compensation, and Career Development Task Force in Senate File 2284 (2012) to develop recommendations for a new teacher compensation system that would address opportunities for differentiated teacher career pathways and increased pay associated with teacher leadership roles. Seven Iowa state education leaders (64%) described the work of the task force as an important part of the policymaking process because it brought together diverse stakeholders to identify an agreeable and pragmatic policy solution. The task force led to two central outcomes for teacher leadership policy in the state: broad stakeholder support and increased local control. One leader said:

> We had a fairly broad and diverse design group that was made up of people that were practitioners, politicians in the legislature on the left and the right, people from the state board, people representing the different associations, people representing business interests and large and small community interests, policy wonks, and department staff. So there’s a really broad group of people, probably about 30 of us that worked on the design committee. We settled on a consensus-based model which was a bold step, so what we said is, “Look, we’re not going to advance anything unless we can . . . all agree to it.” That forced everybody to put aside some of their maybe more ideological partisan views and realize nothing’s emerging from this group unless we can get to complete consensus on it. . . . That was somewhat of a constraint, but I think it also forced us all to be reasonable and pragmatic, and ultimately led to it sailing through the legislature with minimal amendment because we had already modified it to be something that was palatable to both sides.

Similarly, another task force member described the benefits of collaboration on the task force: “You had a broad-based coalition that both believed in teacher leadership and were in alignment and agreement on the key components of [a teacher
leadership system].” According to eight education leaders (73%), bringing together diverse stakeholder groups helped to create broad “buy-in” because these groups were both involved in the development of the policy and worked to garner support for the policy among the broader public. According to three Iowa state education leaders, the final legislation included many of the task force’s recommendations. One leader said, “The task force was the key group. I think the task force really did develop the system.”

Engaging diverse stakeholders may have been particularly important in the state given the divided government, which four leaders (36%) described as a challenge for passing teacher leadership legislation. For example, leaders described interest among Republicans in performance-based pay, but this idea was unpopular with the teachers union. Leaders described support among the teachers union and Democrats for teacher leadership opportunities that were tied to additional compensation but concern among Republicans that this was a strategy for giving large salary increases. One leader described how the task force developed a policy that appealed to diverse stakeholders:

From a political perspective [the challenge] was really to try and think about how we could move an education reform proposal through a divided government. We had a Republican fairly pragmatic, seasoned, moderate Republican governor, sort of Tea Party, Libertarian-minded House of Representatives, and then a sort of a Democratic liberal—very much values in line with the teachers union—Senate. We had to figure out some way to thread that needle. . . . [The TLC System] appealed to teachers in the teacher’s association and Democrats because it represented a significant investment of funding into education and it was sort of an instructionally focused reform, as opposed to charter schools or government kind of reforms or evaluation. This was a positively framed policy. It appealed to our Tea Party and Libertarian and right-leaning friends in that we were able to talk about it sort of as a performance-based compensation element in that not every teacher was going to have access to this. It was competitive about who got these opportunities that would be [compensated].

Despite the challenge of passing legislation in a divided government, Iowa state education leaders described bipartisan support for the TLC System as important for both its initial passage and long-term sustainability.

**Local Control.** One task force recommendation that differed from the original teacher leadership model proposed in the education blueprint was the focus on local control over designing teacher leadership opportunities. Nine state education leaders (82%) described allowing local control over the design of teacher leadership plans as an important condition for garnering widespread support for the policy. One task force member described the teacher leadership models presented initially in the edu-
cation blueprint as overly “prescriptive.” She described the decision of the task force to allow districts greater flexibility in designing their teacher leadership plans:

The [task force] looked at TAP and looked at a lot of different models. Ultimately, what the task force recommended was a set of five must-haves that districts had to do in order to participate, but they could more or less create their own. There was an instructional coach model. There was a TAP-like model. Then it was a build your own. Almost every district in the state went for the build-your-own model. A few have adopted TAP, but most did the “we’ll meet your five must-haves.” It was things like minimum teacher salary, a rigorous selection process, multiple roles, trying to include 25% of your teachers in teacher leadership experiences. The idea was that we would be tight on what we wanted—what we had to have—and then loose on what districts could identify as their own need and then their way to build teacher leadership roles to meet those needs.

According to Iowa state education leaders, allowing the option of a “build-your-own” teacher leadership plan was important for gaining broad support in a state that values local control. Further, the popularity of this option provided further support for the degree to which districts valued local control.

**Sustainable Funding.** Six Iowa state education leaders (55%) described the mechanism and size of the funding for the TLC System as important conditions for enabling and sustaining teacher leadership in the state. Funding for the TLC System was phased in over four school years, growing each year as additional districts were approved for planning grants and funding for implementing their TLC plans. This gradual ramp up of funding and implementation was, in the words of one leader, “critical” for effective and sustainable change. One leader explained that they sought to learn from why similar initiatives, such as teacher career ladders, had “ petered out over time” in states, and they identified sufficient and sustainable funding as essential for deep and lasting change. Another leader explained the importance of the funding mechanism—the school foundation formula:

> It’s no longer a line item in anybody’s budget. It’s built into our foundation formula for education, so the $150 million that went into the Teacher Leadership and Compensation System would take—not an act of God but close to it to get it done. I mean it’s not just a simple little bill to pass or somebody taking one of the appropriations chairs saying, “Yeah, we’re not going to do that anymore.” We built it to last from the beginning. We drove . . . the funding down into the foundation formula, which nobody wants to open because it’s a bloodbath. Once you open it up, everybody will rush in with their priorities. So nobody’s going to open that up.
According to Iowa state education leaders, the funding mechanism makes the funding for teacher leadership less vulnerable to cuts in times of leadership change or economic downturn.

Implementation Challenges

Iowa state education leaders described three central challenges for implementing and sustaining the TLC System: sustaining support for funding, developing and employing teacher capacity, and developing principal capacity.

Sustaining Funding Support. Although Iowa state education leaders described significant funding for the TLC System as important for its success, eight leaders (73%) described funding as a point of tension in garnering continued support for the policy. Concerns about funding teacher leadership opportunities were heightened because the previous governor had cut the education budget by 10% in 2009. Six leaders (55%) described concern that funding for the TLC System would come at the expense of future increases in general school funding. One leader said that members of “the task force have been very strongly vocal that the TLC funding cannot be at the expense of education funding in general, but I think we’re starting to see that happen a little bit. And that’s been a real concern.” According to two leaders, politicians had created a false narrative that framed funding for the TLC System as a threat to general education funding such as supplemental state aid, the percentage growth in the amount schools receive per pupil each year. One leader explained:

One of the biggest friction points in the whole thing is money. At the same time, we’re building an expensive world-class—hopefully—system for supporting teachers, we’re giving the lowest increases in state supplemental aid in a six-year stretch that we’ve ever seen in the history of the state. What the politicians, I think, have done a masterful job of is juxtaposing the reason we’re getting less money is because we’re actually getting the money, we’re just getting it in a different form. What makes me smile is they passed a huge commercial property tax relief thing about the same time. There would be plenty money to do all this and give us real raises in schools if we wouldn’t have passed all that commercial property tax. You know what I mean? It’s juxtaposing the two things against themselves as opposed to the real other thing that’s actually making the biggest difference, but it’s hard to get. I very rarely hear superintendents and other leaders talk about the financial challenge related to commercial property tax relief. They almost always talk about it as, “If I could go back, TLC is nice and all, but I would have taken more money in state supplemental aid if it meant I could not have TLC.” I think that’s, personally, the wrong way to think about it.
Iowa state education leaders described maintaining and increasing levels of general school funding and demonstrating the effectiveness of the TLC System as important for maintaining support for sustaining it.

**Developing and Employing Teacher Capacity.** Iowa state education leaders described developing the capacity of teachers to serve in various leadership roles as an important implementation challenge to address. As one leader explained, 25% of teachers in each participating district are expected to be serving in a leadership role, which requires extensive professional development. Given the variation in local plans, three education leaders described clearly defining and developing the capacity of teachers to serve in differentiated leadership roles as a challenge. These leaders described some leadership roles, such as instructional coach, as more clearly defined than others because they had already been in place prior to the development of the TLC System. In contrast, some leadership roles, such as model teacher, varied in how they were defined from district to district and, in some districts, the definitions were vague. Clearly defining teacher leadership roles was described as important for both supporting the development of teacher leaders and helping other teachers to understand the role teacher leaders could play in supporting their development. According to three education leaders, getting teachers to seek out support from teacher leaders could be difficult because it challenged traditional norms of autonomy. Leaders are now considering questions about how to encourage teachers to take advantage of teacher leaders to support their own development, such as: “How do [model teachers] support the teachers?” and “How do we help [career teachers] see the value of a coach and see how they can use a coach to improve their practice?”

Six Iowa state education leaders (55%) described the coordination among the Area Education Agencies (AEAs), SEA, and professional associations as important for developing the capacity of teachers as leaders. One leader described the process of coordinating support for teacher leaders:

> Shortly after the passage of the legislation, we created a statewide implementation support team that continues to meet every single month. It has a representative of all of the associations, representatives from the Department of Education, and from each of the AEAs. They’ve created a network of support to ensure teacher leaders who are taking these designated leadership roles have the training and support that they need to be successful as they move into these roles.

Another leader remarked that working together to support implementation improved the support available to teacher leaders because representatives of each group asked questions about how to add to rather than replicate existing supports by asking:
What does my piece of this look like? What role does the Iowa State Education Association need to play in making this happen? If the AEAs are taking on this piece, what piece is left that needs to be done?

In addition, Iowa AEAs shared resources and coordinated professional learning by developing an online resource for on-demand learning opportunities, tools, and information (Iowa Department of Education, 2017b). Notably, education leaders described coordination among local AEAs for providing support for statewide initiatives as something that predated the passage of teacher leadership legislation and supported effective implementation.

**Developing Principal Capacity.** Although the TLC legislation included funding and guidance for developing the capacity of teachers to serve as leaders, nine Iowa state education leaders (82%) described the need to develop the capacity of principals to work with and support teacher leaders as an important challenge that emerged. According to leaders, principals were struggling with questions about whether they should be delegating instructional leadership to teacher leaders or sharing this responsibility, whether and how they should be deploying teacher leaders to work with colleagues, and how teacher leadership related to their school improvement goals. One leader said:

We realized fairly early on in TLC implementation that we needed to provide more support for principals. They were operating in a very different environment than they’d operated before, having all these new instructional leaders. Ensuring that they were well equipped to leverage them, to support their school improvement efforts was something that support would be needed for. The legislature allocated an additional million dollars to provide support specifically for principals.

Notably, the legislature’s decision to allocate additional funding to support principal development, rather than requiring districts to use existing TLC funds, reflects the strong level of support for and financial commitment to the success of the teacher leadership policy. The Teacher Leadership Administrator Support Program was developed to provide on-going and intensive professional development to support principals in developing and facilitating distributed leadership in their schools, with a focus on “leveraging teacher leaders as part of [a school’s] leadership team” (Iowa Department of Education, n.d., p. 1). High levels of satisfaction (98–100% satisfaction) reported by participants suggest that principals valued this support.

**Next Steps and the Impact of ESSA**

Iowa state education leaders described the TLC System as the “infrastructure” or “capacity” that could support the state in being successful in meeting a wide range of goals. One leader described teacher leaders as the “cavalry” that could lead
instructional improvement efforts, whatever their focus may be. Another leader said: “Whatever initiatives there might be—whether it’s early literacy efforts or it’s mathematics efforts—the conversation now is, ‘How do we use our teacher leaders?’” Although the state was still in the early stages of developing its ESSA plan at the time of our interviews in the fall of 2016, seven leaders (64%) said that the TLC System would be part of their plan for meeting the expectations for equity and excellence in student learning under ESSA. For example, one leader said that they were beginning to discuss questions about the role of teacher leadership in closing opportunity gaps: “How do we use teacher leadership? How do we bring that to bear on learning gaps? Whether it’s special education, whether it’s students of color, whether it’s poverty, what is it?” Three education leaders described teacher leaders as playing an important role in addressing inequitable learning opportunities and outcomes among students.

Iowa state education leaders described focusing on successful implementation of the TLC System as the next step for the policy. According to four leaders (36%), leaders needed to monitor local implementation so they could learn from and spread best practices across districts. Seven leaders (64%) described supporting and demonstrating results, such as improved opportunities for teacher and student learning, as important for maintaining support for teacher leadership legislation. One leader described the next steps for the policy:

Honestly, stay the course. I think that what happens is we tend to implement things as educators, and we don’t give them enough time to really take hold. . . . [The TLC System is] going to continue to need attention and maintenance. It can’t be an afterthought. It can’t just be another way that we got teachers an increase in salary. I think it’s going to take active focus on the state level, active focus from the school level, active focus from the legislature. I honestly think that the correct role right now for the legislature to be playing is holding our feet to the fire, asking the right questions, saying, “Okay we’ve invested $150 million, what are we getting for our money?”

An early evaluation of the Iowa TLC System suggested that teachers surveyed in districts with TLC plans were more likely to describe professional development opportunities as useful and high quality, report participating in weekly collaboration with colleagues, and be satisfied with their opportunities for teacher collaboration than teachers in districts that had not yet implemented TLC plans (Citkowicz, Brown-Sims, Williams, & Gerdeman, 2016). However, this evaluation found no meaningful differences in student achievement between TLC and non-TLC districts in the first year of program implementation. Notably, two Iowa state education leaders described meeting legislators’ expectations for quick results, especially improvements in student learning, as a challenge.
Assessing the success of the Iowa TLC System is a challenge since each district designs its own unique approach to improving opportunities for teacher leadership and compensation and sets its own goals based on the state’s guiding framework. According to district reports to the Iowa Department of Education, districts seem to be making progress towards their goals for attracting and retaining teachers and improving compensation. Forty-one percent of districts reported fully meeting and 49% reported mostly meeting their goals for attracting and retaining teachers (Iowa Department of Education, 2017a). Similarly, 79% of the teacher leaders who participated in focus groups conducted by an external evaluator indicated they were more committed to staying at their schools and in the teaching profession as a direct result of participation in the TLC System (Citkowicz et al., 2016). Evidence of the effect of the Iowa TLC System on student performance remains less clear and state documents describe some districts as “reluctant” to draw conclusions about the early effects on student learning given the time needed to train teachers to be successful in their new roles and develop trust with their colleagues (Iowa Department of Education, 2016a).

Iowa state education leaders described the TLC System as a complex educational reform that would need continued attention and support from both state and district leaders for the locally designed plans to meet the policy’s overarching goals. Three leaders described the Commission on Educator Leadership and Compensation as playing an important role in overseeing the implementation of the TLC System and supporting its success moving forward. One member of the commission described the members’ role in encouraging fidelity to the central principles and goals of the legislation: “The commission exists as a place to monitor and support that fidelity. . . . It’s just a really good place to just keep a finger on the pulse and make sure that this is going the way we thought it was going to go or needs to go.” Like the task force, the commission is made up of diverse stakeholders—including the education director, teachers, community members, superintendents, and directors from the teacher, administrator, and school board associations—who could help to maintain the broad-based support that facilitated the initial passage of teacher leadership legislation.

EDUCATION POLICY IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

New Hampshire is a small and sparsely populated state. In 2015–16, 182,425 students were enrolled in New Hampshire public schools (Ed-Data, 2017b) in 161 districts, 24 charter schools, and 3 public academies (New Hampshire Department of Education [NH DOE], 2017). Of these students, 87% identified as White, 5% Hispanic, 3% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 2% Black. Twenty-eight percent were identified as low-income students. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exams taken in 2015, the percentage of New Hampshire students scoring at or above proficient in fourth and eighth grades was
higher than the national public average in both mathematics and reading (The Nation’s Report Card, 2015). In mathematics, 51% of New Hampshire fourth graders and 46% of eighth graders scored at or above proficient. In reading, 46% of fourth graders and 45% of eighth graders scored at or above proficient.

**Performance Assessment of Competency Education**

Prior to the passage of ESSA in 2015, the U.S. Department of Education allowed states to apply for flexibility under the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). This flexibility, commonly referred to as an ESEA waiver, created opportunities for states to make a transition to new college- and career-ready standards and assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Forty-three states eventually qualified for ESEA waivers; some states applied for ESEA waivers to specifically request greater flexibility in responding to federal requirements for assessment.

In March 2015, the New Hampshire Department of Education (NH DOE) was granted permission by the U.S. Department of Education to pilot a new accountability system, the Performance Assessment of Competence Education (PACE) system (NH DOE, 2016). Notably, New Hampshire was the only state approved for a pilot to design and implement a performance-based system of assessment as part of its ESEA waiver (Stosich, Snyder, & Wilczak, 2018). PACE “balances local control with statewide accountability and comparability” by combining locally designed performance tasks, common (across multiple districts) performance tasks, and periodic statewide assessments into an integrated system of assessment (NH DOE, n.d., p. 1). According to NH DOE documents, PACE is intended to improve students’ learning opportunities by more closely integrating curriculum, assessment, and instruction as part of a competency-based approach to learning.

District participation in PACE is voluntary, and districts must apply and be approved to participate. Seven districts and one charter school in the state were fully implementing PACE during school year 2016–17 (NH DOE, 2017). These organizations varied greatly in size, serving between 80 and 4,674 students; four districts served more than 1,000 students. In total, the entities implementing PACE served nearly 14,000 students in school year 2015–16, nearly 10% of the total population of New Hampshire public school students (NH DOE, 2017).

Advocates of competency-based educational systems argue that these systems can improve students’ learning opportunities and outcomes by measuring students’ progress in terms of mastery of specific learning targets or “competencies” rather than seat time (i.e., course completion), allowing flexible pacing based on when students are ready to demonstrate mastery and customizing instruction based on individual learning needs (Le, Wolfe, & Steinberg, 2014). Notably, PACE builds on more than a decade of state and local efforts to foster competency-based learning in New
Hampshire. In 2005, the state was the first to pass statewide regulations to create a competency-based education system and has had a competency-based credit system in place since 2009 (Freeland, 2014). These state regulations for competency-based credit determinations could be met by using more traditional assessments, such as multiple choice or short answer assessments, or more complex performance-based assessments to determine students’ mastery of learning targets. Marion and Leather (2015) argue that complex performance tasks are well matched with a competency-based approach to education when they are closely connected to curriculum and instruction and can provide more in-depth information about students’ knowledge and skills than the more common selected response tests. Notably, performance assessments can serve as one part of the larger competency-based educational system, which can also include changes in the way students earn credit and receive individualized educational opportunities.

Scholars argue that annual testing requirements under NCLB led to an overreliance on selected response or “bubble” tests, which emphasized low-level skills rather than 21st century skills—such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration—required for success in college, career, and life (Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2014). Performance assessments require students to construct an original response and, in doing so, can evaluate and support students’ higher-level thinking skills (Conley & Darling-Hammond, 2013; Parke, Lane, & Stone, 2006). Furthermore, the process of designing, administering, and scoring complex performance assessments can provide information about students’ abilities and support teachers in learning to integrate higher-level thinking skills in their instruction (Darling-Hammond & Falk, 2013; Goldberg & Roswell, 2000).

Prior to PACE, New Hampshire, in accordance with federal guidelines under NCLB, required all students to undergo the same statewide assessments in grades 3–8 and once in high school as part of the state accountability system. Districts not participating in PACE continue to use statewide assessments—specifically, Smarter Balanced and SAT assessments—for accountability purposes in grades 3–8 and once in high school. According to documents from NH DOE, PACE is intended to improve students’ opportunities to learn through “[e]xplicit involvement of local educational leaders in designing and implementing the accountability system” and the “[u]se of instructionally-relevant, high-quality performance-based assessments, alongside periodic administration of Smarter Balanced and SAT assessments of state standards in math and English language arts (ELA), for the purpose of tracking and reporting the progress of students, schools, districts, and educators” (NH DOE, 2014, p. 3). Although Smarter Balance assessments do include some performance tasks, these are only one of the four question types included in the assessment.

Districts that participate in PACE use a combination of locally designed performance tasks in all grades, common performance tasks in selected grades and subjects, Smarter Balanced assessments once in elementary and middle school, and the SAT
once in high school. Educators in participating districts design the common performance tasks; the use of common tasks is intended to support calibration of expectations for student performance across participating districts (Marion & Leather, 2015). In PACE districts, locally designed and implemented performance tasks, common performance tasks, Smarter Balanced assessments, and SAT assessments all count towards state and federally accountability, including student, school, and district performance determinations (NH DOE, 2016).

**Problem Definition**

Six of the nine New Hampshire state education leaders (67%) we interviewed described the divide between local and state assessments as the problem PACE was intended to address. According to these leaders, educators viewed annual statewide assessments used for school accountability purposes as disconnected from instruction, educators viewed their locally implemented assessments as more valuable for determining students’ competency levels than state tests, and students viewed local assessments and grades, rather than statewide assessments, as what “counts” for measuring their progress. A leader described the divide between local and state assessments:

> We were seeing two systems of accountability evolve. One which was the state and federal system and the second being a local system. I would go to school board meetings and our commissioner would go to local school board meetings, and hear the superintendent present, “Well, here’s what the Smarter Balanced results [are] and the state accountability results, but that’s not really how we hold ourselves accountable. Here are our local results on our separate set of assessments, and this is why we think this is more important.” We wanted to end that practice by having a more coherent system of assessment and accountability.

New Hampshire state education leaders acknowledged the need for statewide reporting and accountability but also recognized that the state assessment system could provide more meaningful information for educators and students. One leader described “recognizing that we absolutely needed to report to the state and be part of a federal process, but . . . we needed to balance” state reporting requirements with “worthy assessments for our kids back in the classroom.” Leaders described the statewide assessments as less useful for informing educators’ instruction and helping students monitor their progress than local assessments because they were a one-time event that occurred near the end of the school year. By contrast, teachers regularly administered local assessments as part of students’ coursework or as part of district assessments that were more closely connected to the curriculum, provided timely information to inform instruction, and, in many cases, counted as part of students’ grades.
According to three New Hampshire state education leaders, the lack of student “interest” or “investment” in state tests meant that the results on the state assessments did not reflect students’ actual abilities. These leaders described students as more invested in assessments that they believed “counted” for their progress in K–12 and beyond, such as their course grades and SAT and AP scores. One leader remarked,

The middle school and high school students . . . we knew they weren’t giving their best effort because that test didn’t count for them, really. We could show the student who was an A student in all these top-level subjects was getting a poor score on [the state test]. They just weren’t that interested or excited about it. . . . “[The state test] didn’t affect my grades.” It was really more a measure for the school district.

Similarly, another leader described how state tests conflicted with college placement (e.g., SAT) and college preparatory (e.g., AP) assessments and described students’ reactions: “Frankly they just feel like, ‘You know what? If we’re going to spend our energy, we’re going to spend it on what matters to us.’” The problem of low student investment in statewide assessments seemed to be particularly pronounced at the high school level.

Additionally, three New Hampshire state education leaders characterized the lack of coherence between state and local systems as related to the lack of alignment of state assessments with the competency-based approach being implemented in districts, including the move towards using performance assessment to measure competency. One leader explained that in a competency-based system teachers and students want “very detailed feedback” about students’ strengths and weaknesses on particular standards and skills to be able to support all students’ in achieving competency. He went on to explain: “If the purpose of [the state] test is an overview of whether schools are performing, you don’t get the kind of detailed topical feedback for teachers.” Another state education leader who had also worked as a school leader in the state described how the state assessments diverted educators’ attention away from their focus on competency-based learning:

It always bothered me tremendously that the way we assessed kids . . . didn’t match up to what we were trying to do in our schools. It didn’t help us help kids. I felt very strongly at that time that as a school that had transitioned to a competency-based learning model, there were some things that we were required to do that didn’t support that.

Consequently, state education leaders described the need to more closely align state and local assessments as part of a coherent and competency-based learning system.
Enabling Conditions

Designing and implementing the PACE system’s innovative assessment approach was made possible by New Hampshire’s long history with competency-based education, federal flexibility granted by ESEA waivers, collaboration among state education leaders and educators in participating districts, close work with experts in assessment, investment in developing educator capacity, and generous funding from foundations.

History with Competency-Based Education. All nine state education leaders interviewed described the state’s existing competency-based policies and the adoption of competency-based practices in schools as paving the way for PACE. New Hampshire was the first state to develop a statewide competency-based system (Sornson, 2015); specifically, the legislature approved new Minimum Standards for Public School Approval, which required districts to develop standards for competency and begin measuring course credit in terms of competency by 2009 (NH DOE, 2012). Notably, this statewide competency-based system required districts to measure course credit in terms of competency but did not dictate the kinds of assessments (e.g., multiple choice or performance tasks) they used to measure competency. Six leaders (67%) named this statewide competency policy as an enabling condition for developing PACE. As one leader explained, the policy gave educators “a common purpose” that they were working towards. Another leader described the statewide requirement as setting a minimum standard, while PACE represented a more advanced level of competency-based work:

We do have rules that require competency-based education to be put in place, and we do hold schools and districts accountable to doing that. But the full PACE accountability system, we see as a step beyond meeting those minimum standards, as we call them.

The statewide requirement for competency-based education was one of many policies and professional development initiatives that New Hampshire state education leaders described as creating more supportive conditions in the state for PACE.

Two of the New Hampshire state education leaders interviewed for the study described being directly involved since the 1990s in leading performance assessment work as part of the state’s move towards a competency-based system. One leader described examples of how the state’s focus on competency-based assessment had continued over time and in changing national policy contexts:

We started an initiative called Competency-Based Assessment System for New Hampshire. When I look back on it now, it was very infant stage compared to PACE, but it was definitely the embryo of PACE. We had 80 to 90 schools involved. . . . It was very well received, and
Redesigning State Policy for Meaningful and Equitable Learning

we were just about to take that step of connecting it with our state assessment and having a component of competency-based assessment in addition to the standardized state assessment when No Child Left Behind occurred. . . . The onerous nature of No Child Left Behind meant that the schools were no longer free to follow this path. They just didn’t have the time. They were struggling at that time with weeks and weeks of preparation and testing. . . . We were so poised and had such engaged and eager educators working with us that we took a different tack. We decided since we couldn’t go the state assessment route, we would continue to look at competency-based assessment through anytime–anywhere learning.

This example helps to illustrate the long history of competency-based education in New Hampshire and the supportive policies and professional capacity that had been developed through this ongoing work.

Four New Hampshire state education leaders (45%) said that districts had already been experimenting with performance assessment as part of their competency-based systems prior to the development of PACE. One leader described how the momentum generated by educators in schools and districts supported the development of PACE:

We had a cohort of schools, districts, and leaders who were already going down this direction at the local level. . . . They had already reached out themselves and started to implement project-based learning and performance assessment even before we started, so we drew on them as leaders of the work. . . . We have very strong educators. We happen to have a district that was in our first cohort of PACE districts called Souhegan High School. . . . These are profoundly great teachers, and they’re saying, “Finally, you guys have caught up with us.”

The existing efforts to engage in performance assessment and project-based learning in schools and districts in New Hampshire meant that local educators had already been developing their commitment to and capacity for engaging in the work required by PACE. These professional development efforts were supported by both grassroots efforts in schools and districts as well as state sponsored initiatives. One state education leader explained that educators in the initial participating districts involved in PACE had been engaging in state-sponsored professional development for two years prior to the launch of PACE.

Opportunity for Federal Flexibility. Six of the nine state education leaders (67%) interviewed described the opportunity created by ESEA waivers to change federal testing requirements for New Hampshire as an essential enabling condition for designing the system but also a constraint given the need to meet federal require-
ments. ESEA waivers created a “policy window” that allowed the state to significantly redesign the assessment system (Kingdon, 2011). One leader described this unique opportunity:

All the stars are lining up—so to speak—for us. The waiver process was opened and introduced, and so, we decided to go forward with the waiver. This brought about again, just another linkage to where the state was thinking that we wanted to head.

Specifically, New Hampshire state education leaders described the opportunity to apply for an ESEA waiver to change federal testing requirements as an opportunity to enact their vision for competency-based education to which educators in the state were already committed. One leader explained:

We were lucky in terms of New Hampshire, and the districts, and the New Hampshire DOE were certainly consistent. Once we got the approval from the U.S. Department of Ed., we were ready to move forward. That was really the key part. Everybody was in agreement to try and move forward. . . . we had talked at the state and local level for a number of years that the old accountability system was not an accurate reflection . . . of where student performance was. It seems like, “Here’s a chance to build what we think would be a better system. We should try that.”

According to New Hampshire state education leaders, when the opportunity to redesign the state assessment system became available through the ESEA waiver process, leaders in NH DOE and local districts were able to seize this opportunity due to their ongoing efforts to envision and implement new assessment practices as part of their competency-based approach to learning.

Nevertheless, taking advantage of the opportunity to change federal testing requirements also came with constraints for designing PACE. New Hampshire state education leaders described the US DOE as involved in determining the grades and subjects in which the statewide assessments (e.g., Smarter Balanced) would be administered; the requirements for reporting student performance on local, common, and statewide assessments; and the districts that could participate. Two leaders described US DOE leaders as limiting the number of districts. One leader explained: “The Feds are really concerned that we move forward with folks who really are ready to do this.”

Two New Hampshire state education leaders characterized negotiations about the design of PACE as a “back and forth” between NH DOE and US DOE to arrive at an agreeable balance in terms of the level of flexibility granted to the state and the scope (i.e., proportion of schools and districts involved) of the new assessment
Redesigning State Policy for Meaningful and Equitable Learning

system. For example, US DOE required all participating districts to administer both Smarter Balanced and performance assessments during the first year of implementation as evidence that the new performance assessments provided comparable information about student performance. After this first year, statewide assessments were administered only once in each subject in each grade band (i.e., elementary, middle, high school). One leader described both the challenge and benefit of the requirement to administer both Smarter Balanced and performance assessments in participating PACE districts the first year:

The first year when we got the waiver, we had to do Smarter Balanced and performance assessments. That was tricky, but doing them together was a learning experience for people. . . . They had two different sets of tools that they could compare. After the statistical analysis was done by the Center for Assessment and people saw that there was a definite relationship between . . . the performance assessments and students taking Smarter Balanced, it just was another legitimate tie in with the work that they were doing. . . . It legitimatized them and it made them feel like, “Yeah, this work is important. This work is telling us something.”

Although some New Hampshire state education leaders described the federal requirements for reporting as cumbersome, evidence of comparability between locally developed performance assessments and Smarter Balanced created a sense of legitimacy for the PACE system. Furthermore, leaders described support from US DOE as essential for having the resources—including time—to develop and implement local performance assessments as part of the assessment system.

Collaborative Engagement Among Stakeholders. Six New Hampshire state education leaders (67%) described the development of PACE as a collaborative process that engaged state and local stakeholders as partners in the design process. One leader described this process:

[Deputy Commissioner of Education] Paul Leather initiated the work with performance assessment, and we started to have discussions about it in the state [NH DOE]. The level that it really started at was local. . . . We went right to school districts to see if they would be interested in joining in the efforts. Then, from there, the discussion became much deeper over the next two years. Then we started the pilot process.

This statement illustrates how local educators in the early implementing districts, commonly referred to as the “lead” PACE districts, were involved in discussions about the design of the system from the beginning. A district-based leader described this process:
The New Hampshire Department of Education came to us and asked would we want to be part of this pilot that they were trying to get off the ground called PACE. . . . We already had our competencies in place. We’re doing some performance assessments here locally and just chugging along. We said, “Sure, we’re interested.” . . . Then we had several conversations back and forth with the US Department of Ed. trying to get basically a waiver for New Hampshire to pilot this pro-
gram. . . . We saw this as an opportunity to further our work with the support of the Department of Ed.

According to New Hampshire state education leaders, educators in lead districts, such as the one described above, were engaged as partners in the design of PACE and influenced key decisions, such as professional development approaches, resource allocation, and the design of common assessments.

State education leaders described two structures that supported engagement among diverse stakeholders: the state accountability task force and the PACE lead team. The state accountability task force included members of the NH DOE, technical assistance providers, a parent, and leaders from schools, districts, and universities. According to one leader, “the discussion about PACE actually came out of the discussion originally that started at the state level accountability task force group.” In addition, two leaders described the monthly PACE lead team meetings as an important structure for supporting shared decision-making. One leader explained, “We don’t take a lot of votes, but we try to go by consensus. They are a governing body in a lot of ways.” The PACE lead team brought together members from the implementing districts and NH DOE to make decisions about the design and implementation of PACE.

**Partnering with Assessment Experts.** Eight of the nine New Hampshire state education leaders (89%) interviewed described engaging closely with researchers, including specific experts and research centers, to design the complex and highly technical assessment system. For example, four leaders described inviting scholars to advise on the design of the assessment system, including scholars with expertise in assessment and instruction, competency-based learning models, performance assessment, and assessment and accountability policy. In addition, four leaders remarked that existing relationships with local assessment experts supported the design and implementation of the assessment system. According to these interviews, researchers worked with state education leaders to consider both larger “conceptual issues of assessment and accountability” as well as technical details, such as how to determine whether students met expectations for competency and whether locally designed assessments met the federal requirements for comparability with Smarter Balanced assessments. State education leaders described their research partners as fundamental for both supporting educators’ professional development and evaluating the technical quality of locally designed assessments.
Focus on Capacity Development. Seven New Hampshire state education leaders (78%) described PACE as a system that was designed to support educators’ professional learning as part of its core processes, including through collaborative development and scoring of performance assessments; they also described the intensive professional development support provided at the state and local level as important enabling conditions. For example, one leader described the scoring calibration process as an important process for supporting professional learning. She described cross-district scoring calibration as something that was “built in for data reasons” but was “equally as important for teaching and learning reasons.” Three leaders described ongoing, job-embedded professional learning in schools and districts as essential for the success of PACE. A district-based leader described PACE as requiring a substantial shift that required reorganizing teachers’ professional learning opportunities. Another leader explained what this reorganization entailed:

The PACE districts plan their professional development days and years around PACE. PACE is seen as what the school does, and the professional development is seen as what supports what the district does. Professional development days are used to learn how to teach in a competency-based way in the classroom. They’re used for PLCs [professional learning communities] around looking at student work together. They’re used for competency assessment literacy sessions and competency-based data sessions. They’re used for scoring calibration.

External experts in assessment as well as New Hampshire teacher leaders supported these professional learning experiences. As described in greater detail below, state education leaders noted that teacher leaders were taking increasing responsibility for leading professional learning as part of the PACE system. This included leading professional learning for teachers in districts that were in the earlier stages of integrating performance assessments and not yet fully implementing the PACE system.

Funding from Foundations. Four New Hampshire state education leaders (45%) described foundation support as, in the words of one leader, “critical” to the success of PACE. Two leaders explained that grant funding allowed for the PACE system to continue no matter the “political climate.” Rather than relying on funding from the state, PACE and the professional development support associated with implementing this system came primarily from district funding and external grants, including $735,000 from the National Education Association (NEA) to support teacher leadership and training provided by PACE teacher leaders (NEA, n.d.). At the same time, financial contributions from participating districts were viewed by leaders as important for encouraging commitment and part of a longer term financing strategy. According to five leaders (56%), local districts used Title I and II funds to support professional development related to PACE. As one leader explained, a goal is for districts to view participation in PACE as “valuable” enough to use their own funds
to support their involvement. However, one leader said that state support would be important for longer term sustainability and described speaking with state legislators who wanted to see evidence of the “beneficial impact” of PACE before committing funding support. Questions remain about whether state leaders will choose to allocate funding to support the ongoing development and longer-term maintenance of PACE.

Implementation Challenges

Participation in New Hampshire’s PACE system is voluntary and requires both meeting expectations of “readiness” and committing to intensive collaboration around assessment. State education leaders identified the system’s labor-intensive processes, the state’s emphasis on local control, and the readiness model used to determine participation as both implementation challenges and important “guardrails” for ensuring the integrity of the approach.

**Labor-Intensive Processes.** According to six New Hampshire state education leaders (67%), implementing the PACE system is challenging because it requires significant shifts in assessment and instruction and requires intensive collaborative work among participating educators to develop, implement, score, and report assessment results. For example, four of the six leaders described strong PLCs among teachers as essential for supporting collaborative development and scoring of assessments. One leader described observing the laborious nature of this collaborative work during a recent cross-district scoring calibration event:

> They [teachers] graded five hundred examples of student work. . . . It was two teams of several teachers per team grading the work and then trading and cross-trading and so on in order to calibrate, obviously, and get to an agreed quality level for each piece of student work, which then could be used as a model going forward for those tasks. You can just, from that description, see how cumbersome that process is. . . . This is much more work than Smarter Balanced. . . . There’s no work to Smart Balanced once it’s issued other than proctoring for a few days. This is a year-round invasion of your classroom. It’s supposed to be. It’s supposed to change instructional practice, and you have to be committed to that to do it.

(However, another leader noted that intensive scoring calibration is a once-a-year, single day event.) A different leader described the calibration process as “pretty intense” but said that it was not an “obstacle” because “the PD [professional development] was so amazing that the teachers just love doing it.” These examples reflect the belief among these six leaders that their beneficial effects on instructional practice offset the rigorous nature of the assessment development, calibration, and scoring processes.
Local Control. According to five of the nine New Hampshire state education leaders (56%), voluntary participation was important for state support in this state that values local control. As one leader explained, “Although most states take pride in saying that they’re local control, education is locally controlled in New Hampshire. It really is. . . . We would not get policy support for mandating PACE throughout the state.” Further, two leaders described PACE as something you could not “force” people to do. Instead, leaders described focusing on building interest and capacity for implementing the assessment and accountability system. However, local control over participation and requirements for meeting readiness criteria, described below, limited district participation in PACE.

Readiness Criteria. Eight of the nine New Hampshire state education leaders (89%) we interviewed described the readiness model as important for supporting districts in successfully participating in PACE. However, this approach also limited the number of districts allowed to fully implement PACE. In fact, districts were required to apply to participate in PACE; if selected, they could be assigned to participate in one of three tiers (NH DOE, n.d.). Three New Hampshire state education leaders described the tiered readiness system as helpful for providing differentiated support to districts interested in implementing PACE. One leader described the development of the tiered system and the differences of districts in each tier:

We realized pretty quickly . . . that after the early adopters we were going to be working with the districts that either were not ready or were not convinced. I conceived of a three-tiered model where we would offer differentiated support. . . . Tier I are the implementing districts. Tier II are the districts that are knowledgeable but need and want practice, or perhaps one of the schools in the district is knowledgeable but the others need to come forward. They get some intense professional development around practicing performance assessment and competency education. Tier III are the very beginning districts who were aware of the state [competency] rules but . . . never really implemented it.

New Hampshire state education leaders described the tiered model as important because some fundamental conditions needed to be met before districts were ready to fully implement the model. The tiered system focuses on building all participating districts’ capacity for implementing performance assessment as part of a competency-based system. As one leader explained, the professional development support available to districts in all tiers was “raising the demand” for involvement.

Next Steps and the Impact of ESSA

According to seven New Hampshire state education leaders, the next step for PACE was to continue scaling the system to include more implementing districts. As one leader remarked, “Scaling is always on our mind.” In interviews, leaders described
including additional districts in the tiered model of support as presenting a tension between the desire for widespread district involvement and the commitment to both voluntary participation and rigorous requirements for full implementation. In the school year 2016–17, with 161 school districts, New Hampshire had nine functioning Tier I PACE districts. In addition, 11 Tier II districts were engaged in developing and practicing performance assessment with support from professional development (NH DOE, 2012a. As one leader explained, “The goal is to eventually make this available to as many districts that want to participate as possible, assuming that they’re ready to participate.”

Three New Hampshire state education leaders described growing teacher leadership as an important part of scaling PACE. One leader described teacher leaders as essential for providing support to districts during implementation:

> We believe that, ultimately, having existing teachers lead the system is going to make it a stronger system, but we also realized it was the only way we could address the capacity and scaling issue. Now, when we talk about Concord or Manchester or Rochester, three of the districts currently in PACE that are the larger districts, we now have cohorts of lead teachers that are emerging from those districts that can help support the implementation across their schools.

According to New Hampshire state education leaders, these teachers, who were chosen based on their expertise in performance assessment, engaged in additional training to prepare them for leading learning for other teachers.

All nine New Hampshire state education leaders we interviewed described the passage of ESSA as providing a sense of longevity. PACE was initially approved in 2015 as a two-year pilot. ESSA created the opportunity for up to seven states at a given time to apply for the Innovative Assessment and Accountability Demonstration Authority, commonly referred to as the innovative assessment “pilot,” which could include using performance-based assessments for accountability purposes.16 By joining this program, New Hampshire could apply to expand PACE with federal support. Leaders described the inclusion of the innovative assessment pilot in ESSA as a “validation” of their work. As one leader put it, New Hampshire education leaders and educators no longer “feel like they’re in a short-term experiment.” One leader explained how PACE influenced the design of ESSA:

> PACE affected the Every Student Succeeds Act. Paul Leather was actually interviewed by [the US Department of Education] about PACE, so that the demonstration project could be designed around PACE

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because they wanted to encourage other states to use PACE-like models. . . . We anticipate ESSA being able to support and enhance our efforts around PACE.

New Hampshire thus influenced federal policy and, in doing so, shaped the conditions for implementation of its assessment and accountability system. Still, participating in the innovative assessment pilot under ESSA also surfaced tensions between the goal of scaling and the readiness model in place. One leader described this as a “catch 22” because the innovative assessment pilot “pushes for a single statewide system by the end of seven years but also pushes that you have to have districts that are ready to participate.” This tension may create issues for New Hampshire leaders who described their strategy for scaling as focused on building demand and capacity rather than imposing mandates.

EDUCATION POLICY IN VERMONT

While slightly larger than New Hampshire in landmass, Vermont has the second lowest population (after Wyoming) of any state in the United States. As of the 2014–15 school year, the state enrolled 87,311 students in its public schools in grades PK–12 (Education Week, 2017). In the same year, the state oversaw 360 school districts and 316 public schools (Education Week, 2017). Of the student population, 39% of students qualified for free and reduced-price lunch, 8.7% were minority students, 6.1% qualified for special education services, and 1.7% were classified as English language learners (Education Week, 2017). On the NAEP exams in 2015, 43.2% of Vermont’s fourth grade students and 42.1% of its eighth grade students were proficient in math and 44.7% of fourth grade students and 43.8% of eighth grade students were proficient in reading (Education Week, 2017).

Education Quality Standards and Education Quality Review

In 1997, the Vermont Supreme Court held in Brigham v. State (166 Vt. 246 [1997]) that the state’s education financing system violated the Vermont Constitution because of its dependence on local property taxes to fund schools, which created wide disparities in the revenues available to local school districts and denied Vermont children equal educational opportunities. The Vermont legislature responded by passing Vermont Act No. 60 (n.d.), the Equal Educational Opportunity Act of 1997, which reformed the state’s school finance system in order to provide equal educational opportunity to all students.

Act 60 also revised Vermont provisions for educational quality by instituting the School Quality Standards (SQS), which tasked the State Board of Education (SBE) with new duties, including developing standards for performance as well as a means of assessing performance, creating a clearinghouse of successful educational
programs, requiring the annual reporting of the status of education statewide and locally, and evaluating the effects of Vermont’s new school finance system on the quality of educational opportunity.

In comparison to the previous public school approval standards, which were primarily resource based, the SQS were considered to be more performance based because they focused on student outcomes (Vermont Act No. 60, n.d.). The SQS required individual schools to develop and implement action plans to improve student performance, administer a statewide assessment to measure student performance, and report on student performance to their communities annually. Moreover, each school was required to undergo a biannual evaluation by the Commissioner of the Vermont Department of Education\textsuperscript{17} to determine whether or not students were being provided a substantially equal educational opportunity and whether the school was meeting the standards of quality (Vermont Act No. 60, n.d.).

The Vermont SBE, by rule, established a system for determining quality that consisted of an on-site review conducted by a Department of Education–led team (Vermont Department of Education [DOE], 2006). For schools that did not meet the standards of quality, the SBE would initiate actions towards improving performance, such as providing technical assistance, assuming administrative control, adjusting the boundaries of the supervisory union\textsuperscript{18} or its superintendent’s responsibilities, or closing the school (Vermont DOE, 2006).

In July 2013, the Vermont legislature passed Act No. 77 (16 V.S.A. § 941), which encouraged flexible pathways to secondary school completion and post-secondary readiness. Act 77 requires schools to develop personalized learning plans for all students in grades 7–12 and to use those plans to guide students’ progress towards graduation.

Several months later, the Vermont SBE approved the Education Quality Standards (EQS) (16 V.S.A. § 165), which are rules designed “to ensure that all students in Vermont public schools are afforded educational opportunities that are substantially equal in quality, and enable them to achieve or exceed the standards approved by the State Board of Education” (Vermont SBE, n.d., p. 1). The EQS revised the SQS in significant ways. While both sets of standards are focused on ensuring that all students in Vermont are afforded educational opportunities that are substantially equal in quality, the EQS highlight a shift to personalization in the educational experience as well as the demonstration of proficiency in the educational experience (Vermont

\textsuperscript{17}The position of Vermont’s Commissioner of the Department of Education is now called the Secretary of Education.

\textsuperscript{18}In Vermont, a supervisory union is an administrative, planning, and educational service unit consisting of two or more school districts. A supervisory union differs from a supervisory district in that a supervisory district consists of only one school district. A school district is a central office that is responsible for educating students within a defined area by operating a school or schools, joining union or unified union districts, or by paying tuition (Vermont Agency of Education, 2015).
Agency of Education, 2014). Personalization is defined as “a learning process in which schools help students assess their own talents and aspirations, plan a pathway toward their own purposes, work cooperatively with others in challenging tasks, maintain a record of explorations, and demonstrate their learning against clear standards in a wide variety of media, all with the close support of adult mentors and guides” (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004, as cited in Vermont Agency of Education, 2017, p. 1). The shift to personalization in the EQS was likely influenced by the passage of Act 77 as the SBE’s rules regarding the EQS statute contain explicit references to “promoting personalization for each student” and providing “students the opportunity to experience learning through flexible pathways” (Vermont SBE, n.d., p. 4).

Where the SQS required schools to complete and file a minimal school quality status report, which consisted of a checklist and some open-ended questions regarding compliance with the standards, the new EQS require each school district to develop a continuous improvement plan, which must include the list of state-required and locally determined indicators that the school officials used to reflect on the school’s progress to date; a description of their goals, activities, and strategies for improvement; and evidence of meeting the EQS (Vermont SBE, n.d.). Moreover, while the SBE’s rulemaking for the SQS required only that 30–50 schools be visited by a Department of Education–led team each year to determine the school’s compliance with the standards, EQS rulemaking requires that all schools be eligible for an Education Quality Standards Review conducted by the Agency of Education to ensure equity and improved outcomes for students. The SBE does not explicitly define what constitutes an Education Quality Standards Review, but tasks the Secretary of Education with determining “the requirements and outcomes of the review, including a peer review system between schools” (Vermont SBE, n.d., p. 15).

In 2015, Vermont Agency of Education staff began developing Education Quality Reviews (EQR), the tools with which the state and the public measure student learning and school progress (Fowler, 2015). The EQR consist of two complementary review processes: the Annual Snapshot Review and the Integrated Field Review (IFR), used to drive continuous improvement. The Annual Snapshot gathers quantitative data along five dimensions of school quality related to the EQS to examine a school’s overall performance and assess the extent to which there is parity for all students and student subgroups within and between the districts/supervisory unions and schools.

The IFR is intended to fulfill several goals: to provide stakeholders with a broad review of school quality; to illuminate potential reasons for shortcomings revealed by the quantitative data; to identify promising practices from the field; and to provide support and interventions for school improvement. Schools participate in IFRs

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19 Five dimensions of school quality defined by the EQS are 1) academic achievement, 2) personalized learning, 3) safe, school climate, 4) high quality staffing, 5) financial efficiencies.
at least every three years, and teams conducting the reviews comprise a combination of students, educators, and Agency of Education staff. The review team observes classrooms; reviews student work and school policies; and meets with parents, students, and staff to assess the school’s performance along the same five dimensions of school quality that guide the Annual Snapshot Reviews. The on-site review concludes with the development of a written report that assesses performance, highlights commendations, and provides recommendations for areas in need of improvement. The Agency began field-testing the IFR process during the 2015–16 school year and continued the field tests into the 2016–17 school year.

**Problem Definition**

Vermont state education leaders with whom we spoke identified two primary problems that the EQS policy was intended to address: to determine and improve the quality of schools (8 out of 9, 89%) and to attend to inequities that exist in the educational system so that all students are provided more equal educational opportunities (6 out of 9, 67%). As an example of determining and improving school quality, a leader explained,

> We’re also talking about redefining what high quality means for schools. So if high quality is just about a math or literacy, a standardized test score . . . we’re going to extrapolate and pull conclusions off from that very narrow slice. [It's] about looking at schools differently, I think. And rethinking school quality.

Other Vermont education leaders concurred, speaking about how hard it was to measure school performance through standardized tests. One leader described the main purpose of the EQS:

> [T]o look at the bigger picture and see how are students achieving in various areas and how can we allow schools to show that off. That is really the problem . . . we would get these test scores—and that is one piece of who that school is—and so we need a better . . . more holistic picture.

From these leaders’ perspectives, the purpose of the EQS policy is to broaden the definition of school quality beyond standardized test scores to create a more holistic view of school quality using a multiple measures approach.

Vermont state education leaders framed another goal of EQS as a way to address the inequities in the education system. One leader expressed:

> [T]he Education Quality Standards were written with equity in mind so they’re looking at not only the quality of education in Vermont, but
how equitable it is. Students are all supposed to receive an education that’s substantially equal and receive those opportunities that offer that equity.

Another leader framed the goal of EQS as surfacing opportunity gaps. She related, “So one of the big outcomes is to make sure that students have the full range of offerings, in terms of depth and breadth courses, and personalized learning, and to make sure . . . that there aren’t any gaps in those opportunities.” Another leader described this equity focus as a “responsibility” to students. She explained:

It’s also realizing that there’s really a responsibility with that to get out ahead of it and make sure that we’re being mindful of making sure all those kids are adequately supported to be able to really take advantage of some of the opportunities we provide them in schools. Equity isn’t just about saying we believe in these things; it’s about making sure that when we have opportunities, kids actually have the support they need to take advantage of them.

Similarly, another leader stated, “It was just something that we needed to do because. . . . We do have some equity problems. We do have some disparities, particularly by wealth. We ought to look to see that these things are being taken care of.” The EQS standards attend to equity issues by highlighting the persistence of gaps as well as appealing to stakeholders’ sense of responsibility to ensure that schools offer all students equitable opportunities to succeed.

**Enabling Conditions**

Vermont state education leaders identified the following six enabling factors that supported the development and passage of the EQS policy and the related EQR processes: aligned vision, stakeholder engagement, recognition of test data shortcomings, local control, focus on continuous improvement and capacity building, and relational trust.

**Aligned Vision.** Six of the nine Vermont state education leaders (67%) described how the alignment of state policies and initiatives was an enabling condition for the EQS policy. One leader explained that the EQS were “a blending between the old traditional School Quality Standards, Act 77, and then this very clear notion about wanting to think about schools as comprehensive locations and not being just about reading and math.” From his perspective, the EQS policy provides a more holistic view of school quality and promotes ways to personalize learning for students. Another leader echoed similar views:

The [EQS] were acting in concert with some other legislation that had gone through. In Vermont, we had Act 77 that was really looking
at personal learning plans, and so we had these initiatives that were almost going on at the same time. Seventy-seven came first and then EQS, and so then working in concert together . . . and it had one vision, so really the legislature had a vision, the Agency had a vision, the Board had a vision.

Another Vermont leader explained, “And the Education Quality Standards were really an outgrowth of all that work . . . there’s a lot of enthusiasm because a clear vision was articulated.” The complementary nature of the state policies effectively created a clear and aligned vision for stakeholders, which paved the way for the passage of the EQS policy.

**Stakeholder Engagement.** Eight of the Vermont state education leaders (89%) related how the stakeholder engagement process was a critical factor in the design of the EQS policy and the EQR processes as well as in garnering support for them. One leader recalled attending stakeholder meetings all around the state to listen to “what people’s concerns were” regarding the EQS. This leader elaborated:

> Just hearing public feedback in that way, and it definitely affected our thinking in certain areas . . . that is very helpful to have the public weigh in . . . Really getting their opinion, I think it really sparked a lot of debate on the Board. And then it allowed us to flesh it out a little more.

Another leader shared how the stakeholder engagement process encouraged active involvement from the community. As she related, “[W]e got a group of people assembled that were willing to roll up their sleeves and work with us on putting these new Education Quality Standards together. From the beginning, it came from out in the field to change.” From the onset, the Vermont leaders were committed to an engagement process that sought out diverse voices and perspectives to inform and influence the development of the EQS.

A similar stakeholder engagement process was employed to develop the EQR. Led by a Deputy Secretary of the Vermont Agency of Education, the Agency took a participatory stance and reached out to a wide variety of stakeholders, including educators, administrators, parents, and representatives from industry and advocacy groups, and sought their involvement in the development of the EQR processes. As one leader described the process: “[W]e involved stakeholders and Agency staff, school folks, parents—the whole nine yards—in really coming up with . . . what would we need in order to know if our schools were quality or not? Like, how would we do this?” Another leader recalled that stakeholders’ opinions and viewpoints shaped the EQR process, such as how the EQR would be used, what data would look like, and how it would be represented; whether commendations would be given; and whether the areas of improvement would be presented as recom-
mendations or requirements. The leader recalled that it “was very valuable to have stakeholders from the field there for that.”

Another Vermont state education leader elaborated on how the stakeholder engagement process really influenced the design of the EQR:

In the initial stages, we were thinking about something very different, and we were looking into developing indicators for each area of the EQS and looking at them in a more standardized way. But through our conversations and exercises and input from various stakeholders. . . they had something to say that turned the tables, and it became more of an organic process. We didn’t want any checklists, we didn’t want indicators, and so it turned. Because there was that conversation that happened and I remember thinking, “Oh, what happened to that?” It went away, so I think it happened in order to serve the Vermonters, the way in which they’ll be open to it and have some ownership in the process and appreciation for the process. Rather than, “Oh, no here’s this punitive measure that the agency is doing to us, rather than helping us improve.”

Participation in Vermont’s IFR pilots was also viewed as an avenue for stakeholder engagement and input. The Agency of Education initiated a process by which schools could voluntarily participate in piloting the IFRs. A team of peer reviewers led by Agency staff visited participating schools, and then educators from the school participated on a team visiting another school. In this way, educators experienced the IFRs from both perspectives: getting reviewed as well as conducting reviews. Six state education leaders (67%) commented that participating in the IFR pilots afforded deeper engagement with the EQR. For example, a leader reflected:

[In those Integrated Field Reviews . . . there was a very deliberate effort to get input from people who’d been through the process and then to incorporate their feedback into the subsequent round of beta testing. I think what it communicated to the field was this isn’t about a “gotcha” game. This is about trying to work with you, get your input, and design a process that’s going to help you, as local educators and advocates for kids, take a much more robust look at what you’re doing locally and how it is or isn’t serving these shared goals. . . . the heavy emphasis on qualitative feedback has really engaged people in a deeper way. I think people have been much more likely to engage in risk-taking because they understand where the process is coming from and they’ve had input in terms of how they experience it.

Thus, stakeholder engagement was a vital process for developing Vermont’s EQS policy and its EQR processes. More important, rather than using stakeholder
engagement merely to make the policy and rules known to the public, the engagement process was used to involve stakeholders in policy design, which was essential for garnering widespread support for the policies.

**Recognition of Test Data Shortcomings.** Seven Vermont state education leaders (78%) reported that relying solely on standardized test scores was insufficient because it provided a “narrow view of school quality.” Leaders expressed a shared belief that a “more robust” or “fairer” picture of performance was needed. One leader related that the EQR provide:

> [A] broader view. . . that invites you to think more holistically about the work instead of just zeroing in on this really narrow single measure. . . . And it felt fairer for that reason as well. And it also seemed to be more growth oriented.

In addition, state education leaders talked about how the IFRs provide a counterbalance for the quantitative data depicted in the Annual Snapshot. A leader observed,

> [The IFR] balances out that quantitative data. So to look at that single point in time, look at that number, that’s fine, we know there might be some needs here, students are 30% proficient; then definitely there’s something going on there. But to stop there isn’t answering the question why. So going in and doing these reviews gives us some more information around, like I said before, the practices, so broadening that definition of data. It also allows us to speak with educators, with administrators, and with students to get a broader picture of what that looks like.

From the leaders’ perspectives, the IFRs provide Vermont educators, parents, and community members with qualitative information that contextualizes the quantitative measures of student and school performance. The qualitative data provide information on what the school, teachers, and students actually do—the processes of teaching and learning—as well as the structures and mechanisms that support teaching and learning.

Vermont state education leaders also reported that the IFRs, in conjunction with the Annual Snapshots, provide educators and community members with the information they need to engage in continuous improvement. As one leader expressed,

> If we have selected the quantitative measures that are actually indicative of things that are improved for kids and . . . the Field Reviews provide an insight into a typical educational experience for students . . . we can generate recognition of things that are working well and recognition of things that need support. Then, we actually are providing
valuable information to systems so that they can self-improve.

These Vermont state education leaders value IFRs because school reviews can generate a deeper and fuller understanding of teaching and learning in schools and provide the evidence with which to inform the decision-making processes for supporting continuous school improvement.

**Local Control.** Five Vermont state education leaders (56%) described how local control and flexibility over how the design of the EQR processes were important conditions for garnering widespread support among stakeholders. As an example, one leader explained:

> The reason why that’s allowed to work is because our state Agency built a system with enough flexibility in the process. That the process, I think, really identifies this is excellence, but then it doesn’t say exactly how you’re going to get there. . . . by not being over-prescriptive, that’s also allowed for a lot of innovation. And so, now people feel as if they are leading the change instead of just implementing something that’s been handed down . . . that’s a huge shift from . . . feeling like they’re just in compliance mode. And feeling instead like they’re in creative and innovation mode. There’s an ownership piece there.

Another leader further explained that Vermont has a history of local control, which is a strongly held value:

> There’s an absolute bias in Vermont towards local communities having the knowledge within to solve their problems. . . . There’s a sort of New England ethic about all that. And there’s absolutely, I think, in policy a deference to the professional and education officials in their systems. Sorting through what’s going to work for their communities and their students. And so, I think the design of the Education Quality Review really tapped into that. . . . it’s been a really important strategy because it builds upon the tendency of Vermont to say, “Educators should be driving this conversation. It shouldn’t be a state driven conversation.”

As these statements demonstrate, local control was a key driver for how the EQS policy and the EQR processes were designed. The EQS policy provides stakeholders with a framework for school quality, and the EQR is the mechanism by which determinations of school quality are made. However, neither prescribes what schools must do to meet the standards or how schools should improve. Instead, school officials and community members have the flexibility to innovate and respond to local needs. As one state education leader summarized:
Vermont has really put its eggs in the professional capacity of its educators and has tried to have a model of school [reform] that’s focused on clarity and consensus around standards and goals but allowed a tremendous amount of local autonomy about how we achieve those ambitious standards.

**Focus on Continuous Improvement and Capacity Building.** Seven Vermont state education leaders (78%) related that the EQS policy and the EQR processes were intentionally designed to focus not on punishment, but on support for improving schools and building capacity within the system. One leader pointed out:

> [W]ith No Child Left Behind, we are forced to rank schools and to come up with a bottom percentage. And, that is fundamentally not what the Education Quality Review is about. That is about just identifying strengths at school, challenges, and a way for improving schools. It is not supposed to be a way of ranking schools and penalizing them.

Another leader reflected that the focus on improving schools and building capacity has created an environment that allows educators to receive feedback from the EQR and act upon it: “Because it feels more real and relevant. . . . And in a way that compels action. . . . children will be better served because of that.”

In addition, participation in the IFRs, as a component of the EQR, was designed to build capacity as educators visit neighboring schools and systems as peer reviewers. One leader commented, “There is value in educators seeing systems that are similar geographically and demographically to them and how they are implementing some of the quality standards.” Leaders also spoke of seeing signs of educators building networks across districts as a result of participating in the IFRs. As one leader described the process,

> [T]hey just appreciate being able to go out and look at other teachers and watch them in their practice and speak to other administrators and see how they’re doing things. I think it’s going to open some doors; people are collecting phone numbers, and they’re writing down notes. I think it, hopefully, will be the beginning step in the process of building more sustained networks across schools. Hopefully, so that they can help each other improve and collaborate on projects, work smarter, not harder.

**Relational Trust.** Five Vermont state education leaders (56%) identified an ethos of trust among the educators and educators’ desire to collaborate as an enabling condition for the development of the EQS policy and the EQR processes. In fact, research has shown that relational trust is a key resource for school reform (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2009). Especially in the case of the IFR, where
educators serve as peer reviewers, the need for educators to trust one another’s ability to make judgments about school quality becomes paramount. “Those Field Reviews are the best part of the Education Quality Reviews, and the part of them that makes them best is people really open themselves up because they trust their neighbors, they trust the teachers and districts coming in as professionals and wanting to get better,” one leader reflected. Similarly, another leader explained:

A spirit of colleagueship in this state is something that allowed for schools to actually have colleagues come in with the Agency. There’s a degree of trust there that probably doesn’t exist in some other states or some other context. Where they’d be like, “Yeah, come on in with colleagues.” And the idea being that it’s really about learning and improvement and not a game of “gotcha” with the Agency or with colleagues and we’re coming in in the spirit of competition or something and are going to be looking to make you look bad. So I think that’s another thing that really enabled it to come off.

In our interviews, Vermont state education leaders also surfaced educators’ desire to “collaborate across the system.” One leader commented:

[O]ur willingness to share across districts . . . that’s a key thing. . . . there’s a basic understanding that sharing information is going to allow all of us to do a better job with our students, to improve outcomes for all students. . . . there is a solidarity, a feeling that we’re all in this together.

Because the norms of privacy are strong in schools (Little, 1990), the presence of relational trust among educators, as well as educators’ desire to work with and learn from one another, were key enablers of Vermont’s policy design.

Implementation Challenges

Translating policy into practice is often fraught with challenges due to organizational structures, stakeholders’ sense-making processes, authority dimensions among implementers, just to name a few. State education leaders in Vermont identified three challenges affecting the implementation of the EQS policy and EQR processes: lack of resources, initiative fatigue, and capacity.

**Lack of Resources.** All of the Vermont state education leaders we interviewed recognized lack of resources as a constraint affecting the implementation of the EQS policy and EQR processes. Specifically, the leaders identified money and personnel as the primary resources in need. As one leader explained, “[When] EQS was put forth, there was no budget for it . . . so we’re really fiscally constrained at the same time as we’re trying to launch this innovative new policy.” A major concern for
the leaders was the fact that the IFRs are not only labor intensive, but they are also expensive. Agency of Education staff must train the peer reviewers to conduct the reviews, and schools must absorb the costs of release time for administrators and classroom teachers, as well as pay for the cost of substitute teachers. Such additional expenses can be problematic when school systems are already strapped for funds. As one leader described the situation, “For teachers to actually leave their classrooms and to take this on. . . . There is a cost that does pass on to the schools that are releasing those teachers and paying for the substitutes . . . a hidden cost.”

In response to budget constraints, the Agency successfully sought outside funding to support the IFR pilot work. A state education leader reflected:

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\text{[W]e knew we needed some startup money so we did pursue outside funding to support the development of the processes and we benefitted frankly from some foundation support from Nellie Mae [Foundation] that was absolutely instrumental in some of the design work that needed to happen that we would not have been able to afford without external help.}
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This short-term solution, however, gave pause to Vermont state education leaders as they thought about sustainability. One leader questioned, “[H]ow are we going to sustain this process every year?” Similarly, another leader observed, “[The] huge grant from Nellie Mae, that is helping. That helps us but doesn’t carry us beyond the length of the grant. It helps us; it doesn’t sustain us.”

The Vermont state educational system also struggles with a lack of personnel both at the state education agency (SEA) level and the local education agency (LEA) level. State education leaders talked about the constraints of small LEAs with limited staff. As one leader explained:

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\text{[T]his is a very real concern. In Vermont, our school systems are so small that they typically don’t have personnel at the central office level that can support these improvement efforts. So it’s not uncommon that a supervisory union is going to have a superintendent, a secretary, a business manager, and maybe a curriculum director, and maybe a special education director, and that is the entirety of the staff. So it’s not like in [other states] where you’ve got a division of data and a division of accountability, and a Title I office and an ELL [English language learner] office. . . . You don’t have it [here].}
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Leaders echoed similar sentiments in regards to staffing levels at the Vermont Agency of Education. One leader said:

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\text{Our staff here has worked really well and cleverly and innovatively to}
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put together something that we can actually do. But it is still resource intensive. It is a lot of people's time, who already had jobs. So they're putting it on top of what they do.

In fact, many of the Vermont state education leaders talked about how the recession had a negative impact on the Agency of Education, which had to decrease its staff in recent years. “[A]t one point we had 211 people positions in our Agency, and I think we have 170 now,” observed one leader. Another leader elaborated, “We actually are facing a lot of challenges in the state with losing positions at the Agency. . . . So, with all these various initiatives, all require time and those initiatives. None of them came with money, and none of the came with staff.” As these statements show, the lack of personnel and funds to implement these ambitious initiatives was a very real concern for Vermont state education leaders.

**Initiative Fatigue.** Three of the state education leaders (33%) identified initiative fatigue as an implementation challenge. At the time the EQS policy was put into state statute, the Vermont legislature had also recently passed Act 77, which promoted high school redesign and required school systems to personalize learning, create flexible pathways for graduation, and implement proficiency-based graduation diplomas. State education leaders commented on the challenges of implementing the myriad initiatives simultaneously. For instance, as one leader explained:

> [T]here’s a lot of superintendents and a lot of building-level leaders who complain about initiative fatigue right now, because they had several huge education reform laws all dropped in the space of two years. So we had Universal Pre-Kindergarten Act 166.\(^{20}\) We had Act 46,\(^{21}\) which is all about unification. . . . And then of course, we have Act 77, which is about flexible pathways and personalized learning.

Another leader expressed, “The reality is that any time you pass a major piece of legislation. In this case, we’ve got three really major policies that came down within two years, implementation fatigue sort of sets in.” Moreover, initiative fatigue can be exacerbated when the requirements of the initiatives conflict. For example, while Act 77 promotes flexible learning pathways, the EQS policy dictates a prescribed math sequence. As one Vermont state education leader observed, “They do work against each other in some points, because . . . one of the quirky things about the EQS is that it does state that you have to have algebra by ninth and 10th grade. Which is not really a choice.” From the state education leaders’ perspectives, although well intentioned, the multitude of policies that have shaped the educational

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\(^{20}\) Vermont Act 166 was signed by Governor Peter Shumlin on May 28, 2014, and is intended to provide access to publicly funded prekindergarten education (16 V.S.A. § 829).

\(^{21}\) Vermont Act 46, which was enacted on June 2, 2013, provided opportunities for school districts to merge governance structures to create more sustainable systems of education delivery (H.361).
landscape in Vermont over the last few years have created some implementation challenges.

**Capacity.** Four Vermont state education leaders (44%) identified capacity as an implementation challenge for EQS and EQR. One leader reflected about the IFR process, “There are constraints there. . . . We just don’t have the capacity . . . there isn’t any real capacity to pull this off on a school level.” Another state education leader commented:

I hear the reactions of the principals and teachers that we’re working with now and what a challenge it is to try to implement proficiency-based learning, personalization, some changes in the laws. . . . These are all wonderful things and I think Vermont has been at the forefront of trying to promote this and implement this. But from the reactions, I don’t necessarily think that many schools were doing that already. . . . I do know that some schools were. . . . But I gather from the reactions that we’re receiving from the field that they need more professional development around it. How do we do this, and what does it look like?

Because significant differences in capacity existed throughout the state, uneven implementation was happening throughout the state. “[P]eople are starting from different places. And the people that are starting further behind see that there’s a long way to go,” observed one Vermont state education leader. However, many of the leaders were quick to point out that there is a “deep commitment” among the educators to “serve every child.” As one leader aptly described the situation:

[A]ll these pieces were aligning in terms of broad agreement of the direction, where we need to go. And so, Education Quality Standards as a process, I think, were relatively easy. Because there was a broad consensus around the definition of quality and the need to move to a more student-centered, proficiency-based system that looks at multiple measures of success.

Even though the need to build capacity throughout Vermont may be a heavy lift, it is one to which educators and leaders in the state are committed to achieve the goal of ensuring equal educational opportunities for all students.

**Next Steps and the Impact of ESSA**

When asked about the next steps for the EQS and EQR, 67% (6 out of 9) of the Vermont state education leaders we interviewed spoke about the need to fully implement the EQS policy and the EQR procedures. As one leader commented, when ESSA was passed in 2015, state education leaders “tapped the brakes” on the EQR work. Vermont was not one of the 43 states that had received an ESEA flexibility
waiver; state education leaders withdrew the state’s waiver request. When ESSA came on the scene, state education leaders were already working on building a new accountability system that reflected the educational goals and needs of their stakeholders and communities, rather than simply tweaking a system designed under an ESEA waiver. At that time, the Vermont Agency of Education was in the middle of the first year of the IFR pilot. Another state education leader reflected:

From my perspective, it’s stalled everything, which is unfortunate. So, I think Vermont was moving forward with a plan that was going to work for Vermont and reflect EQS and the other policy initiatives that we have in place. And we’ve had to hit the pause button.

State education leaders were eager to complete the IFR pilot and give school systems time to fully implement the EQS and EQR. One leader stated, “We’re all focused on implementation right now and that’s just getting it done well, getting it done with integrity.” Another leader further elaborated:

We have reached the point where we need to stop making policies on the state level, and let the locals and schools really absorb all these changes and really try to flesh them out and how they are going to work within their individual systems. Ideally, it would be great if we gave them money, but since we have not given them money, we have to give them time. Because, the same people are doing the same work and that is why we just need to slow down a little bit.

Three Vermont state education leaders (33%) identified evaluating the EQR processes as a potential next step. As data from the EQR accumulate, leaders expect to be able to see system strengths and areas in need of improvement. They say they are prepared to make course corrections. According to one leader, “We will have to revisit and see what else needs to be added, deleted, or clarified”:

There could be more attached to that list of what we expect for schools and . . . we will have to go back and look at and see what else is missing. Especially, once we see some of these Quality Reviews, we start seeing what other schools are doing, they are like, “Wow, this is really in a category by itself,” and “Should we have that category for everybody?” So, that is why I think while these reviews play out and we get more data and we get more presentations about them, we can learn more and, again, we will have to go back and revisit the original Education Quality Standards.

Three Vermont state education leaders (33%) recognized the desire to create a single accountability system that meets the federal requirements outlined in ESSA but also reflects the values and priorities that are most important to Vermont’s educators,
community members, and policy makers. As one leader explained,

We are still actively debating whether or not we can have a single accountability system for state priorities and federal law. We are persisting right now as if we can have one. We think that makes sense for our stakeholders and our schools to just have one thing they have to think about. I mean, obviously, it would have multiple measures and all of those kinds of things, but instead of being like, “Does this count for state or federal or both?” it all counts.

From the leaders’ perspectives, the goal is to have one accountability system that aligns the state’s agenda with the federal agenda. As another leader expressed, “[W]e wanted to make sure as we move forward in our state plan and on these Education Quality Reviews that all that work was going to be aligned with where we were going to have to head under ESSA.”

Data collection for this case study ended in early November 2016. Since then, Vermont state education leaders ultimately decided that a single system for both state and federal accountability would put at risk the integrity of the EQS model they worked so hard to create. To do so, they settled on a comprehensive accountability system for the state and then used a small portion of it as their state ESSA plan—essentially making ESSA as small as possible a part of their overall approach to accountability.

As a result of their alignment work, 44% of Vermont state education leaders (4 out of 9) reported conversations about potential changes to the state’s ESSA plan. For example, one leader spoke about the role of the IFRs in the accountability system:

We are not sure yet how we are going to use it within our ESSA plan. We are not sure if we are going to use it in accountability. Whether we do or not, it will always be there as a form of technical assistance for schools. It is part of Vermont’s [EQS]. Every system has to have a field review every three years so that is not going to change. It is just that, will that be used to hold schools accountable? We are not sure yet.

Another leader related how the use of the IFRs in the state ESSA plan could negatively affect the intent of the reviews:

Then there was this other conversation about the Integrated Field Reviews. To use them in federal accountability for accountability purposes, we have to put a number on that qualitative process. Our concern was that that would really corrode what we found was incredibly frank conversation that was starting to take place in those reviews. So, it looks like we’re moving toward a strategic choice to keep them
as technical assistance, rather than an accountability tool, for federal purposes so we don’t corrupt that process.

The impetus for not including the IFRs in the state’s ESSA plan is the potential negative effects that doing so might have on the bonds of trust among educators and how school officials perceive the visits and review findings. For the leaders, putting “a number on that qualitative process” seemed antithetical to the spirit of the school review. Because the IFRs are essentially a peer-review process that intends to identify promising practices and provide support and interventions for school improvement, distilling the observations, interviews, and document and policy reviews to a number for school comparability purposes did not align with the IFR designers and implementers’ beliefs about the purpose of the reviews. As a result, state education leaders elected to use the reviews as a diagnostic or technical assistance tool, rather than as a federal school accountability indicator, to stay true to the aim of the reviews—to make professional judgments about school quality and effectiveness to support continuous school improvement.

As these strategic decisions were being made, the Vermont state education leaders affirmed that their main priority is to do what is best for Vermont. One leader reported, “[W]hat we’re trying to do is use our policy in the way we want to use it, while also meeting the criteria for the laws.” The hard work that went into the development of the EQS policy and the EQR processes is not lost to the state leaders, who are committed to staying the course. As one leader expressed:

[W]e’re going to do our best to reflect the path that Vermont is on. And not change course dramatically. Recognizing that the feds are going to require some elements that we might not like. We’re going to argue the best we can for the Vermont approach.
Discussion

Designing and passing major education policy is a complex process influenced by how state policy makers define a policy problem. In California, state education leaders defined two critical issues: a broken school finance system and the need to address financial inequities in the system. Iowa leaders defined their problem as stagnating student achievement. Education leaders in New Hampshire needed to bridge the divide between local assessments and state assessments as well as build a more coherent system of assessment and accountability. Vermont education leaders perceived their problem as an equity issue: that they needed to provide more equal learning opportunities to all students.

Because policy is not enacted within a vacuum, the selection of policy instruments is dependent on the availability of resources and the constraints confronting policy makers (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). Across the four states, seven related themes emerged as influences on the policymaking process:

- Stakeholder engagement,
- Local control,
- Funding,
- Educator capacity,
- Prior policies and practices,
- Engaging with research and researchers, and
- Impact of ESSA.

These themes played out differently across the four states and, in some cases, an enabling condition in one state represented a challenge in another state.

Stakeholder Engagement

Policy makers in all four states engaged in an extensive process of stakeholder engagement to identify viable solutions and garner support for their respective policies. Notably, the stakeholder engagement process in each state was structured so that policy makers did not simply use the process as a way to explain policies to the public; rather, they employed the process to work with stakeholders and seek their input and feedback, which ultimately influenced the policy design.
Redesigning State Policy for Meaningful and Equitable Learning

In Vermont, state education leaders reported holding stakeholder meetings all around the state to listen to “people’s concerns.” As a result, the EQS and EQR were developed with “active involvement from the community”; input from the field influenced policy design (e.g., the decision to not use checklists in the IFRs).

Similarly, in California, the governor’s staff and the Department of Finance engaged in a “listening tour” and provided multiple opportunities for stakeholders to provide input into the design of the new finance system and negotiate provisions of the policy.

The Iowa legislature established a Teacher Performance, Compensation, and Career Development Task Force to bring together diverse stakeholders to develop recommendations for a new teacher leadership and compensation system. Iowa state education leaders described the task force as a “broad-based coalition” of stakeholders who had to set aside their “ideological partisan views” to come to consensus on a teacher leadership system that appealed to both sides. The stakeholder engagement process in California and Iowa extended to the lawmakers themselves and enabled them to find common ground, which was essential for the passage of the policies.

State education leaders from the New Hampshire Department of Education began the work of developing the PACE system by soliciting school districts to join in the design of the system. Local educators from the early implementing districts became partners with members of the NH DOE in the design of PACE and have continued to influence key decisions through monthly PACE lead team meetings.

In all four states, engaging stakeholders in these ways not only gave a voice to different groups of constituents with varying interests, but also improved the likelihood that policies would have broad support once adopted.

**Local Control**

Despite the major differences in population—nearly 40 million residents in California and approximately 625,000 in Vermont—education leaders in each state described broad support for local control. Education leaders in California, Iowa, and Vermont described local control as an essential condition for successful passage of each state policy. According to leaders, local control allows for greater flexibility to account for both the unique needs and existing capacity in districts.

In the case of California, the principle of subsidiarity returned responsibility for educational decision-making back to the local level after decades of state control, mirroring public sentiment that “locals are in the best place to make the decisions,” as observed by one California state education leader.

Local control in Iowa kept the TLC policy from being overly prescriptive and empowered the stakeholders to build their own systems according to their local
values and priorities. In Vermont, local control was a key driver for how EQS and EQR were designed. The EQS policy provides stakeholders with a framework for school quality and the EQR processes are the mechanism by which determinations of school quality are made. However, neither prescribes what schools must do to meet the standards or how schools should be improved. Instead, stakeholders are provided the flexibility to innovate and respond to local needs.

In New Hampshire, the opt-in nature of the PACE system made it politically viable. However, local control over participation meant that only a limited number of the districts are involved so far and may benefit from these policies.

**Funding**

Funding emerged as a critical enabling factor as well as a challenge in all four states. The passage of Proposition 30 in California restored much needed funding to schools that had experienced severe budget cuts due to the Great Recession. This influx of money gave California policy makers and the public the breathing room needed to tackle school finance reform and led to the creation of California’s LCFF policy.

In Iowa, the new TLC System involved a substantial increase in state funding built into the school foundation formula, making the policy popular among educators and less vulnerable to cuts in times of leadership change or economic downturns. At the same time, having committed significant state funding heightens political pressure on Iowa education leaders to demonstrate results or risk losing support in favor of other funding strategies.

By contrast, New Hampshire and Vermont relied on funding from foundations and participating districts to support piloting new systems. This approach allowed for state education leaders to adopt innovative approaches and build the capacity of educators in early adopting districts. In addition, district investment represented a high level of commitment to each new approach. However, a lack of state funding support raises questions about the level of commitment among the broader community of stakeholders in the state and longer-term sustainability.

**Educator Capacity**

The education policies pursued by the four states studied require educators at multiple levels of their systems to learn to work in new ways. To be successful, these policies depend on support for developing educators’ capabilities to engage in new practices. Leaders in all four states described growing capacity as an ongoing challenge for successful implementation of education policies.
The approaches pursued in Iowa, New Hampshire, and Vermont were intended to grow capacity among educators as part of their system design. In Iowa’s TLC System, for example, teacher leaders support enhanced professional learning opportunities for their colleagues. Teacher participation in the development, implementation, and scoring of performance assessments in New Hampshire’s PACE system is critical for operating the system and also serves as an opportunity for strengthening teachers’ assessment literacy as well as their understanding of students’ learning strengths and needs. Vermont’s EQR process was designed to develop the capacity of school members who receive feedback from the process as well as peer reviewers who learn from the opportunity to visit and review educational opportunities at other schools. State education leaders in all three states described early investments in professional development as important enabling conditions for the success of these new approaches.

In California, in contrast, leaders described growing local capacity to engage in the LCFF and LCAP processes as important next steps, describing the CCEE as an essential structure for providing this support.

**Prior Policies and Practices**

In all four states, existing policies and local practices played an essential role in influencing policy trajectories, whether they created support for further action or demand for change.

In California, New Hampshire, and Vermont, prior policies and local practices paved the way for the successful development and passage of new and promising education policies. State education leaders described building on and aligning new policies with the goals of previous policies and used examples from existing practices in local schools and districts as evidence of the value and efficacy of their new policies’ approaches.

Iowa’s previous but unfunded teacher leadership legislation served to familiarize policy makers and the public with the idea of teacher leadership. Existing teacher leadership systems in districts served as examples of possible teacher leadership roles that could support teacher and student learning.

A series of state policies in California led to a fragmented and highly regulated finance system that made it challenging for local districts to decide how to spend state funding in ways that would best meet their needs. California’s LCFF and LCAP policies were introduced to fundamentally redesign the funding system with a focus on local control.

In contrast, New Hampshire’s new performance-based system of assessment and accountability represented a next step as part of a much longer history of competency-
based policies and practices. Similarly, state education leaders in Vermont described their educational quality standards and review process as aligned with and an outgrowth of previous policies and initiatives, which aimed to take a more comprehensive approach to understanding school quality.

**Engaging with Research and Researchers**

In California, Iowa, and New Hampshire, education leaders described research and researchers as influential in identifying both policy problems and solutions, reporting that they were supported in making major changes in state policy by evidence from research that supported their decisions. Leaders in California and Iowa cited specific reports that reviewed relevant research to define the policy problem and offer policy solutions. These reports included indicators, such as state-by-state comparisons of student achievement and student–teacher ratios, to define the policy problems and create urgency for education reform. Further, these reports served to distill research evidence into specific policy solutions. State education leaders in New Hampshire described working closely with researchers and local assessment experts to design the complex and highly technical performance assessment system.

Thus, contrary to studies that have found that policy makers rarely use research in policy design (Landry, Lamari, & Amara, 2003; Weiss, 1986), our findings suggest that research can influence the policymaking process. According to several state education leaders, research partnerships were critical for building educators’ knowledge and understanding of performance assessments as well as their capacity for evaluating the technical quality of locally designed assessments. Engaging with research and researchers was an important condition for the design and implementation of some states’ policy solutions.

**Impact of ESSA**

We studied these states’ policymaking processes in part because of their commitment to developing meaningful next phases of school accountability that promote continuous support and improvement (Center for American Progress and the Council of Chief State Officers, 2014; Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, & Pittenger, 2014). The education leaders in these four states began their work many years before ESSA came on the scene. Thus, while the presence of federal requirements for school accountability did not affect their choice of policy instruments, the implementation of ESSA is affecting their states’ policy work to varying degrees.

State education leaders in California reiterated their commitment to building a coherent accountability system that meets ESSA requirements, but were intent on staying true to the original intent of their policy solutions. As one leader asserted, California state leaders would define very clearly their state goals and then “figure out how to translate that into ESSA requirements.”
Iowa state education leaders acknowledged that their TLC System would have a role in their state ESSA plan, having begun discussions around how teacher leadership could be used to close achievement gaps and address inequitable learning opportunities. New Hampshire state education leaders saw ESSA as an opportunity to validate their work and bring the PACE model to other states. They were proud of how PACE had influenced the design of ESSA’s innovative assessment pilot and perceived the pilot as an opportunity to build on New Hampshire’s own efforts to scale up the PACE system throughout the state. Education leaders in Vermont asserted that ESSA would not drive the development of their state plan; their main priority was to do what is best for the students, families, and communities in their state, and to stay the course.
Conclusion

As this comparative case study shows, state education leaders in the four states, defined and framed policy problems in different ways. Their varying frames led to differing educational policies that were influenced by the political and historical context of each state. These contexts created enabling conditions for the policy-making process as well as implementation challenges once the policies were enacted. These findings have important implications for policy.

First, the education policies enacted in these four states necessitated the creation of new roles and responsibilities for system actors, which required that actors learn new skills and abilities. This suggests the need for greater attention to capacity building and professional development opportunities for actors at all levels of states’ educational systems. Research has shown that school leaders play a key role in policy implementation at the school level (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Coburn, 2005; Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002; Fullan, 1991; Stosich, 2017). Thus, providing school administrators with professional development opportunities alongside teachers is essential for cultivating readiness throughout the system. As Elmore (2000) observed, policy in itself is unlikely to bring about improvements in teaching and learning if attention to capacity building does not match the demands placed on system actors to carry out the policy requirements.

Two examples illustrate this point. California’s LCFF legislation, which reformed how school funds are allocated and distributed to schools, instituted the LCAP process, which requires districts to adopt a budget annually and strategically plan for and institute programs to advance state and local education goals for students. The LCAP process presumed that California school district officials, school board members, and community leaders would be proficient in strategic planning, but that was not the case. System actors in California need learning opportunities to develop strategic planning skills to ensure that LCAPs are meaningful, actionable, and provide transparency into the ways spending allocations support the district’s annual goals and guide continuous improvement efforts.

In contrast, New Hampshire’s PACE model explicitly required significant investments in professional development so that districts could meet the readiness criteria for participation in the state’s assessment and accountability model. Educators who are interested in implementing the PACE system are supported in their efforts to learn to develop, conduct, score, and interpret performance assessment results as well as make significant shifts in their instructional practice. School administrators are provided with professional development opportunities to cultivate readiness throughout the system. New Hampshire education leaders describe this work as labor intensive, but worth the effort. We argue that professional development opportunities must also be extended to central office personnel since the PACE

70 Stanbord Center for Opportunity Policy in Education
model is dependent on the readiness of the district as a whole rather than individual schools. Such an extension would increase opportunities for participation in PACE and address state education leaders’ desires to scale the assessment and accountability system throughout the state.

Second, state education leaders must ensure that adequate resources, both financial and human, are provided to local education agencies to implement new policies. Research has shown that the availability of slack resources is a key condition for policy innovation (Cyert & March, 1963; Nelson, 1978). When organizations have additional resources to perform required functions, implementation of new approaches is likely to work more efficiently. In Iowa, for example, the legislature recognized the important role of principals in supporting the successful implementation of the TLC System and allocated funding to support principal development in addition to funding already dedicated to supporting teachers in learning to take on new leadership roles. In Vermont, in contrast, the Agency for Education endured staff layoffs and reductions as a result of a budget crisis fueled by the Great Recession. As a result, state education leaders acknowledged that the implementation of the EQS policy and the EQR process was challenging due to the added responsibilities and work falling on staff already stretched thin. For both New Hampshire and Vermont, education reforms are supported by grants from external sources, calling into question their sustainability and long-term viability. State education leaders must allocate consistent and stable funding to policy initiatives to signal to stakeholders that they are committed to the success of the policies.
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