Spring 2020

Virginia Standards of Accreditation: A Case Study Of Sensemaking and Policy Implementation in a School District

Shana Nicole Remian
Old Dominion University, remians@cox.net

VIRGINIA STANDARDS OF ACCREDITATION: A CASE STUDY OF SENSEMAKING AND POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN A SCHOOL DISTRICT

by

Shana Nicole Remian
B.A. May 1997, Old Dominion University
M.A. May 2002, University of Virginia

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

EDUCATION

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY

May 2020

Approved by:

Jay Paredes Scribner (Chair)

Karen L. Sanzo (Member)

Phil Reed (Member)

ABSTRACT

VIRGINIA STANDARDS OF ACCREDITATION: A CASE STUDY OF SENSEMAKING AND POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN A SCHOOL DISTRICT

Shana Nicole Remian
Old Dominion University, 2020
Chair: Dr. Jay Paredes Scribner

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between how school leaders at both the district and school level make sense of a policy change and how that understanding affects implementation. Specifically, this study explores how different factors affect individual sensemaking and the effect that has on policy implementation. Using an embedded case study methodology, data were collected through sixteen, semi-structured interviews. Additionally, field observations and document analysis were conducted to triangulate the data. Data were coded and analyzed to determine three major categories--policy ambiguity, internal and external factors, and communication. These three categories were integrated to form a conceptual framework.

Findings suggest that the more ambiguous the policy, the more important it is for strong leadership. Stronger leaders were empowered by the openness of the ambiguous policy while weaker leaders demonstrated frustration and paralysis. These leaders were shaped by both internal and external factors. Internal factors include background experiences, motivation, and cognitive abilities. External factors include networks and organizational structures and practices. Finally, a learning community results from both vertical and horizontal communication by strong leaders. Without this facet, little to no change to the organization will occur.

Systems should leverage the skills of those leaders who show capacity to lead their schools through change and design professional development to build capacity in the other

school level leaders. Secondly, it is imperative for desired outcomes and clear expectations for all district leaders if policy change will happen with fidelity.

This study has three main findings. First, bureaucratic inertia occurs as a result of inconsistent policy interpretations at a variety of levels. Second, the interdependence between state, district, and local levels creates an ecosystem where a variety of needs need to be considered. And finally, a bifurcation of priorities leads to organizational paralysis.

Dedicated in loving memory of my grandfather, Pops, who was my inspiration to “go all the way” with my education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation was a labor of love that would not have been possible without some key supporters.

Many thanks to my dissertation chair, Dr. Jay Paredes Scribner, who pushed me beyond my comfort zone and challenged my thinking and writing. Without his continuous support, brilliant guidance, and positive encouragement, this work simple would not have been possible. Yet, I still hope to never hear the word “dimensions” ever again!

I cannot explain the amount of gratitude I have for my mom, Madeleine McAdoo. She is my rock and has stood by my side through all things. She has watched my children, brought my family dinner, and offered support and encouragement through this entire process. I am forever grateful for her unconditional love, support, and generosity.

My family has dealt with my absence from important family events while working on this research. My husband, Chip, has gone above and beyond his matrimonial duties to give me both time and space to work. My son, Hunter, whose conversations and presence offered me enjoyable breaks from my work. Madeleine, my mini-me, whose ambition and drive never cease to amaze me. And to my Hannah-Bean, who lights up a room with her smile and kindness.

To my friend and colleague Ryan O’Meara, who offered me both a competitive push and words of encouragement. I appreciate your insight, your support, and your friendship.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Federal accountability systems in today's educational setting result from a belief that all students should learn at high levels. This premise challenges "deeply rooted beliefs about who can do intellectually demanding work and question[s] popular conceptions of teaching, learning, and subject matter" (Spillane, Reiser & Reimer, 2002, p. 387). *No Child Left Behind* (2002) and *Race to the Top* created the "high-stakes era" (Young & Lewis, 2015, p. 4) where states are held accountable for their student achievement results. One of the main goals of these accountability measures was to create measures to hold states and, ultimately, schools, accountable for student learning. *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015) continued to propel high stakes testing and accountability into the educational forefront, committing to "equal opportunity for all students" (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). As a result of this political environment, states are left with creating and implementing policy changes to help stimulate these beliefs to effect change for students.

While these policies may have been enacted, they have had little impact on the instructional practices of schools (Coburn, Hill, & Spillane, 2016). Numerous challenges have hampered implementation: political setting, district priorities, implementing actors' skill and will, clarity of policy, support for change, to name a few (O'Toole, 2000). Understanding what makes effective and ineffective implementation of policies through individual sensemaking uncovers knowledge important to the future of policy design and effectiveness.

Purpose and Research Questions

Policy implementation is generally agreed upon to be "a decidedly complex endeavor, more complex than the policies, programs, procedures, techniques or technologies that are the subject of the implementation efforts" (Fixsen et. al., 2005, p 2.). Varying actors, contexts and

policy messages contribute to an unreliable realm of policy implementation. Policy implementation depends on how each actor makes sense of the policy, which is influenced by both internal and external factors. As a result, these types of policy changes in the educational setting often ignite a variety of responses. Schools in Virginia, for example, are now required to adjust how they monitor students in order to meet new Standards of Accreditation (SOA) requirements. To study this intersection between policy implementation and sensemaking, one school district in Virginia will be examined at both the district level and the school level. Isolating and studying the different actors at a particular level will help me focus on how leaders make sense of policy and how their level in the systems affects their understanding and implementation. As such, the purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between how school leaders at both the district and school level make sense of a policy change and how that understanding affects implementation. As the new SOAs are being implemented in the 2018-2019 school year, the following research questions will be investigated:

- How and in what ways do district and school leaders in one district make sense of a new state level education policy aimed at influencing local level practice?
- What contextual factors or individual beliefs influence the ways local district and school leaders understand the intent of these policies?
- How do these factors or beliefs influence policy implementation?
- What can we learn about how school leaders make sense of the policy implementation in their organizational settings and how can we leverage that learning for future implementation?

Using interviews, observations, and documents, more insight will be gained in how district and school leaders in one district make sense of a new policy, what contextual factors contribute to their understanding, and how these factors influence policy implementation. As

such, the first three questions will be addressed in the findings section--Chapter 4. The final question will be addressed in Chapter 5; it will synthesize how we can leverage that learning to inform both policy makers and education leaders for future implementation.

Statement of the Problem

One primary challenge with policy implementation centers around how individuals interpret and understand the policy. This individual interpretation and understanding depends on several different factors—background experiences, individual context, alignment of personal values to the policy change. School leaders in Virginia with different backgrounds, experiences, and contexts are charged with making sense of these policy changes, which will impact the actions and decisions for implementation at the school level. Implementing actors might not have the will to implement; they can "fail to notice, intentionally ignore, or selectively attend to policies that are inconsistent with their own interests and agendas" (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002, p. 390). Additionally, they might lack the capacity to successfully implement policy. According to Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002), capacity involves the knowledge, skills, and resources. As policy messages are more and more ambiguous, the cognition of the implementer becomes fundamental to implementation.

Coordination issues between the governmental levels—federal, state, district, school—further complicate implementation (Pont & Viennet, 2017; Desimone, 2002). Policy travels through multi-levels before implementation. As policy travels through the multi-levels of the different actors and situations, it faces being understood in a variety of ways. Pont and Viennet (2017) argue that "regional and local administrators, school representatives, principals, teachers, parents and other actors are keen to defend their own vision of education, based on deeply rooted and largely personal belief systems" (p. 12). As the policy travels through the different levels, each actor has the

potential to “buffer or bridge” (Schechter & Shaked, 2017) the policy in his/her current context. As a result, the policy may not be implemented with fidelity.

Virginia exemplifies one particular setting where this phenomenon of cognition through multi-levels in the process of policy implementation can be explored. The state of Virginia has a history of acting independently. For example, it remains one of only four of the fifty states to have never adopted Common Core (Ujifusa, 2016). Moreover, under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, Virginia applied for two waivers to deviate from the federal requirements. Consequently, the case in Virginia provides an interesting setting to see how Virginia policy makers and implementers respond to the recently adopted Every Student Succeeds Act of 2017. Virginia recently modified and adopted the Standards of Accreditation (SOA) as a result of the 2017 Annual Report on the Condition and Needs of Public Schools in Virginia. The roll-out of the new SOAs during the 2018-2019 school year makes Virginia school districts ripe with opportunity for learning about implementation. How school leaders in Virginia at both the district level and the school level will make sense of these changes and the changes that are enacted as a result of their understanding can unmask some insights into policy implementation. The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) strives to “improve student achievement, without regard to race, gender, ethnicity, disability, family background, family income, or geographic location, and prepare students to succeed in postsecondary education and the workplace, and to become engaged and enlightened citizens” (Gecker, et. al., 2017, p. 6). To meet its mission, the VDOE sought to revise its SOAs to set expectations for schools in Virginia and to meet federal benchmark requirements. School accreditation will no longer be based solely on standardized testing results; with the new SOAs, schools will also be evaluated on a series of additional School Quality Indicators. The Virginia Department of Education indicated that the changes are “designed to encourage continuous

improvement for all schools while placing an emphasis on closing achievement gaps between student groups and providing a more comprehensive view of school quality" (VDOE News Release, 2018). While these changes require schools to show progress in several factors, they allow for schools to have more latitude in how they accomplish these goals.

In the 2018-19 school year, Virginia high schools will be accredited based on these updated school quality indicators: (1) overall proficiency in English reading/writing, math, science; (2) English and math achievement gaps among student groups; (3) graduation and completion rates; (4) dropout rates; (5) absenteeism, and, in 2021-2022, (6) college, career, and civic readiness. For each of the school quality indicators, schools will be rated as Level One—meets or exceeds standard or sufficient improvement; Level Two—near standard or making sufficient improvement; or Level Three—below standard. Based upon those ratings, schools will earn one of three accreditation ratings: accredited, accredited with conditions, or accreditation denied. As part of this process, however, Virginia has not revealed to districts or schools a clear path for how to meet these requirements; by having somewhat ambiguous policy messages, they are requiring districts and schools to come up with their own answers to their unique challenges to improve student achievement. Thus, this study uses a cognition lens to explore how implementing actors make sense of a policy change and how this sensemaking impacts implementation.

Significance of the Study

In these politically charged times of school improvement reform, policy implementation will be at the forefront of future studies. So that policy makers can replicate instances of success, studies on policy implementation are even more important now than ever before. While other studies focused on a top-down approach, a bottom-up approach looks at how individual actors'

sensemaking ultimately affects policy implementation. Additionally, after a review of the literature, a gap remains in the study of multi-level policy implementation. Policy implementation travels through many levels to reach its ultimate destination—the classroom. A study on how policy is shaped by examining its movement through the different levels can help explain the complexity that undergirds the success and/or failure of policy implementation.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between how school leaders at both the district and school level make sense of a policy change and how that understanding affects implementation. In our current political climate, citizens are demanding improvement in schools, resulting in an increase in policy mandates. This study is significant because implementation is where the action happens to result in substantive change. If we understand more about how implementation is affected by individual cognition at multi-levels, we can influence more change to benefit students and, as a result, society.

This study is divided into five chapters. This chapter provides the background, problem statement, purpose of the research, and the research questions. The following chapter will provide a review of the related literature that includes the historical development of policy reform in education, discuss the definition and key strands from the literature on policy implementation, and identify sensemaking as a lens for which this phenomenon can be explored. In Chapter III, the design of the study and research methods will be explained. As a qualitative study, an embedded case study method will be used. Chapter IV provides the findings from the study, organized by theme. Finally, Chapter V will reveal how lessons learned from this study can help both policy makers and implementing actors at various levels.

CHAPTER 2: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

This chapter outlines a review of the related literature. It begins with an overview of reform efforts in America's schools; then it provides an overview of the literature on policy implementation and policy implementation in education; finally, it discusses what the research tells us regarding how implementing actors make sense of policy and how this understanding is influenced by both individual and collective sensemaking in the implementation process.

Reform in U.S. Education

This section focuses on the role of reform in education. I begin with an historical overview on policy reform and hone in on two major reforms in the 21st century—No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Background on Policy Reform

Public education in the United States is no stranger to educational reform. As educational institutions answer to public opinion and political agendas, schools in the U.S. have faced reform from its inception with Horace Mann in the 1830s (Cohen & Mechta, 2017). Cohen and Mechta (2017) argue that successful implementation has five characteristics. Successful policy reform addressed problems people at the ground level knew they had, offered solutions to real problems; satisfied demands from the political, social, or economic circumstances, provided the tools, materials and support for the reform, and aligned with the values of educators, parents and students.

In the wake of Russia's accomplishment of Sputnik, Americans' belief that they were the most superior technological country was debunked, sparking a national cry for government action (Darling-Hammond, 1990). Since then, a public focus on improving education efforts has

been ever-present, resulting in an influx of different policies (Louis, Febey, & Schroeder, 2005; Pont & Viennet, 2017). These policies have left states and localities with complex and sometimes unclear messages for implementation.

After the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (1983), public education came under increased scrutiny (Coburn, Hill, & Spillane, 2016; Desimone, 2002; McGuinn, 2016). The standards movement evolved in the 1980s-1990s to help rectify the problems with public education. Working with professional associations, policymakers "worked to articulate more intellectually rigorous learning standards in core school subjects" (Coburn, Hill, & Spillane, 2016, p. 244). Policymakers aimed to improve the rigor in schools with content specific learning standards. Uniformity of practice was the intended goal, with a focus on clarity of the policy message and conformity of the implementation. As Coburn et al. (2016) argued, while these reform efforts addressed a problem policy makers knew they had, they did not provide the tools and support necessary for effective implementation. Studies on implementation of this policy documented more traditional structures and surface level changes, but no substantial changes to teaching practices (Coburn, Hill, and Spillane, 2016, p. 244). During this time period the researchers argued that implementers' interpretations of the reforms drove their actions. School leaders were "charged with educating teachers about new standards resulting in inconsistent and sometimes conflicting instructional guidance" (Coburn, Hill, & Spillane, 2016, p. 245). As a result, incongruous efforts were made in implementing policy.

The scrutiny continued with *No Child Left Behind* (2002), *Race to the Top* (2009), and *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015) initiating the accountability-based reforms of the 2000s (Coburn, Hill, & Spillane, 2016). Between 2008 and 2014, approximately 450 reforms were

enacted to improve public education (OECD, 2015). Increased focus on testing and publicly publishing the results created a culture of compliance. Implementation studies during this era focused on both learning (using the new assessment measures) and accountability (focusing on power dynamics). Leaders at both the federal, state, and local levels used power to inspire change. Federal government, for example, threatened to pull money from schools that did not comply with its policies (Coburn, Hill, & Spillane, 2016). State governments threatened accreditation status for districts that would not comply. Local school leaders attempted to change teachers' behaviors with informal authority (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012). While compliance was achieved as a result of some public policies, little substantive change was made (Coburn, Hill, & Spillane, 2016). The next section delves deeper into two major reform efforts since 2000—*No Child Left Behind* and *Every Student Succeeds Act*.

No Child Left Behind (2001)

Written as a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1983, NCLB was signed into action in 2001 during the accountability era. Section 1117(a) of NCLB required states to "establish a statewide system of intensive and sustained support and improvement for school districts and schools receiving Title 1 funds in order to increase the opportunity for all students to meet the state's academic content standards and student academic achievement standards" (VDOE, 2018). Prior to this act, the federal government's role in education had been minimal, leaving the states in control as reserved by the U.S. Constitution (Ladd, 2017). NCLB required all states to test all students annually in math and reading in grades 3 through 8. Schools had to show adequate yearly progress (AYP) each year moving toward 100 percent proficiency by 2013-2014 school year. The main purpose of NCLB was to reduce inequities among different groups of students by holding schools accountable for student achievement. Results of

standardized testing were published by subgroups to inform the public of each school's progress or lack thereof.

This policy followed a top-down approach (Egalaite, Fusarelli, & Fusarelli, 2017). Clear expectations were set by the federal government and strict guidelines were to be followed or sanctions would be instituted. Consequently, while attempting to improve educational outcomes for students, the accountability measures led to unintended consequences. More accountability measures resulted in more tests, which have arguably stifled authentic learning in classrooms (Desimone, 2002; Ladd, 2017). More time in classrooms was spent on drilling isolated skills and practicing test taking skills, ignoring the pedagogical best practices of creating a literacy rich environment (Bodilly & Berends,1999; Desimone, 2002; Dennis, 2017). Finally, this top-down approach invoked a one-size-fits-all policy that did not in fact fit all. Schools facing hardships such as high poverty or high English language populations were not recognized for the gains they did make. Rather, they were faced with sanctions, which often meant decreased funding and local control, when they did not meet the required pass rates. To avoid these sanctions, thirty-four out of the fifty states applied for waivers from the federal requirements (States Granted Waivers, 2013). With more than half of the states not being able to implement the federal requirements, it behooves policy makers and educational leaders to examine the implementation.

This top-down approach to policy did not quite garner the results policy makers had hoped for. Results are inconclusive if this top-down approach did indeed increase student achievement. Dee and Jacob (2010) found a positive influence on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) math achievement scores for students in grades 4 and 8 but found no impact on reading in either grade. More significantly, NCLB seemed to negatively impact the very children it hoped to help—students from low-income schools. These schools often faced

mandates from the state that left teachers "stripped of their autonomy and professional identity" (Dennis, 2016, p. 395). Consequently, low-income schools faced increased teacher turn-over, decreased school morale, and stagnant test scores.

Virginia's Response to NCLB. Virginia's accountability system started in the 1990s with the Virginia Standards of Learning. Following the plummet of reading scores and declining Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) scores, Virginia followed the national standards movement to create more rigorous academic and instructional standards. To meet the requirements of NCLB, Virginia established district-level and school-level academic reviews, provided additional resources for Virginia schools (i.e. Reading First grants, Algebra Readiness Initiative, Project Graduation), and detailed responsibilities and functions of school support. Despite these efforts, most Virginia schools would have been labeled as failing (Balingit, 2015) under NCLB. Consequently, Virginia applied for a waiver citing the U.S. Department of Education's "complex and unrealistic AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) objectives" (VDOE, 2018). Then superintendent Patricia Wright contended that the commonwealth "will continue to hold schools accountable for closing achievement gaps but schools won't be subject to a system of increasingly unrealistic annual objectives" (VDOE, 2018). Virginia's NCLB waivers in both 2012 and 2015 were approved by the U.S. Department of Education.

Every Student Succeeds Act (2015)

On December 10, 2015, ESSA was signed into law replacing NCLB and reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. This new law requires a minimum of four indicators of elementary and middle school students: three academic indicators and one school quality indicator. Academic indicators include proficiency on state tests, decreasing the failure rate for subgroups, and growth for English-language proficiency. Examples of school quality

indicators could be student attendance, school climate, or staff retention. High schools must also include graduation rates. This choice in these indicators marks a dramatic shift from the NCLB Act, significantly reducing the federal role in education policy (Egalite, Fusarelli, & Fusarelli, 2017; Dennis, 2016; Kane, 2017). States are responsible for creating a plan to meet these federal benchmarks, which voids the previous "one-size-fits-all" approach. This policy follows a more bottom-up approach. While the testing requirements are still in place, individual states have the autonomy to how they implement the policy.

With the implementation of ESSA, there are a few reasons to give pause. First, states have never been in this powerful role (Egalite, Fusarelli, & Fusarelli, 2017; Kane, 2017). They must "certify that interventions meet the 'evidence-based' requirements spelled out in the law…and monitor and evaluate federally funded school-improvement efforts going forward" (Kane, 2017, p. 52). The role of state, local, and school leadership will be crucial to effective implementation. Additionally, some worry that this new policy, which relieves states of prescribed solutions, could revert to a previous status of inequity. Unless states commit to equity, students of color, students with disabilities, and English language students could be further marginalized (Egalite, Fusarelli, & Fusarelli, 2017). Moreover, the misalignment between the federal requirements and the state requirements leave the local districts scrambling to make sense of their action. In Virginia, for example, changes to the required Standards of Learning (SOL) tests were reduced for "schools to expand work-based and service-learning programs that promote college, career and civic readiness" (Virginia Graduation Requirements, 2017). While this sounds noble, it creates unintended consequences for local schools facing the federal ESSA requirements. One of the main markers of student achievement is marked by the yearly SOL tests. By reducing the number of required tests students need to graduate, there is a

chance that students will not take the tests as seriously. For example, if a student takes Algebra 1 in middle school and passes the corresponding SOL test, he has now earned the one required verified credit in mathematics for his graduation requirement. However, under ESSA, that student will still be required to take the math SOL for the first math course he takes in high school. The student will not need to pass this SOL for graduation and will, therefore, not have a vested interest in passing this test. The results of the tests will be used to measure the overall school's proficiency in mathematics. This misalignment of the federal and state policies creates a conundrum for local districts.

Virginia's Response to ESSA. Virginia's plan to meet the federal requirements of ESSA includes making schools accountable for nine key indicators (Virginia's revised standards, 2017). These nine indicators are (1) overall proficiency in English reading/writing and the progress of English learners toward English-language proficiency; (2) overall proficiency in mathematics; (3) overall proficiency in science; (4) English achievement gaps among student groups; (5) mathematics achievement gaps among student groups; (6) graduation and completion index; (7) dropout rate; (8) absenteeism; and (9) college, career and civic readiness (effective 2021-2022). Schools will receive credit for students who make progress in English and/or math, focusing more on growth than actual proficiency. VDOE argues that this "provides a more balanced evaluation of schools serving at-risk students" (VDOE, 2018). For each of the nine areas, schools will receive a rating of Level One, Level Two, or Level Three, based on clearly defined measures. For example, in order to earn a Level One on the English combined pass rate, schools must have a pass rate of 75% or a 10% decrease in failure. Level One means schools should continue to monitor data associated with the indicator and review multiyear plans. Level Two requires a revision to the multiyear improvement plan and implementation measures to improve performance on that indicator. Level Three requires a

corrective action plan to improve performance on that indicator and an academic review to be conducted by the VDOE. Based on these indicators, schools earn one of three ratings: Accredited, Accredited with Conditions, Accreditation Denied. These ratings are defined as:

- Accredited: Schools with all school-quality indicators at either Level One or Level Two.
- Accredited with Conditions: Schools with one or more school-quality indicators at Level Three.
- Accreditation Denied: Schools that fail to adopt or fully implement required corrective actions to address Level Three school-quality indicators (VDOE, 2018).

Virginia continues to forge its own path in that, with the new SOAs, localities are required to create their own systems to meet these accreditation requirements. In order for local school districts and local schools to respond to these new requirements, they must first make sense of what these changes mean and then take steps to implement action steps to ensure school accreditation.

Factors that Drive Policy in Education

Policies in education are driven by a desire to address "perceived societal problems" (Hope, 2002, p. 40). As mentioned previously, the United States has developed many policies in an attempt to improve perceived societal problems such as inequities in education and national competitiveness. However, there are other reasons for an increase in policy in schools--the perception of failing schools, fiscal accountability, and social responsibility--are discussed in this section.

The first factor is the perception of failing schools. According to the 2018 Phi Delta Kappan poll on public education, 46% rate public schools as a C and 35% rate public schools as either a D or Failing. Additionally, 55% of respondents reported that today's students receive a

worse education than they did. A plethora of policy mandates have surfaced as a result of this perception. The perception of schools as failing is the societal problem with which policy aims to improve teaching and learning, resulting in policy mandates in today's schools. Paradoxically, this perception of failing schools was created by the increase in policy in education (Schneider, 2017). The standards movement, for example, created public access to standardized test results. Without considering factors such as individual student and family background, which can account approximately 60% of the variance (Goldhaber, Brewer, & Anderson, 1999), the public uses the standardized results for their perception on the quality of public schools.

Another factor is fiscal accountability. As a result of these policies, schools encumber a significant amount of the state and local budgets, creating an environment where policies are inevitable. According to the U.S. Department of Education, an estimated $1.15 trillion dollars was spent at all levels for the 2012-2013 school year. While education falls onto state and local responsibility, the federal government contributed approximately 8% (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Taxpayers and lawmakers want accountability for how their money is being utilized and how the actions result in student achievement (Phelps, Durham & Wills, 2011).

Another important factor is social responsibility; education is viewed as "a significant lever of change" (Honig, 2006). Whereas it was once acceptable to drop-out of high school and live a comfortable life, high school dropouts now face fiscal and social ramifications. Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics cite that high dropouts earn about $8,000 less per year than high school graduates and $26,500 less per year than college graduates (The High Cost of High School Dropouts, 2019). Socially, high school dropouts are 3.5 times more likely to be arrested and more than eight times as likely to be incarcerated (Christenson, Lee, Schaefer, Kass, & Messner-Zidell, 2008). As a result, one-third of high school dropouts in the 25-34-year-old range were living in poverty in 2008 (Amos, 2010). Local, state, and federal programs absorb

the burden of helping those living in poverty, translating the dropout problem from a personal problem to a national one. As a result of these factors, many policies find their way into schools, requiring policy implementation from local district and school-level leaders.

This section discussed how policy efforts in the past have not only increased, but also resulted in minimal change due to the complexity of individual sensemaking in multifaceted systems. The next section focuses on an overview of policy implementation and discusses the four major strands found in the literature about policy implementation.

Overview of the Literature on Policy Implementation

Policy implementation is a complex process, which encompasses many different facets. This introductory section provides an overview of what is known from the literature about policy implementation. This section covers how policy implementation is defined, four strands in the literature on policy implementation: internal factors, external factors, multilevel factors, and approaches to studying policy implementation.

Defining Policy Implementation

Broadly speaking, policy implementation is a process to bring change to a social system. As policy implementation takes on different roles in different situations, a variety of definitions exist for the term. Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), considered the founding fathers of implementation, define implementation as a process of interaction between the goals and the actions. Elmore (1978) delineated four main aspects of policy implementation: (1) clear tasks and objectives, (2) management plan, (3) means of measuring performance, and (4) management controls. O'Toole (2000) defines policy implementation as "what develops between the establishment of an apparent intention on the part of government to do something, or to stop doing something, and the ultimate impact in the world of action" (p. 266). While all

of these definitions may sound rather simple in theory, in practice numerous challenges impede implementation. Policy implementation is a complex process, involving a change in an already complex setting. Between the different actors, levels of implementation (i.e. macro vs. micro), and the contextual setting, unraveling the actual motives, actions, and beliefs proves to be difficult. The research on policy implementation is even more challenging as there are many different theoretical traditions which researchers use to explore the study of policy implementation. Consequently, researchers are left with different definitions of implementation and no agreed upon set of terms or methods to study implementation (Young and Lewis, 2015; Fixsen et. al., 2005; Hill & Hupe, 2002).

Four Strands of Policy Implementation

The literature around policy implementation centers around four strands—internal factors, external factors, multi-level factors, and approaches to studying policy implementation. Literature on internal factors focus on what happens within a person and how his/her background experiences, values, skill, and will influence implementation. Literature on external factors, contrarily, emphasize how people are influenced by their external settings, organizations, and networks. These studies argue that individuals do not live in a vacuum and, consequently, are constantly being influenced by their environment. The third strand of literature acknowledges the complexity of policy implementation as a multi-level process in which the policy is interpreted and, implemented, by a variety of actors at a variety of levels (i.e. federal, state, local, building). Finally, the fourth strand of the literature focuses on the three approaches to studying policy implementation: first generation/top-down, second generation/bottom-up, and third generation.

Focus on Internal Factors

Internal factors center around human behavior and motivation. The goal of any policy is to influence human behavior and most theories of policy implementation are rooted in assumptions about human behavior (Coburn, 2016). One assumption is that individual actors make choices to capitalize on their own personal interest (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Coburn, 2016). Studies using this approach try to discover what thoughts, experiences, motivations, and values influence the way in which policy is implemented.

Focusing on internal factors unveils some of the possible reasons why policy on paper has not translated to policy in action. Successful implementation depends on the ground-level actors who have to first understand the policy and then implement it. Lipsky, who coined the terms "street-level bureaucrats" identified the importance of implementing actors as the "last link in the policy-making chain…where social policy comes to life" (Rice, 2012, p. 1039). Consequently, to understand implementation better requires an in-depth look at the implementer.

Most policy reforms failed in both the standards era and the accountability era because of individual understanding (or lack thereof) of the policy. It is this "underinvestment in teacher [and local leaders] knowledge [that] has killed many a reform in the past" (Darling-Hammond, 1990, p. 345). During this time period, researchers of policy implementation found that implementation "varied because practitioners drew on prior knowledge and practices to interpret the reforms, leading them to construct policy messages in ways that either reinforced pre-existing practices or focused on surface-level forms of the reform proposal" (Coburn, Hill, & Spillane, 2016, p. 245). Studies from the literature focus on the street-level bureaucrat and his/her skill and will (Narendra & Paudel, 2019).

Skill. In order to implement policy, actors need the knowledge, skills, and resources (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). They have to understand the policy, how to craft a plan, and use resources strategically. O'Laughlin and Lindle (2014), for example, studied how principals' roles as street-level bureaucrats impacted school-level practices regarding IDEA's Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) mandate. Alarmingly, they found that leaders did not completely understand the law and, as a result, did not implement practices to ensure LRE at their schools. Additionally, because of their lack of complete understanding, principals relied on the special education teachers to ensure LRE rather than creating conditions and procedures to guarantee these guidelines were implemented.

Will. The implementing actor must also have the will to implement. Tammers and Bekkers (2014) defined the willingness to implement as "a positive behavioural intention of the street-level bureaucrat towards the implementation of the policy" (p. 531). Two terms often associated with the implementing actor willingness to implement are buffering and bridging. Schecthter and Shaked (2016) define these two terms as:

- Buffering: an activity aimed at preventing external factors from interfering with the organization's functioning.
- Bridging: seeks to adapt organizational activities in order to conform to the expectations of external stakeholders.

Both actions demonstrate how street-level bureaucrats have discretionary power with how they implement policy. The choice to buffer or bridge lies with competing priorities and values (Young & Lewis, 2015). Printy and Williams (2014) conducted a study that exemplified how street-level leaders used buffering or bridging when implementing policy. They studied the link between principals' perceptions regarding Response to Intervention (RTI) to their implementation

practices. They found that when RTI aligned with the priorities of the school and the building leader supported it, RTI was implemented to promote student achievement. Additionally, they found that "school level leaders heavily rely on the actions…from district leadership to inform implementation at their school site" (p. 10). In this case, some assume that implementers "[do] not always do as told…nor [do] they act to maximize policy objectives" (McLaughlin, 1987, p. 172). However, Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002) argue that these images of implementers as "resisters and saboteurs working to circumvent the policy proposals that do not advance their self-interest are insufficient" (p. 391). An important factor in the individual's willingness to implement is the "extent to which organizations are willing and able to delegate decision making authority to the front line" (Tummers & Bekkers, 2014, p. 531). The next section focuses on the external factors created by organizations.

Focus on External Factors

External factors are those influences that happen outside of an individual, such as organizational structures and networks, that play an important role in shaping individual's thought and action (Coburn, 2016). Since policy travels both vertically (from federal to state to local) and horizontally (from buildings to buildings, networks to networks), it is essential to examine how these external factors affect the implementing actor (Young & Lewis, 2015). Destler (2017) conducted a study to "shift the analysis from the micro-level of individual interactions to the organizational level" (p. 518). Successful implementation requires fundamental changes to organizational behavior as it "requires not only adopting new practices but also 'un-learning' prior assumptions" (Destler, 2017, p. 518).

Structures are implicit in all policy implementation practices. Local considerations include resources, student needs, community expectations, and "wide variety of constraints

imposed by existing policies, many of which stand as direct and indirect obstacles to the pursuit of the new policy intentions (Darling-Hammond, 1990, p. 343). Implementing actors negotiate multiple external demands and are left "crafting coherence" for their specific setting (Honig, 2004). For example, Carraway and Young studied the implementation of the Skillful Observation and Coaching Laboratory (SOCL) to help principals become more effective instructional leaders. Carraway and Young found that principals combined some aspects of SOCL with their existing teacher evaluation instrument because of the structural conditions of "managing the school, competing district initiatives, the time and effort required to fully implement SOCL, and their perception of the tasks as complementary" (Young & Lewis, 2015, p 11).

Another key organizational structure that can derail implementation efforts is location. Location is the context in which the policy takes place and interacts with policy (Young & Lewis, 2015). Jabbar (2016) studied principal efforts to attract students in post-Katrina New Orleans. In an effort to improve schools, the New Orleans school district created school choice options for parents. District leaders sought the "market hierarchy and competitive network" to lead school improvement (Coburn, 2016, p. 467). School leaders in struggling locations faced very different constraints than their peers in more affluent locations, exemplifying the structural constraints on individual action. This study demonstrates the need to study implementation from a multi-level focus, which marks the third strand of the literature on policy implementation.

Another key organization structure which can thwart implementation of change is its tendency to become institutionalized. Using research from neo-institutional theory, Bray and Russell (2016) studied "why schools in diverse contexts with little interaction look so much alike" (p. 369). These patterns of sameness were examined in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings in two high schools in different districts. They found that despite

the need to individualize education for students, the meetings all looked disturbingly the same. According to IDEA policy, parents and students should be active collaborators in the decision-making process. Yet in all the meetings observed, very few comments were made by parents and students, showing evidence that implementation on these IEP meetings had fallen victim to the vicious cycle of comfort in the known rather than change in the unknown. Paradoxically, Honig (2006) argues that the process of institutionalization is at the root of policy implementation. In other words, in order for policy implementation to truly shape and organization's actions, the policy becomes an integral component of the organization's existence.

The structures within organizations ultimately affect how individuals implement policies. Marz, Kelchtermans, and Dumay (2016) studied how structure affects agency. They studied how mentor teachers "actively construct meaning within a shifting policy context" (p. 306). Over a three-year period, researchers interviewed teachers and observed mentoring activities, specifically the mentors' beliefs about mentoring. The results from this study show that individual actors have some "degree of agency within the broader context of institutional structures and processes" (Marz, Kelchtermans & Dumay, 2016, p. 312). Because of this, it is important to understand both the individual sensemaking and the organizational structures in the implementation process.

Focus on Multi-level Factors

The third strand of literature on policy implementation highlights the importance of how perceptions of policies are shaped by an individual's environment and experiences (Coburn, 24. 2016). Individuals' understanding of the policy and how it fits in with their environment and experiences shape the implementation. A state-level actor, for example, might have a very

different vision of how the policy should be implemented compared to the district and/or school leaders.

The levels through which a policy travels convolute this process even more, as different individuals at different levels (state, district, school) influence the policy on its way to implementation. Policy implementation unfolds at different levels and from different actors. Matland (1995) notes that "at the macroimplemention level, centrally located actors devise a government program; at the microimplementation level, local organizations react to the macrolevel plans, develop their own programs, and implement them" (p. 148).

The policy process exemplifies the convoluted path policy travels from inception to implementation. Policy implementation is a process that begins with identifying a policy problem and then formulating a policy. Public policy "entails the broad statement of future goals and actions and expresses the means of attaining them" (Khan & Khandaker, 2016, p. 539). Policy hinges on implementation and implementation "implies the involvement of multiple actors on different layers" (Hupe, 2014, p. 173). At the macro level, federal policy makers create policy. This is then communicated down to the state level, the district level, and finally, to the micro level of individual school level. The policy process can be seen as either "separate, identifiable" stages or as an "ongoing process" (Hupe & Hill, 2016, p. 105). Young and Lewis (2015) recognize the need to study these multi-levels as they argue for future studies on policy implementation to examine the "full extent of vertical and horizontal interaction" to understand variation in implementation (p. 14).

As a result of these levels, implementers are often faced with policy ambiguity. That is, they enact policy within their local contexts, often without clear direction from policymakers (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Matland (1995) identifies two categories of ambiguity:

ambiguity of goals and ambiguity of means. By the time the policy presents itself to school level leaders, it has been funneled through the different levels, each one with an actor trying to make sense of it. At that point, the goals and means might not be as clear to the implementing actor. Some researchers argue that the more ambiguous the policy, the more sensemaking becomes key to policy implementation (Matland, 1995). When ambiguous policy requires implementers to find answers, learning occurs, which could be the impetus to change in the organization.

To try to mediate between policy makers and policy implementers, Honig (2004) identifies the need for "intermediary organizations" to assist with implementation practices (p. 65). Intermediary organizations "operate between policymakers and policy implementers to enable changes in roles and practices for both parties" (Honig, 2004, p. 66). In schools, the state level best fits the definition and works to submit a plan to the federal government and work with districts to implement this policy. Moreover, an intermediary could mediate between school districts and schools. As such, the sensemaking of each actor involved could essentially change the course of the policy direction.

Due to the internal, external, and multi-level factors, it is no wonder that implementation research demonstrates that policies are rarely implemented as written nor necessarily as intended (Rigby, Woulfin, & Marz, 2016; Cohen & Hill, 2001). Policy implementation is not simply a series of steps to be followed, but a complex process influenced by underlying assumptions and a multitude of different factors. The following section historically traces different approaches to policy implementation: first generation, second generation, and third generation policy implementation.

Approaches to Policy Implementation--Three Generations

Honig (2006) identifies three generations or waves in a historical look at education policy

implementation —a focus on what gets implemented, attention to what gets implemented over time, and growing concerns with what works. Table 1 summarizes the key points of these waves.

Table 1

Honig's (2016) Three Waves of Education Policy Implementation

Wave	Years	Policy	Policy Implementation
One	1960s	ESEA 1965	Distributive, categorical, regulatory (policy)
Two	1970s	Title I	Shaped by macro and micro influences (people)
Three	1980s	NCLB	Focus on places as unit of analysis (places)

First Generation Approach. First generation approaches to studying policy implementation, also known as top-down approaches, focus on policy making. Theorists using this approach see policy makers as the key actors and look at how variables can be manipulated at the top level (Matland, 1995; Cerna, 2013; deLeon & deLeon, 2002; Matland, 1995). Policy implementation was viewed as "two parties acting in opposition to one another, not so much because one was correct but because both thought they were doing the right thing" (deLeon & deLeon, 2002, p. 469).

This approach can be seen in the 1960s with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965. The Great Society Period of the 1960s uncovered those students marginalized by the education system. As a result, the federal government initiated an exorbitant number of new policies that more than tripled federal funding (Kantor, 1991). This new federal presence in education was symbolized by ESEA. Aimed at eradicating

poverty, this act established federal standards to require schools to provide more equitable treatment to disadvantaged students. Top-down policies such as ESEA drew more attention to the policy and created compliance (Honig, 2006; Kantor, 1991).

Several factors made implementation of ESEA difficult. While the policy goal was clear--to improve opportunities for all students to achieve--its guidelines were vague (McGuinn, 2015). Bailey and Mosher (1968) studied the implementation of ESEA and found that failed for several reasons. Primarily, they found that the policy involved multiple goals and methods that sometimes were incompatible with one another. Second, federal administrators lacked the power and the skillset to force compliance. Another obstacle was the opposition to increased federal involvement in education (McGuinn, 2015). All of these exemplify the focus of the actual policy in the implementation process.

Second Generation Approach. Second generation approaches, also known as bottom up approaches, argue that implementation should be studied from the ground level. They recognized that policies in print do not always equate to changes in action. The success or failure of reform policies lies with the act of policy implementation. The focus on the ground level was highlighted by the groundbreaking study by Pressman and Wildavsky, marked by their book *Implementation: How Great Expectations in Washington Are Dashed in Oakland* (1973). In Pressman and Wildavsky's case study, the U.S. Economic Development Administration funded a project in Oakland, California, with the intended purpose of creating permanent jobs for minorities. Accounting for resources and buy-in from local actors, the project remained stagnant for several years underscoring the importance of policy implementation at the ground level. The key actors are the street-level bureaucrats who will put the policy into action. Because there is such "wide variation in how the same national policy is implemented at the local level" (Matland, 1995, p.

148), proponents of bottom-up want to uncover the variables that make policies work or not work.

Third Generation Approach. Third generation approaches are an attempt to blend the two prior generations—underscoring the importance of looking at policy implementation from a multi-level perspective (Matland, 1995; Khan & Khandaker, 2016). One way of digesting these multi-level perspectives is by looking at organizational structure and individual agency.

Third generation approaches, introduced by Goggin and his colleagues in 1990, recognized the complexity of implementation studies (O'Toole, 2000). Goggin et al. sought to understand "why behavior varies across time, across policies, and across units of government" (deLeon & deLeon, 2002, p. 471). This approach to policy implementation research focused on factors such as organizational structure and individual agency. Policy implementation can be shaped by both organizational structure and individual agency. Structure encompasses the procedures and resources, or "the way in which we understand how things should be done, practices organized around those understandings, and capabilities that support those understandings" (Rigby, Woulfin, & Marz, 2016, p. 296; Marz, Kelchtermans, & Dumay, 2016, p. 304). Agency, on the other hand, involves an individual's capacity to take action. The relationship between structure and agency provides a lens from which to analyze policy implementation in a complex field such as education (Rigby, Woulfin & Marz, 2016; Coburn, 2016).

Today's policy makers rely on the local actors for implementation and learned they must work with local actors. The Michigan math standards in the early 1900s provide an example for which today's policy makers have learned. In Michigan, policy makers formulated math standards intended to change classroom practice and education outcomes. However, because the

standards were interpreted differently by the individual implementers, little change was made (Rothman, 2012). Honig (2006) identifies the complexity of implementation as she states, "the essential implementation questions then becomes not simply 'what's implementable and works, but 'what is implementable and what works for whom, where, when, and why'" (p. 2). Understanding not only the policy, but also the people and the places, can help guide policy makers to write implementable policy.

Using a Cognitive Lens to Uncover Sensemaking in Policy Implementation

This section gives an overview of sensemaking and delineates three components of sensemaking: the individual, the situation/context, and the policy message. Sensemaking offers a lens with which to unpack the complexity of individual cognition of new policy initiatives.

Sensemaking

According to Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002), "most conventional [implementation] theories fail to take account of the complexity of human sense-making" (p. 391). Weick (1995) argues that sensemaking is less about discovery than it is about invention (p. 13), which means it is not synonymous with interpretation. One of the main characteristics of sensemaking is that it is "grounded in identity construction," which is an "ongoing puzzle undergoing continual redefinition, coincident with presenting some self to others and trying to decide which self is appropriate" (Weick, 1995, p. 20). In other words, sensemaking is an iterative process discovered by how and what people think. Sensemaking "begins when people experience a violation of their expectations, or when they encounter an ambiguous event or issue that is of some significance to them" (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 77).

Maitlis and Christianson (2014) describe ontological differences regarding where sensemaking takes place--within or between individuals. Those who believe sensemaking

happens *within* individuals rely heavily on the cognitive sciences (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). Cognition is founded upon the premise that new information is interpreted with the lens of what is already understood (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). This takes into account a person's prior knowledge and experiences as influencing what he notices and how to respond to the new information. As part of the cognitive process, a person uses schemas--knowledge structures that capture related concepts to make sense of the stimuli and make predictions (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002).

Those who believe sensemaking happens *between* individuals focus on the social processes. As people do not live in vacuums, it is a generally agreed upon idea that social processes do affect individual sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Cunliffe and Coupland (2012) draw attention to the "polyphony...for which people try to make life sensible by responding to and taking into account polyphony of 'other' voices" (p. 71). Known also as collective sensemaking, members of an organization interpret their environment through interaction with each other (Seashore Louis, Febey, & Schroeder, 2005; Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sicilano, et.al., 2017). Collective sensemaking is not a formal and deliberate activity, but "emerges from frequent informal communication that leads to common actions or agreed-upon activities" (Seashore Louis, Febey, Schroeder, 2005, p. 179). Peer dialogue, for example, marks an essential influential component of individual sensemaking. Defined as institutional logics by Thornton and Ocasio (1999), the relationships between and among different contexts led to "powerful patterns of social action that influence or control how actors ought to think and act" (Marz, Kelchtermans, & Duman, 2016, p. 307). Schools that focus merely on the results of standardized tests, for example, will foster conversations and implementation actions centered around those results rather than pedagogical practices (Seashore Louis, Febey, & Schroeder, 2005). This message trickles down from the district level and is

either reinforced or refuted by peer groups. Depending on who the implementing actor respects can affect the direction of the implementation.

Integrative Approach to Sensemaking

To understand how a person makes sense of a new stimuli requires an in-depth look at both the individual's cognitive process and those factors that influence his/her belief system. In "'the space before the action,' street level bureaucrats form perceptions of a new policy, and those beliefs, in turn, influence their implementation behavior" (Sicilano, et.al., 2017, p. 889). Sensemaking theory involves examining the many factors that influence individual perception, which in turn affects policy implementation. An integrative approach to understand how individuals make sense of new policy involves the individual/people, the situation/place, and the policy message/policy (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Honig, 2016).

The Individual/People. A key factor for sensemaking is an individual's own cognition. McLaughlin (1991) underscores the importance of this by stating "organizations don't innovate or implement change; individuals do" (p. 189). Individual cognition is influenced by the local actor's knowledge/schema, beliefs, and experiences (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Cohen & Ball, 1990; McLaughlin, 1991, Weick, 1995). According to social cognition theorists, learning is connecting information to what is already understood. The schema of different individuals will then result in interpreting the same message differently. For example, a teacher who goes through the process of National Board Certification and has been exposed to the power of self-reflection will understand a policy change on adding self-reflection to the teacher evaluation process differently from a teacher who has never been exposed to self-reflection. An individual's schemas can also lead to a misunderstanding of a policy as "fundamental conceptual change require[s] restructuring of existing knowledge is extremely difficult" (Spillane, Reiser, &

Reimer, 2002, p. 398; Strike & Posner, 1985). Several studies highlight this phenomenon. Spillane and Zeuli (1999), for example, studied 25 teachers who reported they were familiar with and supported the national math standards and believed they were implementing them. They found that teachers saw the standards through the lens of their current practice, and the understanding they constructed failed to reflect the sort of fundamental changes.

Restructuring of existing knowledge constitutes an important part of sensemaking. In order to effect substantive change, policy must create some cognitive dissonance but not too much (Ellis, 2016). This requires actors to "accommodate" or restructure existing knowledge (Piaget, 1972). Without this dissonance or restructuring, the implementing agent will merge the new reform ideas into their existing beliefs and practices, resulting in little to no change in action.

The Situation/Place. Another key factor for sensemaking for an individual is social construction of knowledge. Individual thoughts, beliefs, and actions are influenced by the broader context in which they are situated. Policy comes to implementing actors in a "complex web of organizational structures, professional affiliations, social networks, and traditions" (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002, p. 404). These "thought communities" (Spillane, et. al., 2002) influence how a person thinks and behaves and leads to an institutional perspective. Institutional theory suggests that the norms, traditions, rules of institutions such as schools both constrain and enable action (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Moreover, social systems are emergent—they are shaped over time and across space. This constant state of influx creates an unpredictable environment for which policy implementation occurs.

Policy actors are involved with both formal and informal networks that affect their understanding of policy. Principals, for example, usually group monthly to discuss key issues and policies. While these meetings might prove to influence how principals understand policies,

it is the informal networks they create that can be much more powerful. These bonds are formed when principals gravitate authentically to others they respect, admire, and/or relate.

Additionally, in order for large-scale reforms to take root, they must redefine the norms and values (Coburn, 2001; Honig, 2006) of the organization. For example, school leaders must contend with their organizational climate as it affects how they implement new policies. Organization climate is "the sum of members' perceptions about the nature of authority/decision making, interpersonal relationships and the work itself" (Destler, 2016, p. 518). Destler (2016) conducted a study demonstrating how organizational climate shapes street-level bureaucrats' performance management and found organizational climates that value human relations contribute to reform efforts.

The Policy Message. A policy's message is "an external representation that demonstrates that problems have been targeted, and it represents what is included in and excluded from the problems" (Louis, Febey, & Schroder, 2005, p. 180). Spillman (1999) argues that "language is key in this process because it is the chief medium that policymakers have for representing their ideas" (p. 155). Policy messages create the signal from which local actors must act. These messages can be clear or ambiguous, formal or informal, and can be distorted as they travel through the multi-levels of governance.

The language used in a policy can be extremely clear, extremely unclear, or somewhere in the middle. Paradoxically, "vagueness of the policy's language is a strength" in that "it may broaden the appeal of the reform movement" (Cohen & Ball, 1990, p. 331). Additionally, the message has to travel through a multitude of systems before it reaches the implementer. District level leaders are often seen as "boundary spanners" (Honig, 2006; Woulfin, Donaldson, & Gonzales, 2016) mediating between the state, the district, and the school. As a result, policy actors often receive different policy messages from numerous sources.

Regardless of the policy message, a universal belief is that the implementing person's interpretation of any message is related to his or her own experiences, beliefs, and knowledge (Cohen & Ball, 1990). It is because of this that a sensemaking lens offers a way to understand how individuals and organizations make sense of policy and how that understanding affects implementation.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This chapter introduces the research design and methods for this qualitative case study regarding how school leaders make sense of policy change and how that understanding affects implementation. The case study design allows for an in-depth analysis of how individual cognition is influenced by organizational structure and how agency affects implementation. The research plan including the design, methods, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations are the main focus of this chapter.

Research Design

As implementation involves a myriad of understanding and decisions, it is a difficult concept to study. Case studies offer a way to focus on one situation (one school district in Virginia), relevant stakeholders (district and school level leaders), and one particular moment in time (Yin, 2009). Since the research will involve multiple units of analysis, an embedded case studies approach will be utilized. Embedded case studies give the researcher the power to look at subunits within a larger case study (Yin, 2009).

This qualitative study is designed as a case study design (e.g., Gustafsson, 2017; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). As per the literature on case studies, the cases to be focused on are embedded and tiered including relevant state level officials at both the district level and the school level. O'Toole (2002) argues for cases studies because "research performed in ignorance of the understanding that implementation actors themselves have about their circumstances is likely to miss important parts of the explanation for what happens" (p. 269). The tiered design facilitates understanding how policy implementation is communicated up and down from those charged with formulating and overseeing policy implementation and those charged with actual, ground level implementation. The embedded design allows for more than one unit of analysis (Yin, 36

2009). The units of analysis in the case study include both the district leaders and the school level leaders. Cases are also bound in some nature. In this case the case study is bound by time, specifically the first full year of implementation of the policy of interest. Within the context of one school district in Virginia and one policy topic, the revised Standards of Accreditation, several key district leaders and school leaders will serve as the units of analysis.

Methods

This study uses a case study design to explore and assess the SOA implementation experiences of five high schools within a large, urban district in Virginia. The focus of this research is on how the SOA policy is implemented at the school level. Key to this study is understanding the verticality of implementation (state, district, and high school officials) in order to provide a focused examination of the implementation experiences across multiple levels. In one defined school district, sixteen school leaders will be invited to participate in the study. Five leaders will be from the district leadership and five leaders will be from school-level leadership, creating two units of analysis. Within the school level, two school sites will be selected to interview other key stakeholders, namely an assistant principal, a teacher leader, and the school improvement specialist.

Participant Sampling

From the large school district in Virginia, participants were selected based upon their role in implementing policy at the district and school level. These key positions include stakeholders from a variety of departments in order to delve more deeply into specialized areas (i.e. Teaching and Learning, School Leadership, School Counseling, and Testing and Accountability). At the school level, school principals from a variety of diverse settings were invited to participate and were selected based upon willingness to participate.

Data Collection

Data collection was designed to explore the implementation experiences across each of the four areas reflected in the Standards of Quality including 1) attendance, 2) graduation rates, 3) college, career, and civic readiness, and 4) academic performance in mathematics, English, and science. Interviews served as the primary data collection method, and observations and document analysis served as the secondary data sources.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method. Because it is presumed that different leaders address policy implementation in ways unique to their experiences and needs, interviews began with five district leaders to get a broad view of how the district is implementing the policy. At the school level, five principals were interviewed and three other school leaders at two of the schools were interviewed for deeper analysis of ground level implementation. At the two school sites, the interviews were conducted with one of the assistant principals, the school improvement specialist, and a teacher leader.

Sixteen interviews were conducted in all. Interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes in length, resulting in over sixteen hours and 328 pages of transcriptions. 211 pages were school based, and 117 pages were district based. All interviews were transcribed using Rev, an online transcription company. All interviews were uploaded into NVIVO and analyzed for key themes.

Interview questions were developed to identify key factors that each leader uses in the sensemaking process. These include questions about their background experiences, their informal and formal networks, and their process for understanding policy (see Appendix B for a list of all interview questions).

Documents

Documents served as another source of data where appropriate. In order to corroborate the information gleaned from the interviews, the school district's strategic framework, each school's Plan for Continuous Improvement (PCI), and data reports were examined. Each school's PCI shows the priorities for school and reveals how the new policies make their way into action plans at the ground level. Data reports such as attendance records were utilized to understand how each school is making sense of the new SOAs. Using documents allows for an analysis of how school leaders' understanding of the SOAs result in implementation action.

Observations

Key to this study is how the policy is actually making its way into action at the school level. Observations of school support meetings offered an opportunity to see this unfold. Schools in Oakleaf School District meet at least three times a year with district-level leaders to discuss their PCIs. Known as school support meetings, they are usually scheduled at the beginning of the year, the middle of the year, and at the end of the year. Schools not performing as well as others might be required to meet more than three times. Therefore, observations of these school support meetings were essential for triangulating the data from the interviews and documents. All five principals selected for interviews agreed to these observations. Each school support meeting lasted approximately sixty minutes.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed the traditional process for analyzing qualitative data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The approach taken was a thematic analysis, an exploratory framework allowing the researcher to consider and code all of the data for new ideas or impressions. This open analysis allowed for new impressions to shape interpretations in different and unexpected directions. Interviews and documents were first transcribed using a professional transcription

company. These transcriptions were then uploaded into NVivo to be reviewed and coded by examining transcripts line by line looking for themes, properties and dimensions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

Forty-one codes were created from the sixteen interviews using open coding. From these codes, several were combined to show the dimensions of larger categories. Once this coding was complete, axial coding was used to identify three overarching themes. The three overarching themes were (1) policy ambiguity, (2) factors affecting sensemaking, and (3) communication methods and effectiveness. Analysis was aided by member checks to ensure that analysis resonates with the experiences of those implementing the policy (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is established with credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). Selecting the appropriate school leaders to interview is one way to increase credibility. Selected school leaders will have a direct connection to both understanding the new SOAs and implementing them. Data will be triangulated as a means to ensure both credibility and dependability. Document analysis and observations will help compensate for any distortions made by the interview process.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher is a local school leader in the study being conducted. She has worked in this school district for seventeen years as a teacher, literacy coach, and currently as an assistant principal. She holds a bachelor of arts degree in English, a masters of art degree in instruction, and a certification in school administration. While she is familiar with and has worked with the participants in the study, no direct relationship poses any conflict of interest.

Strengths and Limitations of the Design

As with all research designs, there are both strengths and limitations. The small sample size contributes to both strengths and limitations. It allows for in-depth analysis of the cognition of individuals in school leadership roles. Because it is a small sample size, however, limited data was collected. Focusing on one school district also offers both strengths and limitations. It allows the researcher to unravel the sensemaking within a bound context of the school district. However, the study is limited to one school district, which will provide only one perspective of how school districts are adjusting to the policy change.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were a top priority in this study. Approval was granted by the Internal Review Board (see Appendix A). Each participant was offered a copy of the informed consent (see Appendix B), outlining the procedures, risks, and benefits to be learned as a result of this study. Minimal risks to human subjects result from participating in the study. All participants were over the age of 18 and none of them demonstrated any impaired cognition, as evidenced by the positions they held in the school district. All identifying personal information such as names and titles have been redacted to protect the identity of the participants while maintaining the integrity of the study.

Researcher Biases

In qualitative research, a key instrument is the researcher. As such, my role as researcher will bring some biases into this study. Primarily, as an assistant principal in a high school, the implementation of this policy change directly affects my daily work. As I interviewed others and

analyzed data from their perspectives, it is possible that my own experiences and perceptions could seep their way into the data.

Summary

The goal of this chapter was to outline the methods used to answer the research questions. A discussion of the design, methods, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations delineated the procedures used to conduct the study. Embedded case study methodology was used to discover the phenomenon of sensemaking and how that understanding contributes to policy implementation. The next chapter, Chapter IV, will discuss the findings of the research.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This chapter provides the findings and results of the qualitative study using case study as the method to answer four research questions. The research questions are:

- RQ1: How and in what ways do district and school leaders in one district make sense of a new state level education policy aimed at influencing local level practice?
- RQ2: What contextual factors or individual beliefs influence the ways local district and school leaders understand the intent of these policies?
- RQ3: How do these factors or beliefs influence policy implementation?
- RQ4: What can we learn about how school leaders make sense of the policy implementation in their organizational settings and how can we leverage that learning for future implementation?

The purpose of this research was to examine how district and school level leaders in one school district make sense of policy change. The research used interviews, observations, and document analysis conducted with both district level leaders and school level leaders. The research also aimed to provide further insight into how specific actors' understanding affects implementation at their level.

This chapter begins with the demographics of the selected school district and participants involved in this study. Then the focus turns to the three emergent themes— unambiguous and ambiguous policy and sensemaking, internal and external factors affecting sensemaking, and finally, communication in a multi-level system.

Population and Sample

The population utilized in this study was a sampling of five district level leaders and five high school principals in the Oakleaf School District. The Oakleaf School District consists

of eleven comprehensive high schools, one charter school, and one alternative school; fifteen middle schools, and fifty-five elementary schools. In total, the Oakleaf School District serves over 66,000 students. This district is comprised of 48% Caucasian, 23% black/African American, 14% Hispanic/Latino, 10% multi-racial, 6% Asian.

Demographics and Experiences of Participants

Ten school level leaders participated in this study--five district level leaders and five school level leaders. Additionally, three other leaders were selected at two of the schools to conduct a deeper analysis of how policy travels down to the classroom level of implementation. All participants were given pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. Table 2 provides an overview of these participants.

Emergent Themes

After conducting interviews, observing school support meetings, and reading supporting documents, three themes emerged. The first theme is that the degree of policy ambiguity affects sensemaking differently for different leaders. Secondly, both internal and external factors have a significant influence on sensemaking. Finally, communication of an organization--vertical and horizontal--plays an influential role in sensemaking, creating a learning community. Each of these themes will be discussed in the following sections.

Unambiguous and Ambiguous Policies Affect on Sensemaking

The first finding centers around the policy itself and how it affects individual sensemaking and collective sensemaking. How clear or unclear the policy is tends to affect sensemaking for different types of leaders in different types of contexts. Policy

can be unambiguous or ambiguous. *Unambiguous policy* is defined here as a policy that has clearly defined guidelines, outcomes, and/or strategies. *Ambiguous policy*, contrarily, is defined here as a policy that embodies more loosely defined guidelines, outcomes, and/or strategies.

Table 2: *Participating District and School Leaders*

Name	Title	Level of Leadership
Robert Jones	Chief Academic Officer	District
James Smith	Coordinator for Student Services	District
Alain Brown	Director of Secondary Schools	District
Joanne Miller	Director of Accountability	District
Bill Johnson	Ex. Director, Office of Secondary Schools Teaching and Learning	District
John Davis	High School Principal	School
Tony Wilson	High School Principal	School
Jane Williams	High School Principal	School
Evan Young	High School Principal	School
Joe Taylor	High School Principal	School
Amy Green	High School Asst. Principal	School
Daniel Adams	School Improvement Specialist	School
Ann Baker	Special Education Teacher	Teacher
Melissa Scott	High School Assistant Principal	School
Luke Reed	School Improvement Specialist	School
Shannon Jenkins	Social Studies Teacher	Teacher

This section will discuss how the clarity of the policy affects sensemaking. First, unambiguous policy is defined in terms of its established measures, past experiences, and

defined outcomes. This clarity impacts each stakeholder's understanding of what is expected, yet it does not always lead to continuous improvement. Next, ambiguous policy is defined in terms of its non-established measures, first-time experiences, and ill-defined outcomes. The lack of clarity in ambiguous policy affects stakeholders differently. While it affords some leaders the flexibility to make decisions and take risks, it creates confusion and paralysis for other leaders. Finally, this section ends with a look at how these two types of policies relate to organizational climate.

Unambiguous Policy

In this section, unambiguous policy is explored as a key concept in this study. First, the characteristics of unambiguous policy are defined. Next, the examples of unambiguous policy are identified in the revised SOAs. Finally, a discussion of the impact of stakeholders with this type of policy is explored.

Characteristics of Unambiguous Policy

In the scope of this study, three key characteristics emerged from unambiguous policy: established measures, familiarity with these measures, and clearly defined outcomes.

Unambiguous policies are those that contain clearly established measures. These types of policies prescribe how schools will be measured and the type of instrument used to determine growth. For example, in Virginia, schools' academic progress is measured by the state standards of learning (SOL) tests for key content areas. Schools are given blueprints that describe the standards to be covered and delineate how many questions per reporting category. For the End-of-Course English Reading SOL, for example, the state reports the number of questions for fiction standards (20 questions) and the number of questions for nonfiction standards (27 questions) (Virginia Department of Education, 2019). No guesswork or interpretation is needed at the ground level to determine how the class or school will be measured. One of the high

school principals noted his experience with clearly established measures when he recalled: My very first school that I was principal of was right when the SOLs came on board, No Child Left Behind, and I always said we were the poster child for that, for this testing program, because we consistently had scores in the 80's and 90's. What those scores didn't show was that our African American population was passing at the 30% rate but we had enough white Anglo Saxon, well educated parents with kids in the building that our scores stayed up.

Another key aspect of unambiguous policy is the familiarity with the established measures. Leaders at both the district and the school level rely on their past experiences to help them process and determine action steps for school improvement. The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act opened the door to standardized testing and clarity of measures. As such, leaders facing these types of policies are familiar with the expectations and do not undergo any sense of cognitive dissonance. As a principal at one of the high schools in this study, Dr. Kelley recalled his previous experience in administration with NCLB and stated that experience made his school "exceptionally good at desegregating data." Mr. Taylor, another high school principal, reminisced about how he worked to meet the expectations with these measures:

> So I had to start analyzing kind of recovery points, what that means. How do you remediate? How do you watch the cut score on these SOLs? What does it mean to qualify for retesting all of those items that I was not in tune to as an AP on the high school level.

Both principals understand what the expectations are and are capable of analyzing the data because of their familiarity with standardized testing measures.

The final characteristic of unambiguous policy is its clearly defined outcomes. With this type of policy, it is clear what the expectations are for schools to be seen as making progress. In Virginia under the previous standards of accreditation, schools needed to meet predetermined

benchmarks to be accredited at a Level 1: 75% pass rate for English Reading and Writing and 70% pass rate for science and math tests (VDOE, 2019). Again, no sensemaking is necessarily needed to process these policies outcomes. Mr. Taylor drew from his experience at another school to use at his current high school. He stated the clearly defined outcomes in this passage:

> So I think if you're looking at the accreditation piece, it was my three years of Legend Middle School. I mean we were literally one kid, two kids from being accredited or not. I mean, it was that tight. So I was not a middle school person. I taught high school and was a high school AP and I remember I got hired to go to Legend in April, which was great. I had nine weeks to kind of figure out who people were and so forth. My supervisor, Dr Marlow at the time said, "Man, you've got to hit 70 in math or you're not accredited and we're at 52." I remember looking at him like, what to say? How do you know what to say to him? This guy, like he wasn't even involved in interviewing me for the position, but he quickly said, "okay, how are you going to do this?"

The expectations on these outcomes are clearly defined by the district and state level leadership.

Revised SOAs and Unambiguous Policy

Certain aspects of the SOAs remain unambiguous. Under the revised SOAs, schools still are measured by some standardized testing (established measures), though reduced dramatically, in the form of SOL tests--English, science, and math (familiarity with measures). The school quality indicators remain at 75% for English reading and writing and 70% pass rate for science and math. However, schools not meeting these benchmarks can also reach a Level 1 if they decrease their failure rate by at least 10% from the previous year (clearly defined outcomes). Moreover, schools are measured by their achievement gaps in English and math. Other aspects of the SOAs that remain unambiguous are the graduation rates, dropout rates.

Effects on Stakeholders and Impact on System

Unambiguous policies impact stakeholders by providing a sense of comfort to street level bureaucrats, yet they often do not contribute to continuous improvement. In this study, some district and school leaders remained fixated on the standardized tests and the accompanying data. Unable to learn beyond the known, some leaders in this study showed no movement toward change. These leaders named these measures, specifically closing the achievement gaps, as the core of their Plan for Continuous Improvement (PCI) and made specific action steps to meet these goals.

When asked about district priorities, Mr. Brown stated Oakleaf's priorities as the "gaps, addressing gaps, looking specifically at student performance, and the areas where students are not performing to the level of their peers. I think that's been a priority area. I wish that we had priorities in some other areas."

At the school level, Dr. Wilson, shared his PCI which showed the number one priority to be increasing the pass rate for students with disabilities in math and English. The second goal centers around on-time graduation, and the third priority is creating a culture of growth and excellence. During the school support meeting with senior staff at the district level, more than half of the meeting was sharing SOL data. Moreover, the culture of growth and excellence hinged on creating better standardized test scores. Using a common language, focusing on instructional strategies, and giving reflective feedback were at the core of this goal.

In conjunction with Dr. Wilson, three out of the five principals interviewed remained focused on unambiguous aspects of the policy. Dr. Williams also prioritized increasing the pass rate for students with disabilities in math and English. She stated the most difficult aspect of the policy change was figuring out who was testing and communicating that message clearly to all

involved staff members. Her stated priority was “the reading and writing students with disabilities. Because that's where we fell short. We were level ... what was it? the yellow? Level three?” She continued to share how her school’s PCI was impacted by the SOAs:

> One of the goals and strategies to reach that goal is to make sure the students with disabilities in reading and writing, we reduce by 10% the number of failures. So that's the main goal in the PCI. The other goal, of course, is to increase the pass rate and increase the on-time graduation rate, which of course then is affected by the new accreditation.

Dr. Davis also focused his epicenter around the unambiguous policy of standardized testing data and graduation rates. Because his school was one of the lowest in the district for graduation rates, Dr. Davis became fixated on this data and could not see beyond this for other measures of school improvement. He shared his priorities as the following:

> We had two big, broad goals and one was closing achievement gaps which ties right into the SOA's and the other was an on time graduation because we had an abysmal OTG number here at Cobb High School. So a lot of it was just simply paperwork tracking, proper data entry, and we're shoring it up. And so this year we should see a pretty good bump in our OTG.

While still important, the changes to the SOAs and reduction in standardized testing for students were meant to change schools’ focus from standardized testing to future-ready skills. Based on the findings above, the focus has not yet been changed for the majority of the leaders interviewed.

Ambiguous Policy

In this section, ambiguous policy is explored as a key concept in this study. First, the characteristics of ambiguous policy are defined. Next, the examples of ambiguous policy are

identified in the revised SOAs. Finally, a discussion of the impact of stakeholders with this type of policy is explored.

Characteristics of Ambiguous Policy

In the scope of this study, three key characteristics emerged of ambiguous policy: non-established measures, unfamiliarity with practice, and ill-defined outcomes.

Whereas unambiguous policy has clearly established measures, ambiguous policy does not have established measures. While schools and leaders understand the expectations of the standards, they are left to their own accord to make sense of how the expectations can be achieved. Mr. Taylor expressed this clearly when he stated:

> Now how are we going to use this [the reduction to standardized testing] to adjust how we instruct in the future or basically saying this, albatross around your neck for the last 20 years that we've used is for lack of a better term and excuse for why we teach a certain ways beginning to get removed.

The second characteristic for ambiguous policy falls around the realm of unfamiliarity with practice. District and school leaders have lived through or still feel the effects of the accountability era. They understand standardized testing, achievement gaps, remediation plans, and data dialogues. With ambiguous policy, however, leaders are finding themselves in untrodden terrain. They do not have experiences to draw from, situations to learn from, or examples to follow. Instead, leaders at both levels are required to envision, to change, to create, to lead. Dr. Young lamented on the current status of high school principals' understanding of the policy change when he stated, "I still don't think that principals have an idea of what it really means. They really don't."

Finally, ambiguous policy lacks defined outcomes. While these types of policy changes give guidance to some of the outcomes, they leave the "how" entirely up to interpretation and decisions by the local players. With the reduction in standardized testing, the revised SOAs should create some changes to classroom practice but these outcomes are not clearly defined. Districts and schools are supposed to prepare students to be future-ready but are left up to their own guidance to determine how to do this. Mr. Brown expressed these ill-defined policy outcomes when he stated, "the dilemma is each division has to create their own policy that allows for that to occur and then you can substantiate mastery for students."

Revised SOAs and Ambiguous Policy

While the standardized testing, achievement gaps, graduation rates, and dropout rates are considered in this study to be unambiguous, Virginia's revised SOAs also consists of some examples of ambiguous policy. Two of the indicators under student engagement indicator are attendance and college/career readiness. Both of these indicators are examples of ambiguous policy as they do not have established measures, familiarity, or clearly defined outcomes.

For attendance, schools are measured on the number of students who are chronically absent. In order to reach Level 1, schools must have fewer than 15% of students who show chronic absenteeism. Yet schools and districts are required to figure out ways to identify, track, and correct students who fall under this category. That the state labeled attendance under the category "Student Engagement" hints at the fact that the state deems attendance to be a controllable factor for schools. Leaders in this study, however, identify this indicator as being unfair as this is largely not an area that schools can control. Dr. Jones recollected when he tried to argue against including attendance as a marker of school accreditation. He stated:

> I submitted a document to the state against including chronic absenteeism because I believe it penalizes schools of poverty, and it's really out of the school's control as to whether or not that kid's going to come to school. I mean, you can... We don't have supports from the court system because they're overwhelmed. It's just a poor measure.

Dr. Young also stated his concerns with the attendance indicator:

> I also think the chronic absenteeism piece is going to hit some folks hard. And we've stayed ... So this ... Two years ago, we were looking at ... We knew this was coming. We were looking at our rate. I knew we were fine, but I also knew that we had to look at some other measures. And so we were providing feedback at that time, "Well, what are you going to do about kids that go out and they have open heart surgery or these things?" It's legit, but you know? And you're going to call them chronic absentee or truant?. College and career readiness is another indicator in the student engagement section of the

revised SOAs that is ambiguous. Beginning in the 20-21 school year, Virginia DOE states that in order to reach Level 1, schools must reach 85% of students who are college/career ready. While this indicator will be used for accreditation, again, it is an area that is to a large extent, undefined. Districts and schools are left to determine how to identify best teaching practices to move students to become more college/career ready and to create a system to measure college/career readiness. Dr. Johnson explained how Oakleaf was grappling with this indicator:

> Right now, the college and career is tied to a couple of specific courses, like a co op course. So we're petitioning with the state to say, how can we use, like even leadership workshop? If you're a staff member on leadership workshops, either at the school or at the division level, that's a work experience right there. How can we use Eagle Scout?

> That's a work experience we're really leading. How can we use different components of students' lives and bring it in, in a different way?

He explains how a different school district "who has created just a pass fail course, whoever wants the students to bring the documentation in, they get credit for it if it's outside of school somehow." This demonstrates a struggle with districts to figure out how to accomplish this ambiguous indicator.

Effects on Stakeholders

The results of this study found ambiguous policy affects stakeholders differently. Some leaders in study experienced empowerment by the flexibility in the revised SOAs and sought out opportunities for change. Empowered leaders embraced the ambiguity and were making strategic goals and clear action steps to impact classroom practices. Yet, only two out of the five principals interviewed saw the revision in accreditation as an opportunity to change their priorities and focus.

Dr. Young, for example, emphasized his work with creating future ready graduates by developing and applying higher level skills. Working with his administrative team, Dr. Young created interdisciplinary courses such as BioFit (biology and Health/PE pairing), initiated a senior "capstone" passion project, and aligned the Plan for Continuous Improvement (PCI) to develop a shared and focused vision for growth. In the PCI, achievement rates are the fourth priority, not the first, demonstrating a shift in thinking and priorities.

Likewise, Mr. Taylor worked with his leadership team to create a shared vision which focuses on meaningful learning experiences. Using the framework of EDCP--Explore, Design, Create, and Publish--the leadership shared with the staff the expectations of creating personalized learning experiences for which students experience more agency with their

learning. Students, for example, created a prom fashion show in which they collaborated in order to plan, design, advertise, host, the event. Capitalizing on this event, the school set a goal for at least one learning gallery each nine weeks to showcase these authentic and higher-level experiences. Also, Mr. Taylor thought outside of the box when creating a new course, Technology Foundations, which offers students opportunities to learn what they want to learn and select different methods to show what they learned. He shared his expectation of a different mindset when he told his lead chemistry teacher:

> I better see Bunsen burners on fire. I don't necessarily need to see the balancing of equations nonstop. It's important, but you can't tell me that's what's going to get a passionate person around chemistry and experimenting with things. So they've started that process and started it pretty early.

The other leaders experienced frustration and paralysis by the lack of clarity. These leaders, thus, remained fixated on the practices they knew--data analysis from measures indicated in unambiguous policy. Dr. Davis, for example, touted his affinity for data analysis and the Professional Learning Community (PLC) process when he stated, “I'm a big fan, I've been studying PLCs for over 20 years. I went in 1998 to the very first PLC conference, years and years and years ago, and you know, if something sticks around in education for 20 years and is still being used, it's probably pretty good.” While the revised policy decreased the number of standardized testing based on state standards, Dr. Davis continues to emphasize practices to increase standardized test achievement.

Principals Davis and Williams discussed how they are strategically moving teachers to garner the best standardized test results, demonstrating their continued focused on standardized testing. Dr. Davis stated, “Because for instance science, biology, across the board is going to

be the one that is going to count, so you want strong teachers everywhere, but you definitely want your strongest teachers in biology if you can." This demonstrates his paralysis in the status quo and inability to envision different ways to approach school improvement efforts.

Unambiguous and Ambiguous Policy and Organizational Climate

Dr. Lane, Virginia's Superintendent of Public Instruction, stated the revised system of accreditation "moves the state from using a hammer to a flashlight" (Mattingly, 2018). Based upon this quote, it is evident that the state is trying to help districts feel more at ease and less pressure. Still, both types of policy have a direct impact on organizational climate. Depending on the school leader and the current context, policy can invoke fear or invite risk-taking.

Oakleaf School District boasts 100% accreditation for the past few years. No school in the district wants to be the reason for losing this status. Most of the high schools in this district received a Level 3 in achievement gap status for reading. Level 3 is below the standard for student achievement, thus requiring immediate attention. As a result, some schools in the district maintain a sense of pressure on the standardized tests, specifically on closing the achievement gaps. For example, all of the schools involved in the study still prioritized the achievement gaps on their Plan for Continuous improvement. Yet some schools maintained a tight focus on only that. All aspects for their PCI centered around this goal and a sense of urgency was maintained from the "hammer." During the school support meetings, a key form of vertical communication for organization learning, central level leaders contributed to the sense of fear by asking questions about achievement gaps, strategies, and expectations. The organizational climate at these schools remain one of fear of failing to meet the minimum requirements for the unambiguous policy. Dr. Young exemplified this fear when he noted that in their PCI, "...we've

prioritized the gaps. One, we were told we had to, but two, there are some big gaps there and so there's work that we needed to do there and that we're continuing to work on."

With this fear, some leaders rely on prescriptive, top-down policies to function. They often speak of "playing the game" in order to meet the requirements of the policy without really changing practices, impeding progress to the system. Principal Dr. Young acknowledged that "some of it is, unfortunately playing the game to know that, 'okay, I can get one level 2, but I don't want to have more than one level 2 or level 3.'" He further claimed that "you know people are going to try to play the game and get around the loopholes."

Other schools, however, put more of a premium on how to change current practices. They sensed the relief in the ambiguous policy and have experienced success in increasing SOL pass rates and decreasing achievement gaps. These schools had a more risk-taking climate, inspired largely by their leader. They boasted about new courses they created, student passion projects they ignited, and changed classroom practices they guided. Mr. Young, for example, expressed his excitement when he acknowledged the change:

> You're just not going to have as many kids taking tests on a secondary level. I don't know what it's like on the middle or elementary level. I mean, that's the biggest thing that jumps to me, which for me is exciting. It'll be interesting to see what that impacts in terms of course selections or sequencing.

He is already looking forward to taking risks with course selections and sequencing.

This first finding from this study demonstrates the mixed effects of unambiguous and ambiguous policy on the school leaders and the organizational climate. The next finding takes a deeper look into how the school leaders' sensemaking on the policy is influenced by internal and external factors.

Sensemaking is Affected by Internal and External Factors

Regardless of how clear or unclear the policy is, both internal and external factors affect sensemaking. This is especially true during times of policy change. The second key finding in this study demonstrates how both internal and external factors drive sensemaking for leaders which in turn affects implementation. Internal factors encompass those factors that happen within a person, such as the person's personal motivation, will to learn, and natural processing skills. External factors, contrarily, include those factors that a person experiences outside of his own existence which shape his or her perceptions and reality. Some examples of external factors include networks and contextual factors.

This section will discuss how both internal and external factors affect sensemaking for leaders during policy change. First, internal factors are defined within the context of this study. Three internal factors will be discussed as key factors impacting sensemaking--background experiences, motivation to learn, ability to process and synthesize. Second, external factors are defined within the context of this study. Networks and contextual settings are the two key external factors explored in this study. Networks include both informal and formal organizations to which people belong. Contextual factors are those elements which shape the current climate of the school and/or district. Current accreditation status, organizational structures, and school climate are several examples of contextual factors that shape the way leaders make sense of policy.

Internal Factors

As discussed in Chapter 2, internal factors are a key ingredient for sensemaking. Internal factors are those within a person; schema, motivation, personal goals, self-efficacy are examples of these factors. Summarily, the skill and the will of the individual making sense of the policy

matters immensely. Having the will to learn involves leaders who are both motivated and active in a time of change to both understand the policy and its intent, rather than passive learners who wait for information to be shared and interpreted for them. The skills to lead also determine if a leader can process, adapt, and lead change. Darling-Hammond (1990) underscores the importance of leadership skills as it is this "underinvestment in [local player's] knowledge [that] has killed many a reform in the past" (p. 345).

In this section, internal factors are defined and explored as key concepts of this study. First, three key internal factors that affect sensemaking are identified and discussed. The three internal factors are background experiences, motivation, and cognitive abilities. Then, a discussion on how these factors affect leadership is examined.

Background Experiences

Research has shown that individual schemas affect sensemaking. As a part of sensemaking, individuals draw from and rely upon their background experiences to help them process and understand current context. In this study, leaders had varied background experiences that affected how they approached the revised SOAs. Experience with closing the achievement and experience with leading change are two experiences that shaped an individual during policy change.

Closing the Achievement Gap. Since NCLB, leaders have been faced with data dialogues with central and state level leaders on their achievement data and sub group data. The policy unambiguously provided schools and districts with the expectations, measures, and resulting consequences if expectations were not met. This experience helps all leaders with understanding the metrics for which their schools or districts will be measured. In this study, principals with successful background experiences with closing the achievement gap reflected an ability and willingness to learn. These individuals were more apt to embrace the more

ambiguous aspects of policy. Drawing from their previous experiences, these leaders could envision new and different practices and create a space for risk-taking in their schools.

Mr. Taylor, for example, was moved from the role of a principal of a struggling middle school and to his current role as a high school principal. He shared how his experience with successfully raising test scores helped shape his leadership at his new placement.

> We're testing kids and [teachers] don't know those things [cut scores] that can make a huge gain. I don't know how many points, but I think just teachers knowing it and kids knowing it was enough to boost you up and drill down in the data to meet the standards was hard to be done. So there's things I've done I had to do at Legends Middle School then when I came here to Spartan High School and I would talk to my admin team about, here's what we're going to do. I thought it was very simple, but they were like, "You got to stop, I don't know what you're talking about."
>
> So, we were literally working math problems on the whiteboard and that office where I'd go, okay, here's how many tests takers, what did we get last year? That's how you would get the pass rate you want to get this year. Because I'm not a math person but I came one as a result of having to kind of meet with teachers and tell them, “you need four more than last year. You are telling me you can't get four more than last year?”

His experience and success with closing the achievement gap in this middle school setting bolstered his confidence as a strong leader which he carried to his current principalship. Mr. Taylor stated, “I think those were things based on the previous standards that kind of forced me to figure it out.” As such, he was able to grow in his leadership capacity and move his understanding from beyond the testing requirements and seek out additional challenges to tackle, such as creating more authentic and relevant learning experiences for students.

Not all background experiences, however, contributed to sensemaking positively. This study found that principals with limited and narrow background experiences with achievement gap pressure reflected less ability to learn. These leaders with limited experience in this area shared similar characteristics such as their limited perspective of school improvement relating only to standardized testing and their inability to lead change.

Dr. Wilson, for example, served as an assistant principal at a high achieving middle school prior to his principalship at his current school. As such, he did not have the same pressure to close achievement gaps and track student progress data as Mr. Taylor. In his current position as a high school principal, Dr. Wilson has not been able to close the achievement gaps, thus maintaining a high focus on this area for school improvement. When asked about what he has prioritized, Dr. Wilson stated:

> We struggle with special education students in reading and writing. So, that's where our bang for the buck is as far as the help that we asked for, the money for professional learning, the subs for professional days for teachers, the extra bootcamps that we provided. Because that population's not passing the way they should pass tests, we've had to prioritize things there. We know that the gap is in reading and writing. It is not in math, but it is in reading and writing. It's the only area where we have not been able to close the gap in special ed in that subject only. Any other subgroup, ESL got it. Poverty got it. African American got it, but special ed reading and writing, across the board, I think, that's where we are the weakest.

This lack of background experience of the pressure of showing progress through standardized testing has contributed to him having a narrow perspective and limits his ability to see beyond the standardized testing.

Both Dr. Wilson and Mr. Taylor lead diverse high schools with similar demographics, yet they had two very different understanding of the revised policy as a result of their background experience in the area of closing the achievement gap.

Leading Change. Leading school change is another experience that contributed to the ability for leaders to make sense of the revised SOAs. Some leaders experienced the change process with their staff. This process involves a cycle including challenging current practices with knowledge, empathy, and expectations. Staff members are being challenged to teach in a manner that they themselves did not experience. Leaders took on the challenge to force their staff to think differently about archaic grading policies, teaching in silos, and student engagement. Leaders who experienced these movements of change were willing to grapple with the unknowns of the revised SOAs. While background experiences contribute to sensemaking, so does the motivation for leaders to seek out new information.

Motivation to Learn

In order to implement policy, local actors must be motivated to learn about the new policy, which in turn affects sensemaking. Motivated leaders seek out information, read the policy on their own, ask questions and discuss the changes within their networks. These proactive leaders shared two characteristics--they took responsibility for learning and leading, and they were persistent about challenging the status quo.

Responsibility for Learning and Leading. In order to evoke any type of change, leaders must accept responsibility for both learning and leading. This includes seeking out information and being proactive in the learning stage of change. Several leaders in the study acknowledged their responsibility as a leader to know and understand the ensuing changes in public education. With this burden of responsibility, these leaders felt obligated

to seek out information so that they could understand any changes enough to know how it would filter down to their schools.

Dr. Jones insisted that "you've got to understand the policies, because if you don't, you can easily give misinformation that causes substantial problems." Mr. Smith reflected on his process for understanding policy change as "part of his job" to seek out information. He further explained his proactive process:

> I usually try to read the actual policy itself or regulation, whatever that might be, or code, whatever might have changed. And then from a thought process standpoint, depending on which level it is occurring. Thankfully I'm a part of the local decision-making process so [when] something is handed to us, I think through our policies and our regulations and see if what's being said will impact what we currently do, and then I develop questions based on that.

Mr. Taylor reiterated this sentiment of responsibility when he discussed his process for understanding policy:

> Reading through it and asking the right questions if you don't understand it. From an implementation phase, it's who needs to be involved in the implementation. If it's not something that's necessarily teacher-driven, then it's not something that I feel like I need to burden teachers with, if it's more of an administrative end.

Mr. Brown also indicated that "first you actually have to read it and I think you have to read the notes that go along with it and look for the interpretation from the agency that is responsible for it...whether it is federal policy or state policy."

Furthermore, these leaders identified the responsibility of individual leaders to adjust the policy change based on their particular context. At the district level, Dr. Jones, recognized the need for this responsibility when he stated:

> We're not working from an assembly line, where everybody gets the same part, and you do your part to that part and you pass it along. Every kid is different. And because every kid is different, there's not a one-size plan that fits all. What it is is, if you have a strong enough process and you empower your people, then you're confident in the people finding the solutions.

Likewise, Mr. Brown, Director of Secondary Schools, shared how policy ambiguity requires strong local leaders and site-based decisions:

> And solutions that work in plan A may not work exactly the same in place B. So I think that there does need to be deference paid to the ideas that each building really talk about what works for us and what works for our students. Not that you can't modify this there, but each student is different, each teacher is different, each administrator is different. So there has to be some level of autonomy to say what works best for us.

Both of these quotes echo Honig (2006) who identifies the complexity of implementation as she states "the essential implementation questions then becomes not simply 'what's implementable and works, but 'what is implementable and what works for whom, where, when, and why'" (p. 2).

At the school level, Dr. Young and Mr. Taylor sought out the information, read the policy, asked questions from people outside of their school and district, and changed their priorities as a result of their understanding. Dr. Young, for example, used his involvement with Virginia Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development to understand the nuances of the policy, resulting in a much more solid interpretation of the policy intent. He stated:

> So for example, if I just wait and get something in a principal's packet, then it's very different than if I also can see it beforehand in the superintendent's memo versus if I can be involved on the front end of it to hear how it's coming down through VASCD or through other organizations and kind of getting it that way. So because I've also served on VASCD's legislative committee at the federal levels, so you can kind of get a glimpse on where things are coming from because I think it helps to, one, provide you context in how you're going to implement it, but then it also provides you context in terms of how do I help others understand it that need to?

At the district level, Ms. Miller oversees the department of accountability and knew she would be relied upon to have the answers for her colleagues. As a result, she sought out information from the state by asking clarifying questions and worked collaboratively with other departments such as leaders in PEC (Programs for Exceptional Children) and SL (School Leadership) to see how the policy was being interpreted from the different lenses. Dr. Jones similarly sought out information from the Virginia Board of Education by reading the superintendent's memos and providing input to the state decisions to influence the outcomes. Proactive leaders sought knowledge outside of their immediate group which contributed to their individual sensemaking about the policy, which resulted in more transformational efforts at the implementation level for school improvement.

Other leaders shirked their responsibility onto central office leaders. If they did not understand the policy, it was someone else's fault. They relied on central office leaders to process the state level changes for them and deliver bite-sized information in a simple how-to document. These school leaders were passive in their approach to seeking out information as they did not believe it was their responsibility.

Dr. Wilson, Dr. Davis, and Dr. Williams, for example, all described passive measures for learning about the policy. None of them sought more information about the revised SOAs than what was put out by the district. Moreover, they wanted someone else to interpret the policy for them and tell them what they needed to do. These leaders relied heavily on the principal packet memos (weekly memos that highlight information, including policy changes) and monthly principal league meetings. These leaders lacked the will to learn and were passive receivers of information, resulting in being more reactive than proactive. For example, Principal Wilson stated:

> Well, first, I get the memo and/or the directive, and then, I have to review to see whether or not ... what the changes are. So, thankfully, a lot of the policy changes that come to us are directives given from my central administration, and so, that central administration is able to communicate that to me face-to-face so that I know what to do.

These passive leaders were less likely to understand the revised policy. When asked about the revised Standards of Accreditations, Principal Wilson stated, “Standards of Accreditation. Is this what ... ESSA? Are we going to ESSA, kind of?” Another principal, Dr. Williams said, “I'm not really familiar with what the revised SOAs entail, unless I know them, and I don't realize that they're revised.”

Additionally, Dr. Williams explicitly noted that she relies on district level policy as an excuse for her decisions. She noted that “...the good thing about policy, is that it gives you direction on what to do and what decisions to make, and that if somebody doesn't like it, well, I'm sorry, I'm just doing my job.” Not having the knowledge about the changes to the policy immobilizes these leaders from making the change necessary for school improvement.

Demonstrating Persistence. Leaders who were highly motivated to learn about the policy were also persistent about innovative school improvement practices. They offered

creative solutions to any roadblocks that came up and simply refused to be beaten by the current system. Dr. Young demonstrates his persistence to keeping abreast of the changes and determining how he can leverage the changes for school improvement. He reflected that

> We need to stay in the loop and let's start to think about what are some of the possibilities? What are some questions we need to get answered? And so when it happens, we're ... It's not a shock. It's something that we've been thinking about that we're better prepared for. Because I would think ... I think the principals are the ones that need to be having the vision to think a year or two down the road and have that plan. And so and understand how some of the implications of some of the decisions you're making. Dr. Jones at the district level also recognized "...the dilemma between innovation and meeting the floor, that's real."

Yet as a motivated and persistent leader, Dr. Jones is empowered to be more innovative. He stated, "Because we're in a position where we are now, where all of our schools are accredited, we're in a great position to say, 'Let's kind of tilt the wheel a bit and do the innovation piece.'"

Contrarily, leaders who were not highly motivated gave up rather easily when hit with a hurdle. They offered excuse after excuse for why their current practice cannot be changed. They blamed a long-standing and hard-to-change staff, student demographics, and central office structures as the reasons for why they cannot adapt to the new city and state level priorities for school improvement. When discussing his school's struggle with closing the achievement gap, Dr. Wilson stated:

> So, I think the notion that special education students should be on the same playing field as regular education students is great on paper, but it doesn't match in a school because the student who is not passing right now may not graduate even in August. She's special ed. She is doing all that she can. It's all that she's capable of doing. She has shown

> growth, but she can't pass, whether it be, now, a certification because those certifications are hard. If you're not really in tune with being tutored on how to pass a Microsoft certification, you're not going to pass these things. So, I think that's a big impediment. I think there needs to be a different playing field for special ed. I know that's not the right thing to say, but special ed kids are special ed kids for a reason, and they can't necessarily learn the same way. So, therefore, should they have the same requirements towards graduation?

Ability to Process and Synthesize

Understanding a policy change requires the ability to process and synthesize. Processing and synthesizing require leaders to identify a change (as an input), process the information, and deliver a response (as an output). With the reduction in the number of verified credits needed for graduation and the introduction of the profile of a Virginia graduate, the state de-emphasized standardized testing and emphasized future-ready graduates.

This marks a significant change to state priorities, and thus, a change needed to current practices. Leaders who were able to take this input, coupled with the motivation to seek out information had a solid understanding of the policy's intent resulting in a forward-thinking focus which matched the state's intent. These leaders could then articulate an output that supported the state's initiative to change school practices from a focus on standardized testing to more innovative practices to make students future ready. Mr. Taylor, for example, stated:

> For us, I think the reason I would say that is because of the heavy emphasis we've had in my 4 years around the graduate profile. That's a huge component of it. And I don't know if we talked about it when you were in the meeting, but we created that new technology class here that is unique to [this school] and we're going into year two next year with that

> [new class] technology foundations. And the other one is like a capstone technology. I don't even know. They just were nice enough to give me the code. I think I talked to you about the Explorer-Design-Create-Publish. It's a mentality that we've created here to a degree to give all our kids opportunities to do that.

Leaders without strong processing and synthesizing skills all cited closing the achievement gap as the main goal of the revised SOAs. When asked about the intent of the policy change, these leaders lived in the realm of standardized testing with their responses. Dr. Williams, for example, grounded her responses in student success and knowledge at being the policy's intent. When asked what the biggest change with the revised SOAs will be, she fixated on how testing would affect her schools--keeping track of who is testing, what tests are they taking, and when and how that information should be communicated to all stakeholders. Their school's goals were clearly focused on standardized testing as evidenced by their PCIs and school support meetings.

Moreover, both Dr. Davis and Dr. Williams discuss how they are strategically moving teachers to garner the best standardized test results, demonstrating their paralysis to look forward to changing teaching practices that do not center around standardized testing. Dr. Davis stated, "Because for instance science, biology, across the board that's the one that's going to count, so you want strong teachers everywhere, but you definitely want your strongest teachers in biology if you can." Dr. Williams shared the following:

> I think we are skipping Earth [Science] altogether unless we have to offer it. I think we're doing all Environmental Science...because if we offered Earth and then [students] took that SOL, then they'd have their science credit. Then they'd take the biology and that would be for participation.

Leaders with strong processing and synthesizing skills, contrarily, understood the intent of the policy and focused on how to change instruction to prepare students for the future. Mr. Taylor, for example, viewed the policy change to underscore the evolving role of education to get students future ready. At the district level, Dr. Jones, views the policy change as providing better opportunities for our students due to the deemphasized focus on standardized testing.

Background experiences, motivation, and ability are key internal factors found in this study that contributed to key actors' sensemaking. Yet, sensemaking is not limited to internal factors alone. External factors also impact sensemaking. The next section reviews external factors as a concept and delineates the two major factors--networks and contextual settings.

External Factors

Whereas internal factors focus on what occurs inside of an actor, external factors are those factors which occur outside. It is a well-known fact that individuals are influenced by these outside forces. Other people, places, and events contribute to sensemaking and must be considered when determining how leaders are responding to policy change. Two key external factors contributing to sensemaking within the scope of this study are an individual's networks and his or her contextual setting. This section takes a look at each of these factors.

Networks

Networks are groups where like-minded people with similar interests and priorities unite to share information, exchange ideas, clarify practices, and build connections. As such these networks have tremendous influence over how the individual members understand changes and priorities in their field. These networks can be both formal and informal. Formal networks include being a member of an association, organization, or work group. Informal networks describe those groupings that occur organically between individuals.

Formal Networks. Formal networks are created by a group of people who share priorities, careers, and/or interests. Formal networks are those involved with organizations with pre-established meeting times, purposes, and expectations. Common among formal networks are clearly demarcated methods of communication (e.g. monthly newsletter, website), a hierarchical structure with elected leaders, guiding principles and philosophy, and working committees. Examples of formal networks include associations (National Education Association), councils (National Council of Teachers of English), and groups (Principal League). Individuals can partake in these networks by choice or by force. As such, the quality of the network hinges on individual desire to participate. Individuals who seek out networks where they feel their interests and priorities align are vested in the network and would naturally both appreciate and respect the other members of the network. Consequently, these networks can and do have a marked sway over individual members' sensemaking.

Dr. Young, for instance, serves as a board member for Virginia Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (VASCD) and has been an integral member for the past five years. During his interview, he cites his involvement with VASCD as being a significant factor that helped him understand the revised SOAs and the impact on local schools. Likewise, Mr. Smith is a board member for the local chapter of the American School Counselors Association (ASCA). His involvement with this association gives him perspective on state and national educational trends, priorities, and initiatives. As he makes sense of the local changes happening in his school district, these ideas from the network create the lens from which he processes and understands.

Informal Networks. Informal networks are those networks that occur organically. People with similar interests, work ethics, goals gravitate toward one another creating powerful networks. For these types of networks, meetings occur over lunch, informal gatherings, and

phone calls. Several participants in this study alluded to their people--those they trust and feel safe to discuss key issues. Mr. Taylor and Mr. Brown demonstrate an example of an informal network. They each refer to the other as a key source of information for understanding and processing the revised SOAs. Likewise, Dr. Wilson and Dr. Williams have limited informal networks beyond their school setting. Both name their administrative team at the building level as the main group for which they discussed the changes in policy. In both examples, this lack of outside perspective and understanding led to a shallow interpretation and paralysis of action.

Organizational Structures/Practices

Another key external factor is the organization structure. As described in chapter two, context matters. Each school and each school district is a complex system in and of itself facing different challenges and successes. Subsequently, these organizational structures are contributing factors to sensemaking. A key organizational structure that stood out in this study affecting sensemaking is the effect of institutionalization.

Large organizations are comprised of a multitude of departments. Each department has a purpose for helping the organization as a whole meet its goals. To run efficiently and effectively these departments must communicate and collaborate with each other. Organizational structures are often put in place to facilitate communication and collaboration between the different departments. Communication structures tend to be easier for larger organizations to create. Examples of these structures include joint department meetings involving members of different departments, organizational diagrams with clearly defined departments, weekly emails to all stakeholders. Collaborative structures, however, are not as easy to facilitate. While leaders are brought together for communicative purposes, little to no organizational structures contribute to

this. This disparity creates a sense of institutional inertia where each department continues to work in silos to meet their specific purpose.

As a large organization, Oakleaf School District consists of many departments. Department of Teaching and Learning, Department of Planning, Innovation and Accountability, Department of School Leadership, and Department of Testing are some of the key departments and they all have diverse purposes and varied relationships between each other. Some departments work closely together to achieve the district's goals while others' paths do not cross often. For example, the Department of School Leadership works closely with the Department of Teaching and Learning, but the Department of Planning, Research, and Accountability rarely collaborates with the Department of Technology.

These relationships caused by the organizational structure influence sensemaking for individual leaders. The more collaboration between departments helps each individual contribute his/her perspective to the unified vision for the district. Likewise, little collaboration contributes to pockets of institutional inertia. As departments collaborate, they reinforce status quo practices or challenge each other to adapt practices to accommodate the environmental shifts, in this case the policy change. For example, Dr. Johnson from the Department of Teaching and Learning works closely with Mr. Brown from the Department of School Leadership. Together, they brainstorm ways to innovate and capitalize on the policy change to change the system.

Other leaders, such as Ms. Miller from the department of accountability has identified the policy change as the impetus that created more collaborative opportunities for departments and individual understanding and sensemaking. Ms. expressed her surprise by the people from other departments who wanted to learn about the changes. She stated,

> I trained about 20 groups. I had people reaching out to me. I trained like Teaching and Learning specialists, gifted, LEP...everybody was interested, everybody wanted to know. Which is interesting to me because some of the groups I probably wouldn't have reached out to, but they wanted to Student Services, shared how he "reached out to school leadership and then it became a Socratic seminar with everybody else like, 'What do you know? What's your understanding of… Well, I thought…"

This collaboration is an example of collective sensemaking for which members of an organization interpret their environment through interactions with each other (Seashore Louis, Febey, & Schroeder, 2005; Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sicilano, et.al., 2017). Collective sensemaking is not a formal and deliberative activity, but "emerges from frequent74 informal communication that leads to common actions or agreed-upon activities" (Seashore Louis, Febey, & Schroeder, 2005, p. 179).

The second finding underscores the importance of both internal and external factors on sensemaking. Internal factors which impact sensemaking include background experiences, motivation, and processing and synthesizing skills. Sensemaking is also affected by external factors. Networks and organizational structures are the two external factors that most impacted sensemaking in this study. Both internal and external factors shape the quality of a leader and, thus, affects the system as a learning community. The next section introduces the importance of communication as a contributing factor to a learning community in a multi-level system.

Sensemaking Through Effective Communication

The third finding highlights the importance of communication as a contributing factor to both sensemaking and implementation. Clear and effective communication contributes to individual sensemaking where systems can adjust to changes as a learning community. Learning

communities are comprised of those networks, both informal and formal as previously discussed, for which communication is the means for the policy message to travel both vertically and horizontally. The policy message travels through the levels, and both its purpose and its desired outcomes are filtered through a multitude of players. Communicating this message in a clear and consistent manner is critical for both sensemaking and the successful implementation of the policy. Without clear communication within and between the levels, little learning takes place and, thus, little to no changes to the system take place.

In a complex system such as education, the communication travels both vertically and horizontally, and individual player's sensemaking can thwart or propel the message. *Vertical communication* travels between the different levels--from state to districts, from districts to schools, from school leaders to staff. Factors such as communication methods and intermediary agents contribute to or impede sensemaking for local school leaders. *Horizontal communication* travels among each level--among the different district leaders, among the school leaders, among staff members. Networks and cognition are two significant factors in horizontal communication that influences sensemaking.

This finding elucidates the importance of communication as the vehicle for which sensemaking occurs, resulting in learning communities that learn, adjust, and adapt. It demonstrates how both vertical and horizontal communication supported or hampered sensemaking with the revised SOAs. For vertical communication, the role of the intermediary organization bridges the state to the school and holds a large responsibility in the communication between levels. Horizontal communication is impacted by both networks and cognition and runs the risk of propagating the fossilization of practice.

Vertical communication

In a multi-level system, communication between levels is immensely important. *Vertical communication*, communication between levels, has the potential to create a learning organization for which change can occur. Examples of vertical communication include senior district leadership to school level leaders and superintendent to senior district leadership. The policy travels through multiple levels and multiple actors before it reaches the implementation level. If communication is clear and consistent, individual actors can more easily make sense of the changes and, thus, implement changes with fidelity. Conversely, vertical communication that is unclear and inconsistent creates confusion and immobility.

This section breaks down the how communication of the revised SOAs traveled from the state to the district and, finally, to the schools. The results of this study found that when the policy outcomes and school district expectations were not articulated clearly, confusion and lack of change occurred. This section will explain the communication methods between the district and the state, the role of the district as intermediary organizations, and two main factors for confusion--unclear policy outcomes and unclear district expectations.

Communication Methods

In any large organization, communication is essential to convey the overarching goals, priorities, and objectives of the organization. As such, the organization, as a learning community, relies upon effective vertical articulation during policy changes to communicate the purpose, the effects, and the adaptations that should culminate. Without this vertical communication, an organization does not function well as a learning community and cannot adapt as a unit to make the appropriate changes to the system.

In this study, vertical communication from the district to the school leaders transpired in three main ways: weekly principal packet memos, monthly principal league meetings, and

quarterly school support meetings. The weekly principal packet memos rely on site-based leadership to read and understand the priorities of the district. Each school leader would be responsible for discussing the memos or risk the chance of the memos being misinterpreted or not read at all. As mentioned in a previous finding, proactive leaders took the initiative to do this while reactive leaders did not. The result is a varying degree of understanding at the building level.

The second form of communication occurs in the form of monthly principal league meetings. These meetings provide an opportunity for all principals to meet for a day to discuss key issues and priorities with senior district leadership. Again, while the information is being disseminated for consistency, its effectiveness hinges on individual processing and sensemaking. Leaving the same meeting, individual principals had different interpretations of the message.

The third type of communication occurs through the quarterly school support meetings and was the most important for the two groups to meet and discuss school and district priorities. School district leaders meet with building level school leaders to discuss their plan for continuous improvement. It is at these meetings where the implementation level happens with the guidance and support of the district leadership. If clear communication of the district's priorities and goals are not explicitly stated, schools ran the risk of maintaining their current focus on standardized testing. These meetings create a platform for the vertical communication to take root into actionable steps for a learning organization to occur.

District's Role as Intermediary Organization

Intermediary organizations hold the responsibility for being the bridge between two different entities. Within the context of this study, the local school district acted as an intermediary organization between the state and the local schools. Its role is to make sense of the information as it pertains to the organization and effectively communicate both the policy and

the resulting changes to the current practices. As an intermediary organization, the school district was tasked with communicating the policy changes to all involved players in the three methods. This communication was influenced by a number of factors.

First, the district level leaders needed time on their own to make sense of the policy change. They, as the leaders tasked with providing clarity and purpose to the changes for the school leaders, did not understand it completely themselves. Mr. Smith noted that the state "...ha[s] the best intentions, but not being a practitioner [they] don't think through the different scenarios that come up. [They] just don't because [they] don't live them."

Mr. Smith further expressed frustration with vertical communication when asked about the communication between the different district level departments:

> Just speaking openly and honestly, I felt as if no one really was paying attention. I think it was a matter of one of those, "Does anybody else see the sky falling?" Not to be Chicken Little, but while it's not falling, I just want you to acknowledge that it's different, anyone? What do you mean? I'm like, "No one else cares, all right."

As the policy evolved, key district level players had to put action steps in place to not only meet the new requirements, but also to communicate the changes to the building-level leaders. Ms. Miller expressed frustration over the ambiguous policy as stated below:

> But because VDOE had not clearly defined or thought of all of the questions that come up when you're coding it, so a conversation might be, "What if a student is coded a SOA (Standards of Accreditation) transfer and they have growth, does that growth count? I don't know so I called VDOE who stated, "I don't know, we didn't think about it." So writing the code during all that back and forth, I am sure it was helpful for VDOE because not all divisions really code like we do. And because they don't have the staff.

> We're in a large division, we have staff that... I think it helped them identify questions where they needed to think more about the specifics. And it took a long time of us going back and forth and recoding and changing things while they were making decisions. That was the hardest part.

Another significant factor which influenced sensemaking in the vertical articulation of the policy change is the fact that the district did not have all the answers it needed in order to communicate clearly and efficiently. How to code transfer students, which math test a student would take if they took Algebra in a private school, how to measure college/career readiness are some of the key questions that district leaders attempted to understand. This resulted in the district leaders needing more time in their own sensemaking and in devising strategies for communicating the message. Yet, they held the responsibility of communicating with the schools for the policy's implementation. As a result, two main factors resulted from this lack of understanding from the intermediary organization--lack of clear policy outcomes and lack of clear district expectations.

Contributing Factors Leading to Confusion

Two main factors contributed to the confusion during vertical communication--lack of clear policy outcomes and measures and lack of clear district expectations. As stated above, the school district acts as an intermediary organization, bridging the state to the schools. When the district leaders do not consistently make sense of the same message coming from the state, it becomes even more unclear to the street-level bureaucrats where implementation occurs. School leaders look for clear and consistent communication from the district in what the desired outcomes are.

Lack of Clear Policy Outcomes. Policy changes require a clear and consistent message about how the system should change. As discussed previously, individual sensemaking is influenced by a number of factors, creating multiple interpretations of the same policy and expected policy outcomes. Without these clear outcomes, individual actors at each level are left formulating their own opinions and communicating their understanding to others.

When the SOAs were revised, the intended policy outcomes were not clearly communicated to the district and school leaders. Several district leaders stated that policy change was to reduce the number of standardized tests students have to take in order to focus on future ready skills. Other leaders emphasized closing the achievement gap as the reason for the change. When the policy outcome is not clear, sensemaking becomes muddled and implementation as intended does not occur purposefully. Dr. Jones acknowledged this shortfall at the district level when he stated:

> And it fell out that way because, depending on the school, there was unclear direction from the central office, in my opinion, and I could probably say we own some of that. And then because of that unclear communication down to the schools, it was unclear to the teachers. And so we were all over the place. And so how are we going to end the year if the majority of our kids are not going to be taking an end-of-the-course test?

Unclear Expectations. The second contributing factor to the confusion in vertical communication is unclear district expectations. District expectations drive school level leaders' decisions and actions. When the expectations are unclear, school level leaders are left with mixed messages and rely on their own understanding.

The school support meetings in Oakleaf School District offer a platform for school and district leadership to come together to make sense of and align school and district priorities. These meetings generally begin with the school principal reviewing their Plan for Continuous

Improvement (PCI). The PCI encompasses each school's data, priorities, and strategies. District leaders involved in these meetings include the Executive Director of High Schools, the Executive Director of the Office of Secondary Schools Teaching and Learning, and a testing specialist. School leaders included are the school principal, assistant principals, and the school improvement specialist.

During these school support meetings, the district level leadership (acting as the intermediary) focused questions and suggestions around the previously established SOAs. For example, in most of the meetings, Dr. Johnson, Executive Director in the Office of Secondary Schools Teaching and Learning, pushed for schools to put students in Environmental Science instead of Earth Science for their science. As Environmental Science was advertised as a foundational course for the biology class and required SOL test because of ESSA, it was deemed better for students. Dr. Johnson suggested they "look at SOL data in Biology and use that data to help with instructional plans for Environmental Science." Additionally, Dr. Young noted:

> It has been very clear that we are focused on SOLs and so that is our main metric by which we will set our success and celebrate and shoot off fireworks. And so that's what it seems like we're all about and so I think there's been enough focus and doing whatever needs to happen in order to make sure that we meet accreditation, whether that being like ... I've had ... They've called over and said, "We want to pull a couple of your staff to go over to Birch High School and help them for a week." And we're just pulling staff just to cram so kids can pass a multiple-choice test. And so we're doing whatever we can, whatever's necessary to cram for a test and pass the test.

The communication is still focused on testing outcomes, which will not move the school in the direction of the intended policy outcome of developing future-ready graduates.

The perceived lack of communication by the school leaders and district leaders created some confusion and contributed to some paralysis. Moreover, teachers who were affected by the changing SOAs knew only a limited perspective of the change. For example, Anna Baker, classroom teacher, noted that the transition to the revised SOAs has not changed her practice and emphasized the importance of clear expectations. When asked if the revised policy affected her day-to-day work, she stated:

> For me personally, no because this is how I teach anyway. I don't currently teach an SOL class. When I taught an SOL class, I taught World History One, I taught U.S History. When I taught government, I taught the SOLs when I taught government, but I didn't teach to the test. I think for some people it should. And I think it's going to depend on what the expectations are set by our administration. And what kind of follow up there is this because some people are gonna need that follow-up and closer monitoring just like our students.

As a result of the unclear communication between the multi-levels, priorities have remained focused on the outcomes of standardized testing and not on changing teaching and learning practices.

Horizontal Communication

Vertical communication is affected by horizontal communication. *Horizontal communication* is that communication which occurs within the same level in an organization. Principal to principal, coordinator to coordinator, director to director are examples of horizontal communication. When leaders participate in collective sensemaking, it strengthens the message delivered to the schools when the networks were strong, and the outcomes were clear. This

section discusses the role of horizontal communication in sensemaking during the policy change. It looks at networks and cognition as contributing factors to sensemaking.

Networks

Actors at any level of a system form both informal and formal networks. *Informal* networks are those networks occurring organically without any formal organizational structure. For example, a few principals might gravitate toward each other in meetings and reach out to each other for advice or to discuss an issue. Formal networks are those networks meeting regularly with a hierarchical structure, formal modes of communication, and a governing body. Both types of networks play an important role in sensemaking and are a contributing factor to how information is communicated horizontally. The propagation of both incorrect and correct information happens as a result of horizontal communication.

Information is communicated through an organization in both formal and informal platforms. Formal modes of communication include those methods listed above--weekly district level memos, monthly meetings, quarterly school level meetings. Informal platforms live in off-the-record conversations between two or more actors. While the formal modes of communication created some continuity of practice, informal modes of communication created a space for individual interpretation. When these interpretations were not aligned with the district's goals and objectives, incorrect information was propagated throughout the organization.

Some leaders in Oakleaf, for example, referenced reaching out to leaders in other departments in order to talk through the revised policy and discuss its implications for practice. Through this collaboration, sensemaking occurred at a more complex and rich level of understanding as multiple perspectives were explored. At the school level, proactive school leaders processed what they learned from the district (from district memos, monthly meetings, or

school meetings) with other principals and their administrative team at the building level. This worked in cases where proactive leaders sought out other proactive leaders to discuss, process, and plan for implementation. Working from different perspectives, these meetings--both formal and informal--helped each district leader get a better perspective on the changes.

Mr. Taylor, for example, demonstrated his process of sensemaking by referencing his role in initiating a collaborative meeting among different departments. He stated:

> When they came through and said what kids are no longer [required to test], I came back to my administrative team and discussed, "Okay, let's really get an understanding for what this looks like, because I knew my sis was getting information from somebody else. We were getting information, so I made a recommendation at the lead meeting to say, can we have a meeting with Ms. Miller here but I want the school improvement specialists and principals sitting next to each other.

Not all leaders at the district level, however, had a clear understanding of the policy outcomes, resulting in confusion being proliferated at the district level. Some leaders relied solely on their building level teams for discussing, processing, and planning for implementation. As such, they maintained a surface-level and unclear interpretation of the policy and would share basic or sometimes even incorrect information with their colleagues. When the policy outcome was unclear for these leaders, they remained focused on the status quo--standardized testing.

The Role of Cognition in Communication

The role of cognition in horizontal communication and sensemaking cannot be understated. Standardized testing has been the sole focus of education since NCLB in 2002 and leaders know and understand what they are expected to do. These leaders confidently communicate the importance of closing the achievement gaps and prioritize standardized testing.

District and school level leadership can display data showing the results of testing, disaggregating the data into subgroups, and share plans for addressing achievement gaps. Not all of them, however, can articulate how the policy change in the revised SOAs deemphasized standardized testing and emphasized future ready skills. This lack of understanding left some leaders remaining focused on what they know--standardized testing. This exemplifies a fossilization of practice, or being stuck in the current way of education.

Leaders who could not cognitively grasp the purpose of the change in policy continued to propagate the same practices and strategies with each other as it is all they know. While most of the leaders would say they wanted to create future-ready students, they aligned their priorities with closing the achievement gaps as measured by standardized tests. They gloss over the fact that a significant reduction of tests has been made that will affect mostly freshman. When communicating with their peers, they share strategies for closing the achievement gaps, tracking methods for students with disabilities, and specially designed instruction for closing the achievement gap.

Leaders who could grasp the purpose of the policy change shaped how their colleagues understood the policy and challenged the status quo. They advocated for a focus on future ready skills and challenged groupthink mentality of living in standardized testing discussions.

This finding accentuates the role of communication in sensemaking and its impact on a learning organization. Vertical communication is affected by unclear policy outcomes and district expectations for change. Horizontal communication is shaped by networks and individual cognition. Both vertical and horizontal communication significantly influence individual sensemaking.

Summary

Policy changes occur to create a change to a current system. To understand how the policy actualizes in practice, it is critical to understand how each actor at each level makes sense of the changes. The findings of this study exemplify that (1) the clarity of the policy matters in sensemaking, (2) internal and external factors influence individual sensemaking, and (3) communication between and among levels create opportunities for learning communities.

CHAPTER 5: INTERPRETATION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

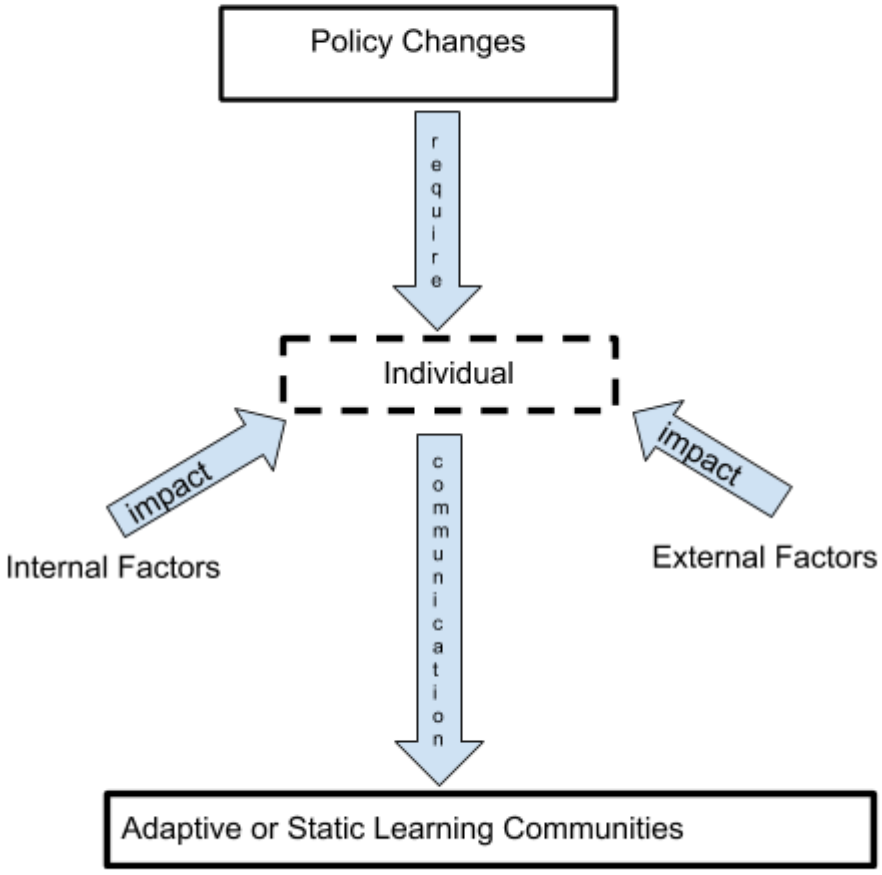
The purpose of chapter five is to integrate the three categories into a conceptual framework that begins to explain how actors on multiple levels make sense of policy change and how that understanding affects implementation. This chapter begins with a summary of the major findings as they relate to sensemaking during policy change. Next an interpretation of those findings is explored on the intersectionality of the findings. Finally, this chapter closes with a discussion on the implications this study has for further research and implications for practice.

Discussion

Reflecting back on the literature, Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) define policy implementation as a process of interaction between the goals and the actions. The purpose of this study was to examine how district and school level leaders in one school district make sense of policy change (the goals) and how that understanding affected implementation (the actions). We know that policy is a complex process, involving a variety of actors and contexts, and it is the intersectionality of these factors that reveal how sensemaking affects policy implementation. Figure 1 illustrates how the major categories related to the intersectionality between three findings from chapter four.

The four strands on policy implementation are centered around the findings of this study: internal factors, external factors, multi-level factors and approaches to policy implementation. The message, be it ambiguous or unambiguous, speaks to the approach to policy implementation. Individual sensemaking involves an extensive look at internal and external factors. Finally, how the message is communicated demonstrates the multi-level facet of policy implementation.

Figure 1: Policy Change and Sensemaking



Interpreting the Policy Message

Policy changes impact a system and the policy message is a key factor in both sensemaking and policy implementation. Since policy messages create the signal for which local actors must act, "language is key in this process because it is the chief medium that policymakers have for representing their ideas" (Spillman, 1999, p. 155). Yet, the interpretation

of the langauge is equally if not more important as the unambiguous or ambiguous message filters through the levels before reaching implementation.

The pendulum swings in a different direction indicating a different value, in this case from a strong, prescriptive, top-down message emphasizing standardized testing to a more open and flexible, bottom-up message emphasizing innovation and future ready skills. This third-generation approach, as indicated by Honig (2006), recognizes the complexity of implementation and blends the two prior generations (top-down and bottom-up).

As indicated by the literature, the policy message results from different factors, such as public perception of failing schools, fiscal accountability, and social responsibility (Phelps, Durham & Wills, 2011; Christenson, Lee, Schaefer, Kass & Messner-Zidell, 2008). The data have shown that measuring student success based on standardized testing alone has not addressed any of these factors; in fact, increased scores have not altered the public perception of failing schools, testing has continued to drain the state level budget, and students are graduating without the necessary skills to be successful in life after high school.

The policy message with the revised SOAs, therefore, was in response to these factors and allows for more control for individual municipalities (bottom-up approach). Interestingly, in this study, the implications of clear or ambiguous policy directives are viewed and experienced differently by different policy actors. Thus, it can be argued that clarity and ambiguity simply describe the nature of particular policies without passing judgment on their quality. Rather, what can be seen is that different actors, depending on their own characteristics, see ambiguity and clarity differently, with different implications for sensemaking and ultimately implementation.

As stated, policy messages can be unambiguous or ambiguous. Unambiguous policy offers specific and precise expectations, measures, and outcomes. Ambiguous policy is open to more than one interpretation and allows for flexibility for implementation. Moreover, researchers argue that the more ambiguous the policy, the more sensemaking becomes key. As stated in chapter two, when ambiguous policy requires implementers to find answers, learning occurs, which could be the impetus to change in an organization (Matland, 1995). This data from this study reinforces this idea. The leaders who had successful background experiences with closing the achievement gap and with leading change were more likely to feel empowered by unambiguous policy messages. They accepted the responsibility to lead a change by first learning about the policy and then creating a vision for the future.

Policy changes, especially ambiguous policy changes, require strong leaders. The success of the policy changes being implemented with fidelity hinges on this leadership. The participants in the study were all aiming to do the best that they knew how to do, yet only a few of them could steer their schools in the direction of more effectual change. When policy is ambiguous, its success hinges on strong leadership. The data suggests that when policy is more open to interpretation, leaders with strong background experiences and drive are empowered. With the ambiguity, strong leaders process the change and are able to lead their organizations into a true model of continuous growth and improvement.

Not all leaders, however, are strong in this area. Some leaders struggled with making sense of the vagueness of the policy and, thus, became paralyzed by doing what they have always done. They relied on upper level district leadership to interpret the policy for them and create a vision for them to implement. As such, they focused their priorities, resources, and professional development on closing the achievement gap and struggled to envision a different way of leading their schools.

Factors that Cultivate Leadership

As indicated by the literature, policy implementation has been studied from four major strands--internal factors, external factors, multi-level factors, and the different approaches to policy implementation. This study concludes that the internal and external factors which shape the leadership qualities of administrators are mitigating factors in policy sensemaking and implementation. Afterall, “organizations don’t innovate or implement changes, individuals do” (McLaughlin, 1991, p. 189). Whether or not the intended effect of outcome-oriented policies designed to promote discretion in implementation actually led to novel sensemaking and innovative solutions seemed as dependent on individual characteristics as it did on the policy designs themselves. In particular, as illustrated, risk-taking administrators with a penchant for learning were more adaptable to the ambiguous and broad reaching policy demands. Further, these types of administrators were able to build on past experiences that provided guidance on how to proceed. Those administrators less inclined to take risks held on to past practices and thus had more difficulty making new sense of policies.

Strong leaders are cultivated with rich experiences and proper mentoring and guidance. The strong leaders in this study monopolized on the benefits of school improvement changes not focused on standardized testing as a result of their internal and external factors. Internally, these stronger leaders had intrinsic motivation to learn first-hand about the policy by seeking out information. They felt it was their responsibility as a leader to know and understand the changes in order to create space for collaborative planning, shared vision, and methodical and strategic action steps. As related to the literature, they exhibited both the skill and the will to learn and implement (Narendra & Paudel, 2019).

Externally, leaders were affected by their formal and informal networks and organizational structures. As Marz, Kelchtermans, and Duman (2016) argue, these are the "powerful patterns of social action that influence or control how actors out to think and act" (p. 307). When leaders created informal networks and sought out other like-minded, forward thinking leaders, they were more easily able to process and synthesize the policy change and infer the suggested impact on the system. Leaders who were not proactive in using networks in this capacity had limited understanding of the policy and, thus, were immobilized to action.

Honig (2006) argues that the process of institutionalization is at the root of policy implementation. As such, leaders need structures and actions to fully integrate the necessary changes required by the policy. These structures are especially important as successful implementation requires fundamental changes to the organizational behavior as it "requires not only adopting new practices but also 'un-learning' prior assumptions" (Destler, 2017, p. 518). Leaders in this study informally created their own structures to process and make sense of the changes.

Importance of Communication in Multi-level System

As stated in chapter two, the multiplicity of a leveled system creates challenges for policy changes. Young and Lewis (2015) recognize the need to study these multi-levels as they argue for future studies on policy implementation to examine the "full extent of vertical and horizontal interaction" to understand variation in implementation (p. 14). This finding provides an opening in the variation and attempts to offer several explanations.

Policy travels through multiple levels and actors at each level, creating many opportunities for growth or risks of misinterpretations being communicated within and among the levels. This study created an opportunity to study the communication between and among

actors at three different levels with the school district acting as intermediary between the state and the local schools (Honig, 2004).

The findings of this study around vertical and horizontal communication shape how the continuum of ambiguity and clarity are received. Indeed, the quality of communication can influence how ambiguous a policy appears to be or influences that perceived possibilities related to the implementation of policies. Elmore (1978) argued that the clear tasks and objectives and means of measuring performance are essential for policy to be implemented with fidelity. In short, communication that lacks elements such as policy intent and expected outcomes can make implementation difficult for some leaders, while others see these omissions as opportunities.

In other cases, poor communication reinforces limited sensemaking causing policy implementers to fall back on prior experiences and old habits, thus negating the intended purpose of fostering innovation and creativity around policy solutions. Some of the individual leaders were empowered by the policy ambiguity of the revised SOAs and contributed to helping the system grow as a learning community by effectively communicating changes through their networks.

Likewise, those leaders who were not able to process the change and make sense of how the change should change the system, clung to the unambiguous policies and communicated them both vertically and horizontally. These varying responses resulted in thwarting progress as the organization as a learning community struggled to maintain consistent and clear messages from the intermediary organization (the district). While pockets of collective sensemaking occurred in these networks, it did not occur across the system to allow for systemic changes to the organization.

These findings led to three conclusions. The next section explains these conclusions that center around bureaucratic inertia, interdependency of policy actors, and bifurcation of priorities.

Conclusions

The findings of this study led to three conclusions. For policy implementation to be successful, these messages need to be considered by all policy actors. First, bureaucratic inertia occurs as a result of inconsistent policy interpretations at a variety of levels. As evidenced by this study, not all policy actors interpreted the policy with the same understanding and thus the policy was not implemented with a consistency. Policy makers should consider this fact when creating policy and should be as clear as possible in the expectations for local actors. Even though each context varies in terms of needs, resources, and leadership, the more clearly stated the expectation of change from the state level, the more likely more policy actors can begin to make sense of the changes necessary to create changes to their local organizations.

Second, the interdependence between state, district, and local levels creates an ecosystem where a variety of needs need to be considered. The state-district are becoming more loosely-coupled from the previously tightly-coupled system, which sought to maintain control with prescriptive policies (Weick, 1982). Instead of this top-down approach, the state seems to be working with the localities to help them find success by using growth measures instead of merely relying on single bar pass rates. As such, the state's overarching objectives and goals, created through policy, will look differently within different contexts. Whereas one district may be ready to embrace the challenge to innovate, others may still be faced with the pressure of raising the achievement of all students based on standardized testing. The decrease in testing requirements offers some levels of relief, but the reality of their mere existence still hovers over the schools where this continues to be a challenge.

Finally, a bifurcation of priorities leads to organizational paralysis. This bifurcation of priorities is created by a bi-directionality of politics. Even with the revised SOAs, schools are held accountable for both standardized testing and closing the achievement gaps and creating future ready graduates. Schools are being strongly encouraged to innovate and focus on creating future ready students. Yet the message is still very clear that standardized testing matters and school accreditation requires growth for subgroups. If an organization is to grow in any direction, the priorities need to be clear and supported by both the state and the district. When school level leaders are pulled in both directions, they create an environment of confusion and state of inertia for their staff.

Implications for Research

This study builds upon previous studies that attempt to understand the complex process of sensemaking coupled with policy implementation. Specifically, this study added to the literature by examining sensemaking of policy using a multi-level perspective. It attempts to make sense of the complex web involved with policy traveling through multiple levels, people, and settings. While this study adds some research to the gap in the literature, it offers an opportunity for further research.

Primarily, this study should be replicated in other school districts to validate the findings. Since one of the limitations of this study was the limited scope of focus, a multi-district and different sized districts study could shed light on how districts effectively work as intermediaries to help state-level policy changes reach the school level with clearly defined expectations and outcomes.

Additionally, this study focused on a school district that has been fully accredited for the past two years. It behooves future researchers to study sensemaking in districts which have not yet achieved full accreditation. How accreditation status affects sensemaking during policy changes was briefly examined in this study with regards to specific schools, but not as a school district.

Finally, a more in-depth study isolating the leaders who felt empowered by policy ambiguity is needed. While this study examined the variation in responses to the policy ambiguity, it would help policy makers and district leaders to understand how to develop the leadership skills of leaders. This type of leadership is essential if systems are going to function as learning communities when faced with policy change and, as a result, are able to adapt and change.

Implications for Practice

Approaches to outcome-oriented policy regimes that establish goals but leave the means for reaching those goals up to the street-level bureaucrats have grown in popularity since the 1990s. Still, the end-in-mind approach has not liberated innovative thinking as it was assumed it would. However, this study shows that street-level bureaucrats (K-12 administrators in this context) do exist. As such, three broad implications can be made at this juncture. First, vertically through the system, policy actors need to do more to identify these capable administrators and utilize them as models for best practices. As seen in this study, these capable administrators do exist in pockets and their leadership capacity can be utilized to help the entire system become a learning community.

Second, upper-level administrators should recognize that all is not lost for those administrators who struggle with challenging policies. Rather, substantive and ongoing

professional development and other types of support would seem to be a logical method for honing the skills of these administrators. This type of support might begin with professional development focused on educating about the particular policies. This much is obvious. But what has lacked is ongoing support and coaching of school and district leaders about problem identification and solution generation related to the problems trying to be solved through policies.

Finally, a partnership between college and local school districts could help close the proverbial gap between learning and doing for school administrators. Local school districts could rely on these partnerships to help develop the substantive and ongoing professional development as mentioned above to include creating policy-related case studies for administrators to consider, providing double loop learning modules for administrators to metacognitively consider their own assumptions and beliefs, and offering insights on how to leverage networks to maximize learning.

Policy implementation requires a deep commitment from all the actors involved--state policy makers, district level leaders, and school-based leaders. Since the policy travels through multiple levels and is interpreted by different individuals with different levels of readiness, alignment of priorities, objectives, and outcomes is paramount to the policy's success. Moreover, an organization can only move in the direction of change with strong leadership that cultivates a learning community. If policy makers' intent is to change systems through policy, they should help districts process and understand the more ambiguous policy changes. Systems simply will not change without this collaboration and alignment.

References

Alliance for Excellent Education. (2019). The high cost of high school dropouts: The economic case for reducing the high school dropout rate. Retrieved from https://all4ed.org/take-action/action-academy/the-economic-case-for-reducing-the-high-school-dropout-rate/

Amos, Jason. (2010). Dropouts, diplomas, and dollars: U.S. high schools and the nation's economy. *Alliance for Excellent Education*. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED510893

Balingit, Moriah. (2015, March 31). Virginia, four other states to remain exempt from No Child Left Behind. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/virginia-four-other-states-to-remain-exempt-from-no-child-left-behind/2015/03/31/6ed61d48-d710-11e4-ba28-f2a685dc7f89_story.html?utm_term=.c2386a438f32

Bogdan, R. & Biklen, S. K. (2007). Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods. New York, NY: Pearson.

Bray, Laura E., & Russell, Jennifer L. (2016). Going off script: Structure and agency in individualized educational program meetings. *American Journal of Education, 122.* 367-398.

Brynard, P. A. (2009). Policy implementation: Is policy learning a myth or an imperative? *Administratio Pubica*, (17) 4, 13-27.

Cerna, Lucie. (2013). The nature of policy change and implementation: A review of different theoretical approaches. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Christeson, Bill, Lee, Brian, Schaefer, Stephanie, Kass, David & Messner-Zidell, Soren. (2008). School or the streets: Crime and America's dropout crisis. *Fight Crime: Invest in Kids*. Retrieved from http://www.thelearningcoalition.org

Coburn, Cynthia E., (2016). What's policy got to do with it? How the structure-agency debate can illuminate policy implementation. *American Journal of Education*. The University of Chicago.

Coburn, Cynthia E., Hill, Heather C., & Spillane, James P. (2016). Alignment and accountability in policy design and implementation: The common core state standards and implementation research. *Educational Researcher, (45)* 4, 243-251.

Coburn, Cynthia E. & Woulfin, S. L. (2012). Reading coaches and the relationship between policy and practice. *Reading Research Quarterly, 47*(1), 5-30.

Cohen, David K. & Ball, Deborah L. (1990). Relations between policy and practice: A commentary. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 12*(3). 331—338.

Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (2008). Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cuban, Larry. (2013). Why so many structural changes in schools and so little reform in teaching practice? *Journal of Educational Administration*, (51)2, 109-125.

Cunliff, Ann & Coupland, Chris. (2011). From hero to villian to hero: Making experience sensible through embodied narrative sensemaking. *Human Relations*, *65*(1), 63–88.

Darling-Hammer, Linda (1990). Instructional policy into practice: 'The power of the bottom over the top." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, (12)* 3, 339-347.

Dee, Thomas S., & Jacob, Brian A. (2010). Evaluating NCLB. *EducationNext, (10)*3. Retrieved from https://www.educationnext.org/evaluating-nclb/.

deLeon, Peter & deLeon, Linda. (2013). What ever happened to policy implementation? An alternative approach. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 4, 467-492.

Dennis, Danielle V. (2016). Learning from the past: What ESSA has the chance to get right. *The Reading Teacher, (70)*4, 395-400.

Desimone, Laura. (2002). How can comprehensive school reform models be successfully implemented? *Review of Educational Research, (72)* 3, 433-479.

Destler, Katherine Neem. (2016). A matter of trust: Street level bureaucrats, organizational climate and performance management reform. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 27*(3), 517-534.

Egalite, Anna J., Fusarelli, Lance D., & Fusarelli, Bonnie C. (2017). Will decentralization affect educational inequity? The every student succeeds act. *Educational Administration Quarterly (53)*5, 757-781.

Ellis, Chad D. (2016). Making sense, making do: Local district implementation of a new state induction policy. *International Journal of Education Policy & Leadership 11*(7).

Fixsen, D.L., Naoom, S. F., Blasé, K. A., Friendman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005) Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, *The National Implementation Research Network*.

Gecker, et. al. (2017). 2017 Annual report on the condition and needs of public schools in Virginia. *Virginia Board of Education.*

Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research. New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine.

Goldhaber, Dan D., Brewer, Dominic J., Anderson, Deborah J. (1999). A three-way error component analysis of educational productivity. *Education Economics, 7*(3), 199-208.

Gustafsson, J. (2017). Single case studies vs. multiple case studies: A comparative study. http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1064378/FULLTEXT01.pdf

Hill, M. J., & Hupe, P. L. (2002). Implementing public policy: Governance in theory and practice. London: Sage.

Hope, Warren C. (2002). Implementing educational policy: Some considerations for principals. *The Clearing House, 7*6(1), 40-43.

Honig, Meredith. (2006). Complexity and Policy Implementation. Albany: University of New York Press.

Honig, Meredith. (2006). Street-level bureaucracy revisited: Frontline district central-office administrators as boundary spanners in education policy implementation. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 28*(4), 357-383.

Honig, Meredith I. & Hatch, Thomas C. Crafting coherence: How schools strategically manage multiple, external demands. *Educational Researcher, 33*(8), 16-30.

Hupe, Peter. (2014). What happens on the ground: Persistent issues in implementation research. *Public Policy and Administration, (29)* 2, 164-182.

Hupe, Peter, L. & Hill, Michael J. (2016). 'And the rest is implementation." Comparing approaches to what happens in policy process beyond Great Expectations. *Public Policy and Administration, (31)*2, 103-121.

Jabbar, Huriya. (2016). The visible hand: Markets, politics, and regulation in post-Katrina New Orleans. *Harvard Educational Review*. Retrieved from http://hepg.org/her-home/issues/harvard-educational-review-volume-86-number-1/herarticle/the-visible-hand.

Kantor, Harvey. (1991). Education, social reform, and the state: ESEA and federal education policy in the 1960s. *American Journal of Education, (100)*1, 47-83.

Khan, A. R. & Khandaker, S. (2016). A critical insight into the policy implementation and implementation performance. Public Policy and Administration, 15(4), 538-548.

Ladd, Helen F. (2017). No child left behind: A deeply flawed federal policy. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. Retrieved from https://doiorg.proxy.lib.odu.edu/10.1002/pam.21978

Leedy, Paul D. & Ormrod, Jeanne E. (2016). *Practical research: Planning and design*. Boston: Pearson.

Louis, Karen S., Febey, Karen, & Schroeder, Roger. (2005). State-mandated accountability in high schools: Teachers' interpretations of a new era. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 27*(2), 177-204.

Maitilis, Sally & Christianson, Marlys. (2014). Sensemaking in organizations: Taking stock and moving forward. *The Academy of Management Annuals, (8)*1, 57-125.

Marz, Virginie, Kelchtermans, Geert, & Dumay, Xavier. (2016). Stability and change of mentoring practices in a capricious policy environment: Opening the 'black box of institutionalization.' *American Journal of Education, (1)*22, 303-335.

Matland, Richard E. (1995). Synthesizing the implementation literature: The ambiguity-conflict model of policy implementation. *Journal of Public Administration and Research and Theory, (5)*2, 145-174.

Mattingly, Justin. (2018, September 2). Highlighted by revamped accreditation system, Virginia implements federal education plan. *Richmond Times Dispatch*. Retrieved from https://www.richmond.com/news/local

McGuinn, Patrick. (2005). Schooling the State: ESEA and the evolution of the U.S. Department of Education. *The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences, (1)*3, 77-94.

McLaughlin, M. W. (1991). Learning for experience: Lessons from policy implementation. *Educational Policy Implementation, 9*(2),185-196.

Narendra, Raj & Paudel. (2019). A critical account of policy implementation theories: Status and reconsideration. Retrieved from https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/96cb/1a5f553dfe89767763005fa65f474af8e6d3.pdf.

OECD (2015). Education policy outlook 2015: Making reforms happen. OECD Publishing. Retrieved from http://www.oecd.org/education/EPO%202015_Highlights.pdf.

O'Laughlin, Laura, & Lindle, Jane C. (2014). Principals as political agents in the implementation of IDEA's least restrictive environment mandate. *Educational Policy (29)*1, 140-161.

Phelps, L. A., Durham, Julie, & Wills, Joan. Education alignment and accountability in an era of convergence: Policy insights from states with individualized plans and policies. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 19*(31). Retrieved from https://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/921

Phi Delta Kappa. (2018). PDK poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools. PDK Education Foundation. Retrieved from http://pdkpoll.org/results .

Pont, Beatriz, & Viennet, Romane. (2017). Education policy implementation: A literature review and proposed framework. *OECD Education Working Papers, No. 162*, OECD.

Pressman, Jeffrey L. & Wildavsky, Aaron. (1973). *Implementation: How great expectations in Washington are dashed in Oakland.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Printy, Susan M. & Williams, Sean M. (2014). Principals' decisions: Implementing response to intervention. *Educational Policy, (29)*1, p. 179-205.

Rice, Deborah. (2012). Street-level bureaucrats and the welfare state: Toward a micro-institutionalist theory of policy implementation. *Administration & Society, 45*(9), 1038-1062.

Rothman, Robert. (2012). Putting the pieces in place. *Educational Leadership, 70*(4), 18-22.

Schechter, Chen & Shaked, Haim. (2017). Leaving fingerprints: Principals' considerations while implementing education reforms. *Journal of Educational Administration, 55*(3), 242-260.

Schneider, Jack. (2017, July 17). Why Americans thinks so poorly of the country's schools. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/07/the-education-perception-gap/533898/.

Sicilano, Michael D., Moolenaar, Nienke M., Daly, Alan J., & Liou Yi-Hawa (2017). A cognitive perspective on policy implementation: Reform beliefs, sensemaking, and social networks. *Public Administration Review, 17*(6), 889-901.

Spillane, James P. (1999). External reform initiatives and teachers' efforts to reconstruct their practice: The mediating role of teachers' zones of enactment. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 31*(2), 143-175.

Spillane, James P., Reiser, Brian J., & Reimer, Todd. (2002). Policy implementation and cognition: Reframing and refocusing implementation research. *Review of Educational Research.* 72(3), 387-431.

Spillane, James P., & Zeuli, John S. (1999). Reform and Teaching: Exploring patterns of practice in the context of national and state mathematics reforms. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, (21)*1. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/1164544.

Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Strike, K. A. & Posner, G. J. (1985). A conceptual change view of learning and understanding. In L. H. T. West & A. L. Pines (Eds.). *Cognitive structure and conceptual change* (pp. 211-231). Orlando: Academic Press.

Thornton, Patricia H., & Ocasio, William. (1999). Institutional logics and the historical contingency of power in organizations: Executive succession in the higher education publishing industry, 1958-1990. *American Journal of Sociology, (105)*3, 801-843.

Tummers, Lars & Bekkers, Victor. (2014). Policy implementation, street-level bureaucracy, and the importance of discretion. *Public Management Review, (16)*4, 527-547).

Ujifusa, Andrew. (2017). Tracking the common core standards. *Education Week, (36)*11. U.S. Department of Education. (2017). The federal role in education. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/fed/role.html. U.S. Department of Education. (2018). Every student succeeds act. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from https://www.ed.gov/ESSA.

U.S. Department of Education. (2013). States granted waivers from No Child Left Behind allowed to reapply for renewal for 2014 and 2015 school years. Retrieved from https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/states-granted-waivers-no-child-left-behind-allowed-reapply-renewal-2014-and-2015-school-years

Virginia Department of Education. (2017). Virginia's revised standards of accreditation. Retrieved from www.doe.virginia.gov.

Virginia Department of Education. (2018). News Release: Virginia schools begin new school year under revised standards of accreditation. Retrieved from http://www.doe.virginia.gov/news/news_releases/2018/08-aug15.shtml.

Weick, K. E. (1982). Administering education in loosely coupled schools. Phi Delta Kappan, 63(10), 673-676.

Weick, K. (1993). *Sensemaking in organizations*. London: Sage.

Weick, K. E. (2015). Ambiguity as grasp: The reworking of sense. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management, (23)*2, 117-123.

Woulfin, Sarah L., Donaldson, Morgaen L., & Gonzales, Richard. (2016). District leaders' framing of educator evaluation policy. *Educational Administration Quarterly, (52)*1, 110-143.

Yin, R. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Young, Tamara & Lewis, Wayne D. (2015). Education policy implementation revisited. *Education Policy*. *29* (1), 3-17.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT EMAIL

I am conducting interviews and observations as part of a research study to increase our understanding of how district and school leaders make sense of policy and how that understanding impacts implementation. As a school/district leader, you are in an ideal position to give valuable first-hand information from your own perspective.

The interview takes around 45 to 60 minutes and is informal. I am simply trying to capture your thoughts and perspectives on being a school leader in the midst of policy change--the revised Standards of Accreditation. Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings.

There is no compensation for participating in this study. However, your participation will be a valuable addition to our research and findings could lead to greater public understanding of how leaders understand and implement policy.

If you are willing to help, please let me know a time that is convenient for you. Thank you in advance for helping me with this research!

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

General Questions:

I. So, my study is looking about how the process of being required to implement a policy impacts those responsible for implementing the policy. By impact I mean, how do they respond to the policy because most policies are vague on details, for example. And how the policy causes them to enact change. And ultimately what they learned, how their organization changed or didn't change, and why.

II. You've been in education for how long? So this is not your first experience with policy change. What is your general process for understanding and implementing policy changes?

III. Explain what the revised SOAs entail.

Questions Aligned with each RQ:

1. How and in what ways do district and school leaders in one district make sense of a new state level education policy aimed at influencing local level practice?

I. What do you understand to be the biggest changes in the SOAs?

II. Which aspect of the SOAs have you prioritized and why did you select that area?

- What information or situation or experience influenced you to prioritize this area?

III. How does your prior experience/knowledge of issues/policies help you address this area?

2. What contextual factors or individual beliefs influence the ways local district and school leaders understand the intent of these policies?

IV. What do you believe is at the heart of the policy (intent)? Why did the state revise the SOAs?

V. ***For school leaders:*** Explain the process the central office undertook to communicate policy changes to the Standards of Accreditation. How did this help you understand the policy and what you as a building leader need to do? ***For central office:*** Explain the process your team undertook when planning the communication of the new SOA's. How do you think this helped school leaders understand what their action steps should be?

VI. What will be the biggest change with the new SOA's for your building/team?

VII. How factors at your school/district will make the implementation of the SOAs challenging?

VIII. What current policies (at your school, in the district, or at the state/federal level) conflict with the new SOA's? How will you work through these conflicts? (get specific example).

3. How do these factors or beliefs influence how the policy is implemented?

IX. How will the new SOAs influence your work/day-to-day actions? What specific changes has your school made to address _____(area identified as the priority)?

X. How has the new SOAs affected your PCI/strategic plan? How so?

XI. What challenges have you faced with the implementation of the new SOA's? How do you plan to address them? Who is part of the solution (team makeup) and why are they involved?

XII. Describe how you have implemented the new SOA's in your building/team.

4. What can we learn about how school leaders make sense of the policy implementation in their organizational settings and how can we leverage that learning for future implementation?

XIII. Describe how previous policy changes (NCLB, etc.) have influenced how you are addressing SOA changes.

XIV. Considering the rollout of the SOA changes from the state and district, describe the policy implementation process. What and who helped you make sense of the changes?

XV. Considering the rollout of the SOA changes from the state and district, what would have helped you understand the policy better? Why?

VITA

Shana Nicole Remian
2888 Sugar Maple Drive
Virginia Beach, VA 23453
Phone: 757-681-6477
Email: remians@cox.net

EDUCATION:

2016—Present	Ph.D. Education, Educational Leadership, Old Dominion University
2015	Administration and Supervision Certificate, The George Washington University
2002	Master of Education in Instruction, University of Virginia
1997	Bachelor of Art in English, Old Dominion University

EXPERIENCE:

2016-present	Assistant Principal, Princess Anne High School Virginia Beach, VA
2014-2016	Literacy Coach, Green Run High School Virginia Beach, VA
2001-2014	English Teacher, Floyd E. Kellam High School Virginia Beach, VA
1997-2001	English Teacher, Great Neck Middle School Chesapeake, VA

PRESENTATIONS:

November 2019: UCEA Annual Conference, New Orleans: *Virginia's Standards of Accreditation: Implementation at the Local Level as Sensemaking.* Jay Scribner, Old Dominion University; Shana Remian, Old Dominion University; Paul Wilson, Old Dominion University

PROFESSIONAL AFFILICATIONS

- Virginia Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (VASCD)