Influential Spheres: Examining Actors' Perceptions of Education Governance

Michael Thier, MAT, *University of Oregon*
Joanna Smith, PhD, *University of Oregon*
Christine Pitts, MAEd, *University of Oregon*
Ross Anderson, *University of Oregon*

Abstract Many layers of education governance press upon U.S. schools, so we separated state actors into those internal to and those external to the system. In the process, we unpacked the traditional state–local dichotomy. Using interview data ($n = 45$) from six case-study states, we analyzed local leaders', state-internal actors', and state-external players' perceptions of implementation flexibility and hindrances across several policy areas. We observed how interviewees' spheres of influence linked to which policy areas they viewed as salient or not, and their relative emphases on *who* and *what* within state education systems contributed to implementation flexibility and/or hindrances, and *how* these factors played out. We found important differences by sphere: the local sphere produced the most coherent findings, and state-internal was least coherent. We discuss implications for education governance research, applications for practitioners and policymakers, and a methodological contribution.

IJEPL 11(9) 2016

Thier, Smith, Pitts,
& Anderson

*Perceptions
of Education
Governance*

Introduction

A multi-layered, complex system governs public education in the United States, including (a) an increasingly prominent federal governance role, (b) numerous state-level organizations, and (c) regional and local school districts, all creating policies for school personnel to implement (McGuinn & Manna, 2013; Torres, Zellner, & Erlandson, 2008). Different levels create overlapping spheres of influence with "ill-defined responsibilities and often conflicting interests" (Finn & Petrilli, 2013, p. 21). Furthermore, U.S. public schools answer to "multiple sources of funding and numerous masters who sometimes possess conflicting priorities and demand incongruous results" (McGuinn & Manna, 2013, p. 7).

Researchers typically conceptualize these overlapping spheres of influence, which Finn and Petrilli (2013) characterize as "too many cooks in the education kitchen" (p. 32), within a state–local dichotomy. But state institutions make up a "complex web" of education governance (McGuinn & Manna, 2013, p. 5), including groups inside and outside of formal governance structures. Internal organizations include governors, state legislatures, state courts, state boards of education (in 47 of 50 states), and state education agencies, which are led by Chief State School Officers and which also contain numerous divisions that oversee schools' adherence to various state and federal policies. External organizations include curriculum and test developers, unions, business groups, and advocacy groups influencing policy and governance by lobbying legislatures, rallying parents and communities, and forming coalitions to push for reforms. In the United Kingdom, Ball and Exley (2010) theorized a rise in the status of external players, leading to "polycentric" education governance, whereby multiple agents—governmental and not—contribute to policy production.
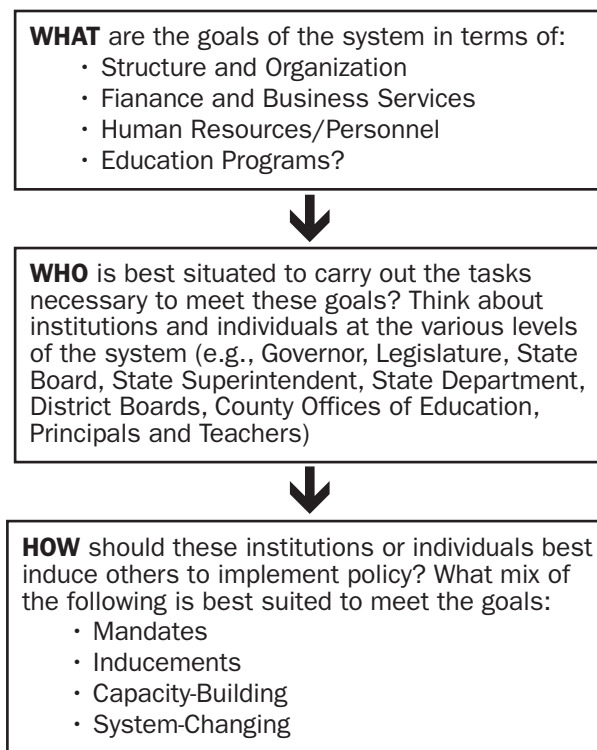
Separating internal and external institutions as distinct spheres within state-level governance can aid in the examination of both structural roadblocks to and enablers of educational reform in the local sphere. At the same time, the U.S. Constitution's reservation of authority for the states has created wide variations both across (Torres et al., 2008) and within states (McGuinn & Manna, 2013), resulting in differing roles across jurisdictions. These spheres of influence lead to differing actions and reactions by local school leaders, due to a hierarchy in American public schools that has "produced a compliance culture that stifles the ability and willingness of school teachers and leaders to improve school practice organically or to faithfully or effectively implement external reforms" (McGuinn & Manna, 2013, p. 7).

Local leaders' capacity or willingness to implement policies harkens back to Lipsky's (1980) seminal work, *Street level bureaucrats,* in which he argued that front-line workers (e.g., teachers) wield considerable discretion in the day-to-day implementation of policies, constrained by limited resources. In this vein, Fowler (2013) argues that "many official policies are never implemented at all, and many others are implemented only partially or incorrectly" (p. 241) due to lack of will and/or capacity of the individuals tasked with implementation. Fowler notes that "implementers perform best when they are receiving messages about new policies from multiple sources in the environment, and not just from their school district or the state department of education" (p. 251). However, given the multiple cooks in the education governance kitchen, policy implementers also receive conflicting messages

IJEPL 11(9) 2016

Thier, Smith, Pitts,
& Anderson

*Perceptions
of Education
Governance*

that might obstruct implementation. As a result, policymakers across spheres share the "dilemma of improving schools while maintaining morale" (Torres et al., 2008, p. 7), especially in an era when policy development is "mostly in the hands of policy elites," and practitioners' perceptions receive less attention (p. 2).

The current study stems from a program of inquiry that examined how states with different governance arrangements approach a range of policy areas: (a) curriculum adoption; (b) teacher evaluations; (c) teacher licensure/certification; (d) instructional materials adoption; (e) interventions for chronically underperforming schools (i.e., takeover of schools/districts); (f) taxation/budgeting authority; and (g) overall education governance. The current study examines how actors from different spheres of influence vary in their interpretations of how their state systems contribute to implementation flexibility and/or hindrances. Our program of inquiry follows theory from Brewer and Smith (2008), who posited that understanding state education governance involves examining a state system's *what*, *who,* and *how* (see Figure 1). *What* includes the necessary set of functions that require organization in the context of system goals (e.g., What are the necessary functions to be accomplished? What programs or policies will schools and districts implement and/or emphasize?). *Who* recognizes the institutions and individuals responsible for fulfilling each of the *what* functions, including various organizations and stakeholders at state (internal and external) and local spheres. *How* asks whether the *what* functions operate from mandates, inducements, capacity-building, or system-changing (see McDonnell & Elmore, 1987).

Figure 1: The *what*, *who*, and *how* of state education governance

WHAT are the goals of the system in terms of:
- Structure and Organization
- Fianance and Business Services
- Human Resources/Personnel
- Education Programs?

WHO is best situated to carry out the tasks necessary to meet these goals? Think about institutions and individuals at the various levels of the system (e.g., Governor, Legislature, State Board, State Superintendent, State Department, District Boards, County Offices of Education, Principals and Teachers)

HOW should these institutions or individuals best induce others to implement policy? What mix of the following is best suited to meet the goals:
- Mandates
- Inducements
- Capacity-Building
- System-Changing

Source: Adapted from Brewer & Smith (2008)

Brewer and Smith's what-who-how framework informed the coding schema that we employed to capture the following common themes across policy areas: excep-

IJEPL 11(9) 2016

Thier, Smith, Pitts,
& Anderson

*Perceptions
of Education
Governance*

tions, innovations, frequency, flexibility, mixed opinion, positive enablers, and hindrances. Inductively, we focused the current study on flexibility and hindrances after observing coding patterns that highlighted differences among interviewees from the three spheres: local leaders, state-internal actors, and state-external players. In line with the notion of working hypotheses in qualitative research—"hypotheses that reflect situation-specific conditions in a particular context" (Merriam, 2009, p. 225)— we expected spheres to yield different perspectives about what does and does not work within states. Therefore, we asked:

1. Do local leaders, state-internal actors, and state-external players find similar policy areas salient?
2. Do local leaders, state-internal actors, and state-external players cohere in the way they emphasize the what, who, or how of policy areas?

We define *salience* for the current study as the proportion of interviewees whose comments received a given code. We define *emphasis* as which of the three dimensions in Brewer and Smith's 2008 framework (i.e., what, who, or how) resonated most within each sphere. After re-examining our data for salience and emphasis, we characterized spheres for *coherence* (i.e., similarities or agreement within the sphere).

Method

First, we describe the sources and procedures we used to collect interview data from policy actors across six case-study states—California, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, Oregon, and Tennessee—for the overall program of inquiry. Second, we explain the analytical processes used in the current study.

Data collection and sources

In the overall program of inquiry, Smith, Thier, Gasparian, Anderson, Shen, and Pitts (2015) analyzed education policies across the 50 states and the District of Columbia along three facets of education governance: (a) level of control, (b) distribution of authority, and (c) degree of participation.[1] To sample six case-study states based on maximum variation (Patton, 2002), we used our 2015 findings, employing indicators of states' roles in education governance. For example, Tennessee scored high on level of control; Oregon scored low. Our other four states scored in the middle of the national distribution. Also, we sought distributional variety among states' scores on degree of participation, with indicators of whether the state board was required to include an array of stakeholders.[2] California and Indiana scored low on participation, Kentucky and Oregon scored in the middle, and Tennessee and Ohio scored high. In Appendix A, we provide the semi-structured interview protocol we used to elicit responses on the range of policy areas. We examined three policy areas per state; each state protocol concluded with overall education governance questions, which were common across states. The protocol featured scenarios that pertained to policies and implementation processes, not specific policies themselves.

Within each state, we used stratified snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) to select interview participants ($n = 45$). First, we interviewed State Board of Education members, closing interviews by requesting nominations of organizations, districts, or pol-

IJEPL 11(9) 2016

Thier, Smith, Pitts,
& Anderson

*Perceptions
of Education
Governance*

icy actors that particularly opposed and/or supported the policy areas covered in the interviews. Nominated participants included individuals with state-internal roles (e.g., Chief State School Officers, Department of Education administrators, or State Board members) and state-external roles (e.g. union leaders, members of education-related councils, advocacy groups, and business association leaders). We concluded state-internal and state-external interviews by seeking nominations for additional interviewees at state and local spheres. We sought local participants from a range of districts (e.g., low-performing/high-performing, urban/rural, high poverty/affluent, high and low proportions of English learners) and included local school board members and district superintendents or other administrators.

During academic year 2013–2014, we interviewed 6–9 local leaders, state-internal actors, and state-external players per state (see Table 1). As Merriam (2009) suggests, a "small, nonrandom, purposeful sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many" (p. 224). We opted for depth over breadth of interviews, spending around an hour with each interviewee to gain nuanced perspectives from stakeholders with various roles within each state rather than seeking a generalizable sample that would be representative of the states selected. Our sample enables us to offer extrapolations—"modest speculations on the likely applicability of findings" (Patton, 2002, p. 584)—from the data, which might be applicable to other situations, namely other states experiencing similar spheres of influence in which local leaders, state-internal actors, and state-external players all contribute to education governance.

Table 1: Interviewees by state and sphere of influence

State	Local	State-internal	State-external
California	2	2	2
Indiana	4	3	2
Kentucky	3	1	2
Ohio	4	4	1
Oregon	4	2	1
Tennessee	4	3	1
Total	21	15	9

Thematic coding and analysis

To achieve consistency for the program of inquiry, the researcher with the most coding experience completed all initial data coding after the entire team piloted and refined the code list. When reviewing the primary analysis, the lead author of the current study detected several examples in which clusters of codes revealed two high-salience spheres and one low-salience sphere, or one high-salience sphere and two low-salience spheres. For example, 12 of 22 local leaders (55%) had at least one quotation coded for curriculum hindrances. In contrast, 4 of 15 state-internal actors (27%) and 1 of 9 state-external players (11%) had at least one quotation coded for curriculum hindrances. By this calculus, we determined curriculum hindrances to present greater salience among local leaders than among either their state-internal

IJEPL 11(9) 2016

Thier, Smith, Pitts,
& Anderson

*Perceptions
of Education
Governance*

or state-external counterparts. Therefore, the secondary coder re-analyzed the data for both salience and emphasis (i.e., what, who, or how). Topics that emerged from secondary coding included: (a) curriculum hindrances, (b) intervention hindrances, (c) budget hindrances, (d) teacher evaluation flexibility, (e) curriculum flexibility, (f) teacher certification and hiring hindrances, and (g) overall education governance hindrances. In Table 2, we report the salience and dimension of greatest emphasis for each code by sphere of influence.

Table 2: Salience and emphasis for policy actors by sphere of influence

Topic	Local (*n* = 21)		State-internal (*n* = 15)		State-external (*n* = 9)	
	Sal.	Emph.	Sal.	Emph.	Sal.	Emph.
Curriculum hindrances	55%	how	27%	none	11%	none
Intervention hindrances	55%	what, how	33%	none	11%	none
Budget hindrances	68%	how	33%	what, how	44%	how
Teacher evaluation flexibility	14%	how	7%	what, how	33%	who, how
Curriculum flexibility	59%	how	50%	who, how	33%	who
Teacher certification and hiring hindrances	18%	none	13%	none	44%	what
Overall education governance hindrances	64%	who	27%	none	67%	who

Note: Sal. = Salience; Emph. = Emphasis. We excluded codes if salience did not vary across spheres by more than 11%, establishing that threshold because our least-populated sphere (state-external) contained nine actors. We could not justify inclusion or exclusion due to presence or absence of a single member in that sphere, a swing of +/- 11%.

Findings

Analyzing for salience by sphere showed differences in how local leaders, state-internal actors, and state-external players saw policy areas as hindrances or flexible opportunities with respect to their states' approaches to education governance. Local leaders emphasized processes (*how*) in 5 of 7 topics, despite coming from disparate states. Overall, though state-internal and state-external interviewees revealed differences in salience, neither group cohered in their dimension of emphasis to the extent that local leaders' interview responses demonstrated. In this section, we organized findings to show how our salience indicator revealed (a) local leaders to contrast with state-internal actors and state-external players in three instances, (b) state-external players to contrast with local leaders and state-internal actors in three instances, and (c) state-internal actors to contrast with local leaders and state-external players in one instance.

Local focus

Local leaders were the most coherent sphere, especially when discussing hindrances around curriculum, budgets, and interventions for chronically underperforming schools.

Curriculum hindrances

Local leaders across 5 of 6 case-study states described practical challenges around curriculum (*how*), a topic that 16 of 22 local leaders referenced (73%). Nine of the 16 who addressed *how* specified state processes as the primary culprit for curriculum challenges: several cited needs to increase districts' capacities to vet and/or upgrade curricula. For example, in both Kentucky and Indiana, local leaders characterized state-led implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) as unfunded legislative mandates. A local leader in Indiana questioned the state's inducements for professional development, saying, "That's ridiculous to think that we're going to send 1,700 of our teachers throughout a year to professional development that is not offered here." In another case, a superintendent of a small district in Oregon wished his staff could capitalize on state laws that permit local choice in curriculum adoption. Instead, his district conforms to state expectations because he lacks the resources to inform choices locally. Another Oregon superintendent identified a flaw in the process for adding new curriculum to the state's adoption list: publishers must fund reviews that the state department of education conducts. Otherwise, their curricula cannot be vetted, a process that empowers large publishers to crowd out smaller competitors who might better meet certain schools' needs.

Two local leaders diverged from their sphere's trend toward favoring local over state control of curriculum. Both actors identified processes in which local control created or perpetuated capacity gaps. An actor in Tennessee praised the statewide capacity-building process of employing curriculum specialists in each district "to very deeply integrate our culture into the curriculum transition process" toward CCSS. Instead of noting *how*-type challenges, as did most other local leaders, he identified "political roadblocks" around CCSS. In Kentucky, where curricular decisions belong exclusively to school councils—typically, 2-3 practitioners (i.e., teachers and/or administrators) and 2-3 parents from the school community—a local leader in a high-mobility district bemoaned one outgrowth of the councils' highly localized authority:

> If a student is at one of my elementary schools under one reading curriculum [and] moves to another elementary school … just across the street, under school governance, [that student] could change curricula almost entirely from one school to the next within the same district. I think that brings its own level of complexity that sometimes is lamentable.

In contrast to the high salience of curriculum hindrances among local leaders, this topic appeared much less salient for state-internal actors and state-external players; only 5 of 24 non-local interviewees referenced curriculum hindrances (21%). For those state-internal actors that did identify curriculum hindrances, their perceptions revealed less cohesion than we found among local leaders. For example, a state-internal actor in Kentucky detailed political conflict over potential adoption of the Next Generation Science Standards, specifically regional controversies around teaching evolution and climate change. That conflict has been conflated with CCSS adoption due to popular claims about CCSS as a federal mandate that dangled Race to

IJEPL 11(9) 2016

Thier, Smith, Pitts,
& Anderson

*Perceptions
of Education
Governance*

the Top funds as its carrot. Focusing on *who* had a crucial role in curriculum hindrances, one state-internal actor in Ohio called for school board members to "do their homework" upon receiving superintendents' curriculum recommendations. Otherwise, board members should expect "mud on their faces."

Intervention hindrances

Though local leaders seemed equally emphatic about *what* and *how* when discussing intervention hindrances, the topic overall held a high degree of salience (55%). Meanwhile, intervention hindrances were less salient among state-internal actors (33%) and state-external players (11%), who demonstrated no coherent emphases. Contrasts observed in this topic showed the state-internal sphere, in particular, to be less unified.

Local leaders consistently depicted state interventions as riddled with problems or as having little effect. One local Indiana leader doubted whether a state-hired external consultant could be of any permanent benefit to a weak school leader, because weak leaders struggle to attract and retain good teachers, resulting in "a mix that doesn't work" even with expenditures in the "millions of dollars." In Ohio, a local leader presented a more neutral view of state interventions. He spoke broadly of successes and failures when the state redesigned six low-performing elementary schools, revising curriculum and replacing at least half the faculty and staff: "We even take out the clerical and the lunchroom lady and everyone and start over." Yet, he expounded on the difficulty of finding quality institutions to sponsor charter operators as takeover options for chronically under-performing schools, often due to some charter operators' financial mismanagement. He described the annual problem of charter schools closing midyear: "Children arrive to find the doors padlocked," which compels those students to return to their zoned schools after low-performing operators are allowed to "hire your husband's cleaning company, your daughter as the secretary, and you pay them six-figure salaries." An Indiana local leader reported that state law restricts districts' abilities to use professional development as an intervention. The state requirement of 180 days of instruction in the year, combined with the inability to count half days in that total as other states allow, makes it impossible to offer professional development during a school day. The interviewee cited research suggesting that professional development "should be job-embedded, connected to their work time. We can't do that without adding days under the calendar, which then adds more money."

State-internal actors were less consistent in their opinions on the usefulness and possibilities of state interventions. A state-internal actor cited politicization as a roadblock: "We all know the Democrat[ic] Party gets a lot of money from teachers' unions. And teachers' unions don't like takeovers." Despite objections, he believed school takeover was working because otherwise

> you were just basically assigning lots of kids, thousands literally, to schools where basically they were pretty much ensur[ing] they never have a future. That's kind of a hard thing to swallow, when you look at it in its stark terms. It was time to act, and the people involved had the courage to do it and we did it.

IJEPL 11(9) 2016

Thier, Smith, Pitts,
& Anderson

*Perceptions
of Education
Governance*

In Ohio, a state-internal actor indicated a desire for school takeover, but felt it would not be possible due to a lack of departmental resources:

> Let's be real here. We're not ever going to … . We don't have enough power nor enough people or enough expertise to take 613 school districts and try to make them effective. It's an impossibility, so all you can do is say, "Here's where you are. If you're happy with where you are, then I'm happy. … If you're not, then you need to go to your local school board and demand some changes to make it better." Again, this is strictly a local problem, a local hurdle, a local issue.

A state-external player in Ohio painted a different landscape of how the state might intervene with chronically failing schools. He noted the Academic Distress Commissions, five-member bodies that operate in ways "similar to what you may find in No Child Left Behind, but probably kicks in a little bit more quickly." Though local bargaining would be required to, for example, lengthen the school day, the interviewee described the Commissions as having "veto rights even over a locally elected board of education." Such a characterization countered the opinions expressed by many actors in locally controlled Ohio.

Budget hindrances

Commentary about budget hindrances supported our decision to examine quotations by sphere of influence for salience and emphasis. This topic proved salient for all three spheres. Local leaders and state-external players emphasized *how* policies should be implemented to avoid or to minimize budget difficulties. Among local and state-external spheres, taken together, 31 of 46 quotations that discussed budget hindrances addressed processes (67%), whereas state-internal actors seemed as interested in discussing *what* policies were being implemented as they were in discussing *how*.

All four local Tennessee leaders in our sample identified processes pertaining to their state's mandatory funding formula as a persistent challenge. One local leader called it the "bane of every educator's existence" and as being so "complicated and convoluted" that even its authors could not "adequately explain how it works." Two other local leaders in Tennessee ascribed inequities to the formula, which residents—particularly those in populous areas that can consolidate tax revenues to supplement funding—accept. One actor described the formula as creating "a land of the haves and have-nots," where teachers "in very similar schools" 30 miles apart have $15,000 salary differences.

Another Tennessee actor described "political theatre" in which school leaders must defend budgets to local mayors who "nitpick" so they can cut the program deemed "most offensive to the constituency." The actor characterized the process as an

> annual ritual on reducing the confidence of the public in the education system. To me it's backwards, having grown up in a place where, as most places, … school boards have taxing authority. It's backwards from going out and making the case for greater revenue on a public basis and building the case for public education in the general community. This way, the district is almost on the defensive

IJEPL 11(9) 2016

Thier, Smith, Pitts,
& Anderson

*Perceptions
of Education
Governance*

for anything that any individual member of the city council wants to make an issue out of … . The lingering doubt about how the schools are managing their funds kind of takes an annual toll.

A local leader in Ohio described a related challenge as "vicious" and threatening schools' abilities to budget effectively:

> Each and every city, village, township is scrambling to put levies on the ballot to maintain police and fire and other public services … everyone's cannibalizing one another. And the school levies, which are funded by property taxes in our state, are at the bottom of the food chain.

In Oregon, local leaders faulted budget constraints for instability. One superintendent noted a "dramatic percentage" of annual layoffs, which disproportionately affects early career teachers and thwarts recruiting teachers and leaders of color. Oregon lacks a statewide system to project budgets of five years or longer. Therefore, Oregon superintendents cannot project future vacancies. As a result of annual budgeting instability, Oregon schools struggle to attract staff, especially from outside the state, which Oregon superintendents depend upon to diversify teaching and administrative pools. Another Oregon superintendent said the budget forced him to cut 17 days in the academic year 2013–2014, an action he called "pathetic," because his calendar went "down to the minute" in terms of complying with state minimum seat times.

In Ohio, a local leader addressed a system change in which new state testing mandates demand a shift from pencil-and-paper exams to an online platform. Once a $41 million state expense, the mandate transferred costs to districts, which now must upgrade computers, software, servers, routers, and other infrastructure for testing by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). When including investments for staff professional development to administer and prepare students for these new assessments, the interviewee estimated $10 million in testing-focused expenses for the academic year 2013–2014 alone.

Both state-external players in Tennessee and California converged with local leaders by focusing on processes; however, state-external players spoke consistently about local capacity gaps in effective budgeting. A state-external player in Tennessee cited a lack of evidence-based justification for investments that led to a "fair amount of funding wasted just because of lack of capacity in budgeting processes and deciding what is really going to get the most bang for your buck." Relatedly, California enacted its Local Control Accountability Plans and Local Control Funding Formulas to build local capacity. Still, one state-external player called the new legislation "the biggest lost opportunity" because he sees the state as "washing its hands on implementation, undermin[ing] the model itself. The assumption [is] that it will all get worked out at the local level. It could, but what you'll get is massive political conflict." One outlier state-internal actor in Ohio said underperforming schools' mismanagement of federal funds "made me want to cry … . They didn't know how to use it. It's a real capacity issue."

An external view

State-external players included heads of administrators' and teachers' unions, a chief executive of a regional advocacy group, members from statewide councils on busi-

IJEPL 11(9) 2016

Thier, Smith, Pitts,
& Anderson

*Perceptions
of Education
Governance*

ness and postsecondary education, and a consultant to a state senate committee on education. Though such a range of positions among our nine state-external players, as well as across our six case-study states, might suggest the likelihood of disparate responses, our state-external players demonstrated a solid degree of coherence when discussing flexibility in teacher evaluation and curriculum, as well as hindrances to certifying and hiring teachers.

Teacher evaluation flexibility

Though local leaders and state-internal actors emphasized *how* states implemented policies, state-external players emphasized to a greater extent *who* implemented such policies. One state-external player in California identified that schools with one principal have "a lot of room for discrepancy" in evaluations compared to schools with multiple administrators. Also, as a union official, the same state-external player reported that even though the state created work groups for teacher evaluation policy, "we are invited to participate in those groups, but we have very little influence on what happens locally." Similarly, a state-external player in Indiana emphasized recent legislation that empowers any individual trained to apply its four-level rating scale (i.e., highly effective, effective, improvement necessary, and ineffective) to evaluate teachers. The state-external player reported a mix of department chairs, academic coaches, or even "outside entities hired by a school district or corporation to come in and do those evaluations" because of compliance challenges. Indiana law requires numerous evaluations and salary raises depend upon ratings of effective or better.

Teacher evaluation flexibility reinforced the divide between state-external players' reports on this topic and those of local and state-internal counterparts: 3 of 9 state-external players spoke about teacher evaluation flexibility. By contrast, combining local leaders and state-internal actors revealed a rate at which only 1 of every 9 interviewees spoke about the topic. Additionally, local leaders and state-internal actors converged in focusing on *how* states implemented teacher evaluation policies. In Kentucky, local leaders and state-internal actors described shifts from highly localized control to state-run processes. A state-internal actor emphasized the *what* dimension, recounting Kentucky's implementation of an "evaluation system of certified personnel that really didn't help people grow professionally" as a replacement for one with fewer but deeper standards to prioritize professional growth. Local leaders affirmed the existence of a workaround for districts seeking local approaches to teacher evaluation, but classified flexibility within the evaluation system as "a district's decision [that] has to be approved by the state."

Curriculum flexibility

The salience of curriculum flexibility among local leaders (59%) and state-internal actors (50%) distinguished those spheres from state-external players. However, spheres varied in their emphases on *what*, *who*, or *how*.

Across spheres and topics, actors consistently referenced Ohio's tradition of local control. For example, though the state adopted CCSS, it cannot compel a district to implement the standards. In fact, a state-external player cited Ohio House Bill 487, which "reaffirmed the local elected board of education as the final arbiter, decider,

IJEPL 11(9) 2016

Thier, Smith, Pitts,
& Anderson

*Perceptions
of Education
Governance*

judge, and jury of what would be taught at the local level." In contrast, a state-internal actor relayed that people have frequently told him,

> "You guys control the test, so, in fact, you are controlling the standards and the curriculum." And my response to that is: I will go on the assumption that you are going to adopt standards that are better or more difficult than ours, 'cause I don't think you are going to adopt something less [rigorous] than the state.

A local leader in Ohio had a perspective on building local capacity consistent with most other local leaders who emphasized processes (*how*) within this policy area:

> Obviously, you want to make sure that whatever curriculum you have is aligned closely enough that your students aren't at a disadvantage in regards to taking the PARCC. In most instances, most districts adopt the standards and use the standards, but then their teachers and individual districts do, we call them, crosswalks. We take a look at what Ohio's old standards are, take a look at what their new standards are, and give our teachers time to meet, to talk about what the differences are, and how we [conduct] gap analysis.

One local leader in Tennessee provided a discrepant view, simultaneously emphasizing *what*, *who*, and *how* in unpacking the intersecting roles of public perceptions on CCSS to exemplify what the state does and does not mandate:

> This is all up in the air at the moment because we had adopted Common Core, and people are so bent out of shape because they don't really understand what Common Core is. But now [the state has] changed it and they're calling it Tennessee State Standards. If people would just understand what the standard is. The standard is the basic set: here's what kids need to learn. The curriculum is what the district sets… . We have a tremendous amount of flexibility. They do not prescribe curriculum. They do approve certain textbooks, but again we don't have to choose to use them.

Teacher certification and hiring hindrances

State-external players' discussions of the challenges that undermine teacher certification and hiring provide an example of where analyzing salience and emphasis might not be sensitive enough measures to understand exactly how spheres converge and diverge. Quotations for 4 of 9 external state players (44%) received the code, compared to 6 of 37 local leaders or state-internal actors (16%). Meanwhile, near-exclusive emphasis on *what* goals their respective state systems hold separated state-external players from their local and state-internal counterparts, who did not emphasize this topic. State-external players spoke about various *whats*: challenges of preparing working individuals to transition into teaching without student-teaching first, finding enough high-quality candidates to teach secondary science or languages other than English, differential compensation for teachers based on content areas, providing regulations for principals' hiring and firing decisions using information from states' evaluation systems, and challenges of losing mid-career teachers to higher-paying districts.

IJEPL 11(9) 2016

Thier, Smith, Pitts,
& Anderson

*Perceptions
of Education
Governance*

Inside out

State-internal actors infrequently clustered by salience or emphasis, cohering apart from local and state-external counterparts regarding overall education governance hindrances. Regarding that code, state-internal actors demonstrated much lower salience (27%) in comparison to state-externals (67%) and locals (64%). Similarly, local leaders emphasized a common dimension for 5 of 7 topics in this study. State-external players did so for 4 of 7 topics. State-internal actors never emphasized a common dimension for any topic. In discussing overall education governance hindrances, local leaders and state-external players disproportionately emphasized *who*; state-internal actors distributed their emphases fairly evenly across dimensions.

Bureaucratic turnover

Local leaders and state-external players in Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio described challenges due to turnover within state departments or on state boards of education. A local leader in Indiana said, "Every time the politics change, then it wipes the entire department. All new people are brought in and so the consistency that's needed just isn't there." The interviewee noted that the state's Republican governor created a parallel education agency to rival the state department of education, because a Democrat led it.

In Ohio, a state-external player made similar observations about its state board, which has 11 elected and 8 appointed members: "Members being appointed by the governor are going to have some beliefs that should be similar to what the governor has," the interviewee said. He noted that the sudden introduction of several education initiatives from the Ohio General Assembly, which had not played a large role in education governance in an historically locally-controlled state, made educators feel "like they're trying to get a drink of water out of a charged fire hose." Echoing the sentiments of counterparts in Indiana, a local leader in Ohio said the multiple layers of education governance made the picture "kind of blurred as to who is actually creating the educational policy for the state." Another local leader in Ohio said politicization has risen "to the point that anything that comes from the state is seen as a barrier or a hindrance." One local leader in Ohio clamored for a "nimble system" rather than "a behemoth that can't move."

Dearth of education experience

Interviewees in Indiana, Ohio, and Tennessee identified a glut of education policymakers without sufficient experience to make high-stakes decisions about education. One local leader in Ohio dismissed members of the General Assembly and state board as "not educators" and called the Department of Education "the professionals." In Tennessee, one local leader opined of legislators and state board members that, "because they have been to school, they think that they know everything about education." When reflecting on Indianapolis' board, one local leader said, "We have left our school boards to some of the least qualified people in our community. That's why we've gotten a poor result." Another Indiana actor referred broadly to non-educators in governance:

IJEPL 11(9) 2016

Thier, Smith, Pitts,
& Anderson

*Perceptions
of Education
Governance*

> They don't know and understand the complexities, the nuances,
> and the downright needs required in public education. They're pay-
> ing for kids to go to private schools. They're paying for kids to go
> to religious schools. And that reduced our funding, so it's a vicious
> cycle.

Discussion

This study combined inductive and deductive approaches to understand education governance. In so doing, we expanded the traditional dichotomous notion that assumes policy actors occupy either state or local spheres. This research might support new practitioner and policymaker networks across local, state-internal, and state-external spheres based on commonalities we found, none of which would have been observable using a typical state-local contrast. Additionally, we have introduced a method of quantifying salience, a tool that could also be useful when analyzing qualitative data to dissect education governance, policy implementation, and the spheres of influence that oversee such processes.

Despite some caveats, our findings support the view that traditional understanding of education governance as having either state or local elements might be too simplistic: perhaps a false dichotomy. In fact, when examining the limitations of this study, it became clear that we might have *minimized* the impact of sphere of influence on interviewees' responses. A more systematic approach to employing sphere of influence in future inquiries could produce a starker contrast between the perspectives from local leaders, state-internal actors, and state-external players. In his discussion of the *who* that led to the proliferation of charter schools in Tennessee, one local leader underscored how an actor's sphere can exert profound influence on that actor's movements in policy spaces:

> They're all from outside. A lot of them are these big families—the
> Waltons, the Walmart family, the Koch Brothers, Michelle Rhee and
> her group—with special interests that are all looking to make
> money in Tennessee at the expense of public schools.

Clearly, not all local leaders viewed state-external players as profit-seekers or interlopers. In fact, local/state-external viewpoints converged more regularly than local/state-internal or the two state-level spheres did. However, this quotation depicts a divide among spheres that resonated throughout our data, a boundary that deserves further examination in other data sets. In particular, local leaders could benefit from deeper understanding of fissures across spheres of influence on education governance. Before discussing the possibilities our findings might reveal for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, we present limitations of the current study.

Limitations

Our small, purposeful sample of interviewees prevents generalization nationwide. That being said, our findings reveal important variation within and across spheres of influence in terms of the areas of education governance that policymakers found salient and that they emphasized. Bair and Bair (2014) note the importance of state legislators and other policymakers understanding "the local contexts and

IJEPL 11(9) 2016

Thier, Smith, Pitts,
& Anderson

*Perceptions
of Education
Governance*

structural constraints within which policies are being implemented" (p. 10). Examining the stark differences we detected between spheres might be particularly useful for such pursuits.

Furthermore, we tailored our interview protocols to various dimensions of education governance to produce a typology that showed interstate variation (see Smith et al., 2015). As one example, protocols for interviewees in California, Indiana, and Kentucky included questions about teacher evaluation; protocols for interviewees in Ohio, Oregon, and Tennessee did not. Although the absence of teacher evaluation from the topics for interviewees in the latter states did not preclude them from commenting on teacher evaluation flexibility and challenges in their states, which occurred among interviewees in Tennessee and Ohio, interviewees would likely have spoken more about teacher evaluation had their protocols included direct questions about it. Furthermore, our sampling strategy might have biased our findings because individuals with more social connections receive an unmeasurably higher chance of selection (Berg, 1988). One potential consequence of snowball sampling was fewer state-external players ($n = 9$) than state-internal actors ($n = 15$).

As with challenges to statistical analyses, our inductive-deductive process struggled with small group sizes and outliers. A sampling strategy that would purposefully equalize numbers of local leaders, state-internal actors, and state-external players might have created clearer distinctions. Additionally, rural-focused comments resonated as outliers in our study. Rurality did not present salience in any one sphere, but spanned emphases: several interviewees commented on hindrances unique to rural settings. Our analytical procedures made it difficult to report such observations. Also, when our initial coding team could not reach inter-rater reliability at 80 percent, we employed a single coder. As such, our findings are susceptible to biases of one individual's interpretation. Moreover, grouping hindrances of hiring and certifying teachers might have masked distinctions that would have shown increased salience and/or emphasis had we examined them separately. Finally, had we selected analytical topics by frequency (i.e., how many times any actor within a sphere spoke on a topic) rather than salience (i.e., how many actors within a sphere spoke on a topic one or more times), our findings might have varied.

Future directions

We advise researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to consider spheres of influence. Our data provide preliminary justification to design studies that treat state-internal actors and state-external players as distinct classifications, with the goal of detecting relevant nuance with local leaders as a third group. Sampling intentionally to parse local, state-internal, and state-external can provide valuable information.

Next, we found local leaders to present the greatest degree of coherence, suggesting a need for additional research on how local leaders across states, districts, and other jurisdictions might demonstrate similarities that could prove useful for both practitioners and researchers. With increases in both the federal role in education governance and population mobility, social networking can enhance opportunities to share information and best practices across state lines and facilitate partnerships across jurisdictions. The local coherence that we found points to leaders' potential readiness to network solutions across divides that analysts traditionally

IJEPL 11(9) 2016

Thier, Smith, Pitts,
& Anderson

*Perceptions
of Education
Governance*

posit as structural barriers to federal, state, and local interactions. Research to confirm the similarities that we detected within the local sphere, but across municipalities and states, is warranted.

Conversely, the state-internal sphere seemed least coherent, a finding that our team found both surprising and not. On one hand, most states have analogous internal structures, making them more likely to screen in similar types of individuals with similar types of experiences and training. On the other hand, political differences among the individuals who work within those structures might have destabilizing effects on the coherence of perspectives among state-internal actors. Further research should confirm if the state-internal sphere is as diffuse as our data showed. Additional studies could ask if factors such as different governance types might enhance or reduce coherence, and how various levels of coherence among state-internal actors might affect how local leaders implement policies.

Last, our secondary coding approach introduced a methodological tool to help unravel some of the confusion in a kitchen with many cooks. We quantified salience by counting the number of interviewees who addressed a given concept and divided that amount by the number of interviewees who shared that group's characteristics (i.e., local leaders, state-internal actors, or state-external players). We interpreted groups with higher proportions of individuals whose quotations received a code for a given concept as showing a greater degree of salience for that concept. Other qualitative analysts who employ systematic counting approaches might instead count frequencies of members whose quotations receive codes for given concepts. Counting salience codes proportionally instead of by frequency enables researchers to avoid biases that stem from the coding of multiple instances of a concept from an individual interviewee. Amid findings that revealed confusion among the three spheres about who has the authority to govern and implement education policy in their states, our method can help researchers compare qualitative data from groups that share traits to determine whether the same topics, in our case policy areas, are meaningful collectively or have differing degrees of salience among others groups or spheres.

Notes

1. The legislative review yielded seven indicators and 35 sub-indicators across the three dimensions. These were weighted to create a typology that sorts states into eight possible designations: state or local control, distributed or consolidated authority, and restricted or participatory processes.

2. In our 2015 study, we examined indicators of whether states' board members were elected or appointed, whether any members had non-voting status (and if so, which ones), and whether state laws required any of the following: regional, partisan, or gender balance; representation from other specific stakeholder organizations (e.g., labor or business); or representation from other groups such as students, the department of education, chief state school officers, or governors' cabinets.

References

Bair, M.A., & Bair, D.E. (2014). Failure, the next generation: Why rigorous standards are not sufficient to improve science learning. *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership*, *9*(5), 1–12.

IJEPL 11(9) 2016

Thier, Smith, Pitts,
& Anderson

*Perceptions
of Education
Governance*

Ball, S.J., & Exley, S. (2010). Making policy with 'good ideas': Policy networks and the 'intellectuals' of New Labour. *Journal of Education Policy, 25*(2), 151–169.

Berg, S. (1998). Snowball sampling. In S. Kotz & N.L. Johnson (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Statistical Sciences* (Vol. 8) (pp. 529-532). New York, NY: Wiley.

Brewer, D. J., & Smith, J. (2008). A framework for understanding educational governance: The case of California. *Education Finance and Policy*, *3*(1), 20-40.

Finn, C.E., & Petrilli, M.J. (2013). The failures of U.S. education governance today. In P. Manna & P.J. McGuinn (Eds.), *Education governance for the twenty-first century: Overcoming the structural barriers to school reform* (pp. 21-35). Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.

Fowler, F.C. (2013). *Policy studies for educational leaders: An introduction* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street level bureaucrats: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

McDonnell, L.M., & Elmore, R.F. (1987). Getting the job done: Alternative policy instruments. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *9*, 133–152.

McGuinn, P.J., & Manna, P. (2013). Education governance in America: Who leads when everyone is in charge? In P. Manna & P.J. McGuinn (Eds.), *Education governance for the twenty-first century: Overcoming the structural barriers to school reform*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.

Merriam, S.B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Smith, J., Thier, M., Gasparian, H., Anderson, R., Shen, Y., & Pitts, C. (2015). Development of a typology of education governance in the 50 states. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the *American Education Research Association*, Chicago, IL.

Torres, M.S., Zellner, L., & Erlandson, D. (2008). Administrator perceptions of school improvement policies in a high-impact policy setting. *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership*, *3*(7), 1–15.

APPENDIX A: Interview protocol

Name of Researcher: _____

Date of Interview: _____

Name of Subject: _____

Name of Subject's Organization: _____ State:_____

Subject's Phone Number: _____

Email Address: _____

Introduction

We are conducting a study comparing education governance systems across the nation. We have selected six states from different regions with a variety of structures and processes. The ultimate goal of the study is to identify how education governance operates in different states, and whether you think the state system helps or hinders your ability to do good work. We'd like to hear both what works and what doesn't work in your state – and any strategies you have to "get around" roadblocks. We'll be asking you to think about how your state has or would react to a series of hypothetical scenarios around [*Each interviewee received 3 of 6 of the following scenarios, purposefully sampled by state based on criteria described in the Method section. All interviewees received the protocol component that pertained to overall education governance in the state.*]

- Curriculum adoption
- District budget process
- Instructional materials
- Interventions for failing schools
- Teacher evaluation
- Teacher licensure and certification
- Overall education governance in the state

The interview should take no more than an hour. With your permission, we would like to record the interview so that we can accurately report your comments. Any information that can be identified with you will be kept confidential: we will not use your name or title in any publication but may identify the type of position. If I ask any questions you can't address, I'd love suggestions on who to contact who could better speak to those areas.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Scenarios
Curriculum adoption

Suppose teachers in a K-6 school want to develop a curriculum integrating art across the grade levels or use a hybrid model of online and classroom-based instruction. Assuming the principal approves the idea and the new curriculum addresses state standards, what entity is responsible for developing the curriculum for all the schools in the district?

IJEPL 11(9) 2016

Thier, Smith, Pitts,
& Anderson

*Perceptions
of Education
Governance*

- If not the state, what entity is responsible for developing the curriculum for all the schools in the district?
- What is the district role?
- The school's role?

When the adoption of Common Core took place in [YOUR STATE], how were those changes approached and ultimately implemented?

- What were the roadblocks, if any?
- If it went smoothly, to what do you attribute its success?

District budget process

Suppose a district is suffering from a significant, long-term budget deficit and the city council is proposing a local ballot measure to raise local taxes to help fund local schools. What are the hurdles or aspects of state policy that streamline this (whether specific policies, or state politics/culture, or financial hurdles)?

Let's talk a little about the district budgeting process. How much discretion do districts have over their budget?

- Which parts of the budget does a superintendent or principal have more or less discretion over?
- What role does categorical funding v. block grants v. weighted student funding play in the district budgeting process?
- What is your view on the district budgeting process: would you change anything?
- What is it about the state governance structure and policies that make budgeting easy/difficult?

Instructional materials

Let's say a district wants to adopt a new math textbook that claims to be Common Core-aligned, but is not on the list of previously approved materials. What, if any, state policy constraints or state policy incentives exist?

- What if the district wants to use state textbook money to purchase textbooks?

Does the state provide any "technical assistance" to help the districts with making textbook adoption decisions?

- Is there state PD money to train teachers in how to use a new textbook?

ONLY IF STATE HAS A TEXTBOOK ADOPTION PROCESS/REQUIREMENT: Can you walk me through a recent textbook adoption process?

- How was the decision made?
- How was the adoption communicated to districts/schools?
- How was its implementation overseen?
- What were the roadblocks, if any?
- If it went smoothly, to what do you attribute its success?

Interventions for failing schools

Suppose a district has identified a handful of chronically low-performing schools and wants to extend the school day to provide more instructional time. Talk me through what that would entail in terms of involving state-level approval or what state policies would prevent the district from doing so.

Now let's say the *district* announces plans to reconstitute a chronically underperforming school by allowing it to be managed by a successful charter operator. If the *school* disagrees with the idea, what recourse does it have to prevent the management change?

Beyond the hypotheticals, what sorts of interventions for chronically underperforming schools have occurred in [YOUR STATE]?

- What levels of the system were involved and what were the outcomes?

What impact do you feel [YOUR STATE]'s approach to school turnaround has had on:

- improving student learning?
- attracting and retaining high-quality teachers?
- attracting and retaining high-quality principals?
- public perception of schools?

Teacher evaluations

Suppose a principal wants to change her school's teacher evaluation system because it's not working well and is taking way too much time. How much leeway does she have?

- What state policy constraints are in the way?
- What state processes/structures *streamline* these decisions at the local level?

What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of [YOUR STATE]'s policies around teacher evaluation?

- How did these policies come about?
- Are there groups that would like to change them?

Teacher licensure and certification

Let's imagine a high school principal wants to hire a chemist as a chemistry teacher. This candidate doesn't have a teacher's certificate—just a B.A. in chemistry. Can the principal hire that person?

- What are the different groups that would weigh in?
- A teacher credentialing panel or other group of actors?
- Is there a policy in state law that is relevant?
- Are there relevant State Board of Education regulations?
- If the principal can apply for a "waiver," from whom does the principal have to get permission?
- What if the principal wants to pay this teacher more than, say, a PE teacher? Are there state policy constraints keeping the principal from doing that? What are they? Issued by whom?

IJEPL 11(9) 2016

Thier, Smith, Pitts,
& Anderson

*Perceptions
of Education
Governance*

When the last big changes took place in the licensure process, how were those changes approached and ultimately implemented?

- What were the roadblocks, if any?
- If it went smoothly, to what do you attribute its success?

Overall education governance in [YOUR STATE]

The ultimate goal of the study is to identify how education governance operates in different states – we'd like to hear both what works and what doesn't work in [YOUR STATE] – and any strategies you have to "get around" roadblocks. First, in the past five years or so (or during your time in your position) who has spearheaded education reform in the state (e.g., the governor, the State Board of Education, federal initiatives coming down to the state, district-led reforms)?

Can you give me an example of a decision that [YOUR STATE] makes particularly easy/hard?

In your view, what is the ideal role for the state to play in education governance?

What has been the response to some of the recent education reforms in [YOUR STATE]?

Thinking about the policy areas we've talked about today, how do you feel the education governance structures in [YOUR STATE] affect the effectiveness of the educational system? In particular, what is the impact on:

- stability?
- accountability?
- innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness?
- transparency and openness?
- efficiency?

What do you think the biggest strength of the education governance system is in [YOUR STATE]?

- What areas for improvement do you see?

Sampling prompts

When recruiting state-internal actors or state-external players: We're starting with you/your organization and would love suggestions about who else to speak to at the state level (Department of Education, state superintendents' groups and/or school boards, state legislative education committees, governor's office/CSSO/SPI, union, etc.) based on who is involved in these types of decisions.

When recruiting local leaders: For the next phase of the study, we'd like to interview local leaders from a range of districts—urban/rural, high performing/low-performing, serving low-income and/or ELL students, etc.—about the same topics we've asked you about. Can you suggest a few districts that we should contact?