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“Boots on the Ground”: The Authority-Power Dynamic of Regional Service Centers in the Standards Era

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Abstract: The current context of standards-based reform has positioned regional service centers (RSCs), intermediary governmental agencies that support state policy implementation in local districts, as a critical source of professional development (PD). In this article, we ask how a governing body that districts often interact with during challenging reform processes manages maintain strong relationships with district and school staff, and thus maintain their image as trustworthy experts on standards implementation. We explore these questions using data from 108 interviews of state, district, and regional administrators in education agencies in Ohio, Texas, and California

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over a three-year period. We illustrate that by providing districts with (a) differentiated support specific to their unique needs, (b) materials and tools consistent with state content standards, and (c) expertise in supporting students with disabilities and English learners in standards-based environments, RSC staff become, in the words of one state leader, the state's trusted "boots on the ground."

Keywords: Standards-based reform; intermediary agencies; regional service centers; education policy implementation

“Botas sobre el terreno”: La dinámica de autoridad-poder de los centros de servicios regionales en la era de estándares

Resumen: El contexto actual de reforma basada en estándares ha posicionado a los centros de servicios regionales, agencias gubernamentales intermedias que apoyan la implementación de la política estatal en los distritos locales, como una fuente esencial de desarrollo profesional. En este artículo, preguntamos cómo agencias del gobierno con las que los distritos interactúan a menudo durante los desafiantes procesos de reforma educacional logra mantener relaciones fuertes con el personal de distritos y escuelas y, por lo tanto, mantienen su imagen como expertos confiables en la implementación de estándares. Exploramos estas preguntas utilizando el análisis de 108 entrevistas de administradores educativos a niveles del estado, distrito y agencias regionales en los estados de Ohio, Texas y California durante un periodo de tres años. Ilustramos que al proporcionar a los distritos con (a) apoyo diferenciado específicamente para sus necesidades, (b) materiales y herramientas consistentes con los estándares de contenido del estado, y (c) pericia en el apoyo a estudiantes con discapacidades y estudiantes de inglés en entornos basados en estándares, el personal de los centros regionales se convierte, en palabras de un líder estatal, en las “botas sobre el terreno” de confianza del estado.

Palabras-clave: reforma basada en estándares; desarrollo profesional; agencias intermediarias; centros de servicio regionales

“Botas no terreno”: A dinâmica autoridade-poder dos centros de serviços regionais na era dos padrões

Resumo: O contexto atual de reforma baseada em padrões posicionou os centros de serviços regionais, agências governamentais intermediárias que apóiam a implementação de políticas estaduais em distritos locais, como uma fonte essencial de desenvolvimento profissional. Neste artigo, perguntamos como as agências governamentais com as quais os distritos costumam interagir durante os desafiantes processos de reforma educacional conseguem manter relacionamentos sólidos com os funcionários distritais e escolares e, portanto, sua imagem como especialistas confiáveis na implementação de políticas. Exploramos essas questões usando uma análise de 108 acompanhantes de administradores de educação nos níveis estadual, distrital e de agência regional nos estados de Ohio, Texas e Califórnia durante um período de três anos. Nós ilustramos isso fornecendo aos distritos (a) suporte diferenciado especificamente para suas necessidades, (b) materiais e ferramentas consistentes com os padrões de conteúdo estaduais e (c) experiência no suporte a alunos com deficiência e alunos de inglês em ambientes baseados em padrões, ou pessoas de centros regionais tornam-se, nas palavras de um líder de estado, as “botas no terreno” da confiança do estado.

Palavras-chave: reforma baseada em padrões; desenvolvimento profissional; agências intermediárias; centros de serviço regionais

Boots on the Ground”: The Authority-Power Dynamic of Regional Service Centers in the Standards Era

Standards-based reform was born out of a need to more rigorously prepare students for an increasingly competitive and globalized world. Early standards efforts in the United States (US) began in several states in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with states developing content standards in math and English language arts (Hamilton et al., 2008; O’Day & Smith, 1993). As a result of the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, by the early 2000s all states had developed statewide content standards, aligned assessments, and accountability policies that provided supports, established benchmarks, and specified consequences based on student test performance (Linn et al., 2002).¹

Over these past two decades, standards-based reform “became the dominant frame for thought and action” in the US (Cohen & Mehta, 2017, p. 668). Dissatisfied with the differing levels of quality found across each state’s set of standards, in the mid-2000s, state leaders advocated for a cross-state collaboration to identify core academic content that should be taught to all students as well as a push toward increasing the rigor of all state content standards (Porter et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). As a result of this movement, between 2007 and 2015, all 50 states and the District of Columbia (D.C.) adopted college- and career-ready (CCR) standards in mathematics and English language arts (ELA), which call for the mastery of ambitious content and high expectations for success in college and post-high school careers. By far the most prominent set of CCR standards is the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which have been adopted by over 40 states and DC. Other states are implementing their own versions of K–12 standards that meet CCR expectations.

Despite the institutionalization of standards-based reform, researchers have produced little evidence of systemwide successes in improving teaching and learning (Dee & Jacob, 2009; Edgerton & Desimone, 2019). While state education officials have opted to offer general rather than prescriptive guidance to districts and schools regarding the implementation of CCR standards, district officials report needing this specificity given their teachers’ wide-ranging interpretations of how they should cover the content of the standards (Edgerton & Desimone, 2018), especially for their most marginalized students (Edgerton & Desimone, 2019). Additionally, the political environment surrounding standards-based reform has disrupted systemwide efforts to implement standards-based reform in a stable manner. Those who questioned federal overreach into issues of state and local control viewed the CCSS as an infringement on states’ rights, resulting in a turbulent political environment of legislators adopting, then rescinding or revising, CCSS and aligned assessment systems, particularly in Republican-dominated states (Kornhaber et al., 2017). Some state agencies also lacked the institutional capacity to facilitate the implementation of their educational policies, and both institutional capacity and political will are necessary for supporting systemic changes (Dahill-Brown & Lavery, 2012). State educational systems needed to have the leaders, structures, resources, and support for facilitating the fundamental changes to teaching and learning demanded by the CCSS, which emphasize “depth over breadth... requir[ing] an extensive infrastructure of coordinated materials, curriculum, teacher training, and professional development...in a society that has very little experience with such an enterprise” (Cohen & Mehta,

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2017, pp. 680-1). This lack of experience is due to a U.S. system that is so “incremental, patchy, decentralized, and highly variable” (Cohen & Mehta, 2017, p. 682) that ambitious standards-based reforms will only start to improve teaching and learning if the broader capacity of policy systems changes to support and manage deep shifts in the way we conceptualize, then deliver, classroom instruction.

A key actor in the decentralized state system is the regional service center (RSC), which is intended to broaden state capacity to spread and scale policy change. State agencies’ need for assistance is captured in the title of the Center on Education Policy (2011) report, *More to Do, but Less Capacity to Do It*, which revealed that state education agencies are attempting to roll out key educational reform strategies (e.g., high quality assessment systems aligned to the standards, teacher evaluation systems aligned to the standards) with fewer and fewer resources to do so. Additionally, state agencies are often maligned for their inefficient or insufficient support to districts in educational reforms (e.g., Brown et al., 2010). It is within this context that RSCs have emerged as a critical support system to state agencies. RSCs exist in at least 45 states and they help carry out the mission of state departments of education (Stephens & Keane, 2005). Though their titles and responsibilities are broad and varied, they have been generally defined as governmental agents operating between state-level policymakers and local policy implementers to provide training and resources specific to district needs (Woulfin et al., 2018).

The current context of standards-based reform has positioned RSCs as a critical source of regional-level professional development (PD) for districts seeking to build their instructional capacity for this movement. In our comprehensive analysis of every state department of education’s website as a separate, multi-year study of [research center name blinded for review], we found that several states view RSCs as directly responsible for supporting state capacity to implement these standards and for deepening districts’ engagement with the standards, two mechanisms for scaling reform (Coburn, 2003). These RSCs explicitly support the standards implementation process by offering workshops that unpack the standards, which show teachers how to utilize curricular resources that align to the standards, or they focus on key instructional shifts demanded by the new standards (blinded for review).

Despite their prominence and resources, a growing body of literature on intergovernmental networks has excluded RSCs from conceptual frameworks that seek to understand policy implementation across state systems (Parsons, 2018; Russell et al., 2015). Scholarship on intergovernmental relations has typically emphasized states as the intermediary between federal and local governments (McDermott, 2009), or local actors as strategic intermediaries between the state and their schools (Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013). While these frameworks highlight the influence of state and local agencies, they omit the influence of RSCs. This omission leaves state policymakers unable to learn from the ways in which others have leveraged RSCs as an intermediary agent in intergovernmental relations to implement policies on a systemic level. Additionally, the role of RSCs as policy actors positioned to work with both states and districts to assist with the implementation of challenging CCR standards remains unexplored, despite their operationalization in this critical capacity across the country.

In this study, we explore the ways in which state and regional leaders leverage their RSCs as institutions that may support statewide implementation of CCR standards, and how district leaders perceive the effectiveness of their RSCs’ supports. Included in this investigation is a look at how RSCs assist districts with the implementation of CCR standards for their special populations--students with disabilities (SWDs) and English learners (ELs) educated in the general education setting, as these are two marginalized populations that state leaders have historically struggled to support (Desimone et al., 2019). We argue that the district leaders who view their RSCs as authoritatively promoting the state’s work around standards-based reform are also less averse to the

accountability function that some RSCs exercise, which may positively influence the political will to continue with standards-based reform. We demonstrate how RSC staff become, in the words of one state leader, the state's "boots on the ground."

RSC Context

Regional service centers were created by the federal government in the 1930s to serve small and/or rural districts in tasks they did not have the capacity to perform on their own and to provide resources they did not have. RSCs have since evolved to support districts of all sizes and capacity-levels, albeit often in different ways (Stephens & Keane, 2005). By the early 2000s, 45 of the 50 states had some version of RSCs that focused on supporting districts in meeting emerging accountability mandates and school improvement in general through PD opportunities and provision of resources (Stephens & Keane, 2005).

Like most educational organizations today, the role of RSCs is tightly wound with accountability. Accordingly, the limited literature available on the role and perceptions of RSCs was primarily written in the early 2000s during the rise of high stakes accountability policies in the United States. While one might expect that districts and schools would, during periods of heightened accountability, view regional educational organizations with suspicion as outsiders working to do the bidding of the federal government, the literature overwhelmingly portrays RSCs as a helpful and trusted source of support for schools. In fact, Arsen, Bell, and Plank (2004) identify RSCs as the organization best suited to turn around "failing schools," as opposed to universities, local governments, and other organizations, precisely because of educators' and district leaders' trust in them.

Broadly, RSCs help districts avoid sanctions by offering curriculum and PD support that districts can utilize when they cannot handle accountability mandates on their own (Ausburn, 2010; Geary & Kettlehut, 2004; Peters & Svedkauskaite, 2008). RSCs' support in the form of PD is their most broadly covered function in the literature. For instance, Arfstrom (2004) found that in addition to helping districts avoid duplication, RSCs also improve equality of opportunity by providing small or poor districts the same access to PD as large or wealthy districts. RSCs further promote equality of opportunity by allowing smaller and underfunded districts to improve their quality of programs by pooling resources and hiring reputable organizations to run workshops and programs. Many qualitative analyses portray RSC PD offerings positively, and Maze (2011) adds support for this perception in Texas by surveying superintendents about their attitudes toward RSC PD and finding a "high level of perceived effectiveness" (p. 99).

Further, RSCs and their multifaceted relationships with districts are notably absent from contemporary frameworks conceptualizing education reform implementation and the actors involved. For example, in analyzing state success in federal Race to the Top applications, Russell et al. (2015) posit that the larger and more diverse a network a state builds, in this case in applying for Race to the Top funds, the more access it has to a wide variety of resources and the more it can accomplish as the network offsets its capacity limitations. However, RSCs are not one of the actors described as working within these networks. The authors consider foundations, higher education institutions, unions, and several other organizations, but RSCs, which, given their involvement in supporting districts in meeting federal mandates would be assumed to be involved, are absent from the discussion. A similar analysis by Parsons (2018) sought to determine what organizations in Virginia local autism policy networks were key actors in distributing information to help districts meet federal special education mandates. The author surveyed both governmental and nongovernmental actors in this research, and surveys were distributed to federal agencies, state

education agencies, and local education agencies. Regional agencies were not mentioned or surveyed, indicating a missed opportunity to determine their role and more fully understand the networks.

RSCs walk a fine line between offering support and accountability oversight, and are sometimes pushed into a monitoring compliance role, something that RSC leaders dislike because of its impact on the trust between districts and regional agencies (Stephens & Keane, 2005). In Virginia, for example, RSCs, called Education Service Agencies (ESAs) in the state, were required to “warn” schools that were failing to meet benchmarks for 20% or more of their students (Stephens & Keane, 2005, p. 112). This creates a dilemma for RSCs, because

... [Service agency leaders] feel that they are best positioned to help their local school districts when district staff perceive the service agency as a nonregulatory body. Districts fearful that the ESA may punish them in one sphere may well be disinclined to admit to service agency personnel the full scope and depth of problems they may be having even in areas not subject to monitoring, thus limiting the potential value of services to the district (Stephens & Keane, 2005, pp. 111-112).

This balancing act between cultivating trusting relationships of support and compromising that trust through evaluative or potentially punitive pressures is a persistent challenge in educational reform efforts, not just in efforts that involve RSCs. For example, such issues emerge in literature on teacher coaching efforts, where perceptions of coaching feedback as evaluative compromise the quality of those relationships (Mangin & Dunsmore, 2014; Wiener & Pimentel, 2017), and in literature on top-down (i.e. pressure-based) versus bottom-up (i.e. support-based) stimuli for reform (Cohen et al., 2013; Honig, 2006; Stosich, 2016). Yet as Guskey (2002) reminds us, “support coupled with pressure is essential for continuing educational improvement” (p. 388), meaning that support allows “those engaged in the difficult process of implementation to tolerate the anxiety of occasional failure,” whereas pressure helps trigger “encouragement, motivation, and occasional nudging that many practitioners require to persist in the challenging tasks that are intrinsic to all change efforts.” The dual nature of support and pressure, or authority and power according to the policy attribute theory (see Porter, 1994), is highlighted in our theoretical framework below.

Authority and Power in Educational Policy Implementation

We use policy attributes theory (Porter, 1994) as an analytic tool for analyzing the roles and perceptions of RSCs as implementers of state policy. While state implementation research is typically examined through the lenses of governance structures, funding, intergovernmental relations, and accountability (McDermott, 2009), these frameworks do not directly address the characteristics of *implementation* as a variable process. Implementation scholars argue that effective policies and programs are those that are deemed to be acceptable, appropriate, necessary, feasible, sustainable, and enacted with fidelity based on how well the implementers adhere to the proposed theory of action over time (Dane & Schneider, 1989; Desimone, 2002; Dusenbury et al., 2003; Proctor et al., 2011). Policy attributes theory simplifies these implementation characteristics into five attributes that predict successful integration of policy initiatives into schools’ lived realities. Furthermore, each of our states are unique entities with their own historical contexts, governance structures, partisan behaviors, and the like (Dahill-Brown, 2019; Manna, 2012; Meier & O’Toole, 2006), and policy attributes theory allows us to apply a conceptual framework across these diverse contexts to look for trends and variations in state approaches to standards implementation.

Policy attributes theory identifies five policy attributes that facilitate policy implementation and can be used to evaluate RSCs’ contributions to their state’s standards-based reform environment: (1) the *specificity* of policies or how detailed policies are; (2) the *consistency* of policies

with each other; (3) the *authority* given to policies by key stakeholders based on longevity, charismatic leaders, or rule of law; (4) the *power* associated with rewards and sanctions found in policies; and (5) the *stability* or extent to which policies remain constant over time (Porter, 1994). While we separate the policy attributes for illustrative purposes, scholars who utilize policy attribute theory have drawn attention to the complex relationships between various attributes. For instance, one way of promoting stability has been to balance power with authority, which has led to more stable policies (Desimone, 2002).

Given our previous discussion of the support (i.e. authority) versus pressure (i.e. power) functions of RSCs, we highlight those two attributes in our analyses to present the two dichotomous functions. We then use the specificity and consistency attributes to understand how the authority and power attributes play out in the different forms of services provided by the RSCs. These attributes emerge against the backdrop of instability in the national policy environment, given the constantly evolving nature of state standards, assessments, and accountability policies in the U.S. political system. Thus, the attribute of stability is woven throughout the context of our analyses in this study.

Policies have authority when they are legitimized through legislation, when they reinforce existing social norms, when they are seen as credible and supported by experts, or when they provide specific guidelines that are believed to be appropriate and feasibly implemented (Desimone, 2002). Institutions (e.g., district offices, community organizations) that provide direction and resources in support of a policy can also stoke buy-in and engender authority (Desimone, 2002). RSCs are one example of these institutions that can help enhance the authority of the state standards if they are seen as legitimate experts providing guidance and resources that are believed to facilitate the implementation of these standards.

Yet in the accountability context of standards-based reform, standards implementation is more often associated with the attribute of power rather than the attribute of authority. Power, which relies on mandates, rewards, and sanctions, manifests most strongly through accountability systems that identify, then reward or punish, high and low performing districts, schools, and teachers. Policies that reward high performing actors and sanction low performing actors are criticized for leading to unintended consequences such as: test-based instruction, the disproportionate punishing of under-resourced schools and communities of color, and the creation of cultures of compliance rather than cultures of improvement (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Finnigan & Gross, 2007; Mintrop, 2003; Trujillo & Renee, 2012). Because of these associations, practitioners typically regard “power” with a wary eye, and those that are asked to enforce accountability policies are often viewed as unfairly wielding power. As we present in this study, RSCs in two of our three case study states are asked to intervene in districts identified as low-performing through the accountability system, and we analyze how perceptions of power play out in these contexts.

We argue that power can serve a productive purpose if utilized in a way that also draws from the authority of the policy in question and if the policy is accompanied by specific guidelines. For example, leaders who—or policies that require employees to—leverage authority and specificity by considering unique local needs, asking for input on decisions among stakeholders, remaining accessible, and building trust prior to utilizing power are more likely to utilize power effectively, whether that power be reward- or sanction-oriented (Fuqua et al., 2000). The complex nature of power is reinforced in much of the literature of the impact of accountability sanctions. Researchers have found that rewards and sanctions can boost teacher performance and students’ achievement levels if they are tied to specific performance rubrics and if the consequences are deemed to be fair, or authoritative (Dee & Wyckoff, 2015; Pope, 2019; Rockoff & Turner, 2010).

We use this policy attribute lens to analyze how RSCs are called upon to both support and pressure districts in their implementation of the state standards, and whether these patterns reveal

important lessons for government agencies seeking to productively establish both authority and power as they work towards enacting standards-based reform.

Methods

The data presented below was collected as part of a broader study conducted by the Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning (C-SAIL), which examined how college- and career-readiness standards were implemented, their effects on improved student learning, and what instructional tools supported their implementation. C-SAIL was established in 2015 and has partnered with California, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Ohio, and Texas to explore their experiences with college and career readiness standards implementation, particularly with regards to students with disabilities (SWDs) and English learners (ELs). Each of these states was selected as a partner based on their diverse geography and differing standards implementation timelines. In this article, we draw on data from the implementation study, one of the four major studies undertaken by C-SAIL. The purpose of the implementation study was to better understand the challenges and opportunities created through the implementation of college- and career-readiness standards across our partner states.

As part of this study, our research team interviewed state and district officials in each of our partner states on an annual basis, from 2016 to 2018, to discern the processes by which state implementation policies filtered down to districts and schools. For this article, we focus on three states for our analysis: Ohio, California, and Texas. We focus on these states based on the availability of three years of data and for their contrasting approaches to standards reform, which allows us to explore the role of RSCs in various standards implementation contexts. The first state, Ohio, incorporated the Common Core State Standards into their standards in 2010. They replaced these with revised Ohio Learning Standards in 2017 due to political backlash in their state against standards that were perceived as federally designed. For this same reason, Ohio replaced their assessment with a state-specific assessment aligned to their Ohio Learning Standards in 2015. California also adopted the Common Core State Standards in 2010, but they did not experience changes to their standards and assessments as Ohio did. Instead, California has retained the Common Core State Standards and the assessment aligned to these standards, the Smarter Balanced Assessment, which is part of the national Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). Texas, on the other hand, did not participate in these nationally adopted standards and assessments, and instead developed their own, state-specific standards in 2008 for ELA and 2012 for math. Their most recently revised assessment system, the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), was first administered in 2013.

The implementation study team collected three years of state and district interview data in each of these three states. Across these three years, we conducted 47 interviews with state officials with knowledge of the state's major initiatives related to the implementation of their ELA and math standards, with three to nine state education agency interviews per state per year. The majority of these interviews were with repeating state officials each year, given the limited pool of officials to choose from and the limited turnover each year. State leaders were invited to interviews based on their expertise with their state's approach to standards implementation through their leadership associated with curriculum, PD, assessment, and accountability. These 45-minute semi-structured interviews took place on an annual basis to track patterns or variations in approaches to standards implementation over time, given that the national policy context resulted in some states overhauling their accountability systems. The 2015 passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) required each state to submit an updated plan by 2017 that outlined their approach to supporting and measuring district and school performance with respect to the state's content standards and

expectations for students’ college- and career-readiness. Because our state interviews spanned from 2016 to 2018, our data captured both state strategies prior to and after the submission of the ESSA plan.

During this three-year period, we also interviewed three to five district leaders in six different districts in each state to obtain their perspectives on the state system for implementing standards-based policies and practices. None of these interviews were with repeating participants. The six districts were chosen on the basis of their urbanicity—two urban, two suburban, and two rural—and whether each district had a sufficient population of SWDs and ELs. Between 2016 and 2018, we conducted a total of 54 district interviews.

In 2018, we added RSC leader interviews to the study. Preliminary analyses of the first two years of data revealed that both state and district officials identified their RSCs as critical sources of support and guidance for standards implementation (see Pak & Desimone, 2018). As a result, in the third year of the study, we also identified two to three different regional leaders per state who could describe how the state’s RSCs operated in the context of the statewide strategy for standards implementation. We asked our state partners for recommendations for regional contacts with knowledge of the regional centers’ relationship with the state and district offices, and with knowledge of the types of curricular, PD, assessment, and accountability assistance provided at this intermediary level. Due to the differing organizational structure of RSCs in each state, the number of interviews we conducted in each state varied. For instance, in Texas some RSCs have a greater focus on developing resources for specific student populations and others provide general support; we interviewed three RSC representatives in two different RSCs. In contrast, in California, county offices execute the work typical of RSCs in other states; we interviewed two county office leaders in different offices. The volume of our interviews reflect these organizational structures. Table 1 illustrates the number of state, regional, and district leaders interviewed for our focus states during each of the three years of this study.

Table 1

California, Ohio, and Texas Interviews Years 1 - 3

	California	Ohio	Texas
State Interviews	Year 1: <i>N</i> = 4 Year 2: <i>N</i> = 3 Year 3: <i>N</i> = 4	Year 1: <i>N</i> = 6 Year 2: <i>N</i> = 9 Year 3: <i>N</i> = 6	Year 1: <i>N</i> = 6 Year 2: <i>N</i> = 4 Year 3: <i>N</i> = 5
District Interviews	Year 1: <i>N</i> = 0 Year 2: <i>N</i> = 9 Year 3: <i>N</i> = 5	Year 1: <i>N</i> = 12 Year 2: <i>N</i> = 8 Year 3: <i>N</i> = 0	Year 1: <i>N</i> = 7 Year 2: <i>N</i> = 9 Year 3: <i>N</i> = 0
RSC Interviews	Year 3: <i>N</i> = 2	Year 3: <i>N</i> = 1	Year 3: <i>N</i> = 3

Note: Data was collected between June 2015 and December 2018. Where *N* = 1 for RSC interviews, the interview combined questions from all of the interview protocols found in Appendices A - C.

The semi-structured confidential interviews with participants were scheduled with participants individually and recorded and transcribed for analysis. The interview protocols used to interview RSC representatives can be found in Appendix A. Appendix B and C reflect the modified protocols we used to interview RSC representatives specializing in EL and SWD supports,

respectively. The interviews were deductively coded using the five attributes of the policy attribute theory as codes: specificity, authority, consistency, power, and stability. The data were also inductively coded using the emergent themes related to state and district officials' articulations of the mediators of their policy implementation efforts: ESSA regulations, partnerships with external organizations, curriculum, PD, supports for SWDs, supports for ELs, state governance mechanisms, geography, outreach and communication strategies, and technology. Using these data, we created case study documents for each state included in the study—Ohio, Texas, and California—that provided an overview of the ways in which regional centers were utilized to support standards implementation. For each state, we described the state-regional-center-district infrastructure, as elucidated by interview participants; the various PD services they provided to general educators, special educators, and EL educators; and the services they provided as state accountability partners. We drew comparisons across the case study documents, looking for similar and dissimilar patterns in the ways in which regional centers were relied upon as specific, consistent, authoritative, powerful, and stable sources of support. We participated in multiple rounds of dialogic engagement (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016), where we examined these comparisons and refined cross-state themes that spoke to the functions and forms of the regional centers as integral players in the standards implementation process.

Shifting from Authority to Productive Power

Though it is commonly known that state and district officials depend on RSCs as critical implementation agents that facilitate the spread of statewide reform initiatives, there is not yet documentation of *how* these regional centers are relied upon to help execute the goals of the CCR standards movement. Our study suggests that regional centers that first build their authority as supportive governmental bodies may be better equipped to productively leverage their power as accountability agents of the state. We first demonstrate how the RSCs enhance their authority by offering specific, standards-aligned resources to states that are deemed to be credible, and by filling the void of standards-based guidance and interventions for special populations. We argue that this authority is critical if states decide to utilize regional centers as interventionists for districts identified as low-performing, according to state accountability metrics. Our data illustrate the promising potential for regional centers to exercise productive power as part of the state accountability system if they first establish their authority as supportive experts in the field of standards implementation.

RSC Mechanisms for Establishing Authority

Regional centers in the three states of our study are configured in slightly different ways, though they all serve the broader purpose of aiding districts with their implementation of their state's standards. In each of the three states, districts can choose to leverage their regional centers if they identify a local PD need that can be addressed by content experts and education specialists at their RSCs. In California, the regional centers are referred to as "county offices," and offer districts and schools differentiated support within a broader tiered system of state support. In Texas, regional centers are called Education Service Centers (ESCs) and they offer help within their geographical designation. While ESCs in Texas are mandated to operate in each region of the state, their services, which include PD and differentiated strategies for working with SWDs and ELs, are completely optional, meaning that districts, schools, and teachers can request their services based on need. In Ohio, the regional centers are also called Education Service Centers, and they operate much like the ESCs in Texas. An additional layer of regional assistance in Ohio is offered through the State Support Teams (SSTs), which are in charge of implementing the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP),

the state's mandated improvement process for struggling schools. SST members are state-level employees, but work out of the ESCs, and are closely associated with them.

The county offices, ESCs, and SSTs function as regional bodies that reinforce statewide initiatives to implement their state's content standards with authority. They do so by specifying the state vision for standards implementation, which adds legitimacy both to the standards movement and to their regional centers as helpful resources, as well as ensuring any interventions are specific to local contexts. They also present themselves as authoritative experts in their general education content, in EL instruction, and in SWD supports, all the while showing educators how to align their instruction to the standards. Finally, in their role as an intermediary source of support, they develop relationships with both district and state officials and serve as a bridge for timely communication, which may offset some of the instability that is a commonplace feature of today's education policy arena.

Enhancing Specificity to Build Authority

One way of cultivating perceptions of authority is to show districts how to specifically enact certain aspects of the standards. While RSCs must be cautious of providing specificity that does not overbear on the expertise of teachers and districts (Desimone, 2002), Flores, Saldívar García, and Edgerton (2020) found that when specificity characterized state resources and systems of support—because they were tailored to meet the needs of local contexts or took the form of procedures that guided research-informed decision-making—district officials reported stronger belief in the purpose of the standards, their credibility, and attainability. RSCs embrace specificity as a central feature of their work by tailoring interventions to district needs, displaying their willingness to work alongside the district in improving schools in ways that work for the local context.

In Ohio, state leaders in the accountability division describe the OIP as beginning with an intentionally thorough listening process, in which members of the SST spend several days in districts speaking with personnel of varying levels and expertise “just to talk through their data and to understand what the district believes are their strengths and weaknesses.” This process builds authority for the members of the SST prior to their implementation of more power-oriented interventions. This commitment to districts' specific needs is recognized by employees on the ground; one suburban district that opted into the OIP noted the flexibility of the SST in making the process fit the district's needs as making the undertaking particularly valuable. Specifically, the SST and school administrators allowed teams of teachers to make adjustments to forms schools are required to fill out as part of the OIP that they felt did not fit their context and to stray from the designated topics of conversation if they were not applicable to their needs. The ability to “make it our own” made teachers much more receptive to the process, despite its potential to be viewed as an overstep of power.

County offices in California also illustrate how they offer specific supports to districts that help deepen their understanding of the standards, which in turn enhances the county offices' authority as the intermediary governmental body supporting the operationalization of the state's standards movement. Administrators in several county offices describe how intensively they work to understand districts' specific needs before offering drilled down PD into narrow areas of support. Rather than picking one PD topic and disseminating information on that topic for two hours, county offices “try to really look comprehensively” at district needs by entering classrooms as coaches, walking alongside principals to “help [them] see what we see so [they're] getting professional learning as principals,” and having “really deep conversation about what do they want and why they think they want that.” An administrator in a different county office referenced an ongoing, integrated series of PD supports that surface specific aspects of the standards, such as “two hours on close reading and the next time we might do two hours on text and questioning... and

then we might do two hours on how do you develop text dependent questions.” These intensive and specific sources of support lend credence to the county offices’ authority as the state arm for standards implementation.

ESCs in Texas build organizational authority by working closely with districts and the state agency to support standards revisions and implementation; efforts that have positioned them as essential to the state-ESC-district standards implementation process, described as a “filtering process” by one district official. Most of the districts we interviewed referenced ESCs as their primary point of contact when it came to standards-based supports from the state. One district administrator described the supports their district receives as having “specific content pieces, like how to align your standards to writing” and explained that these resources can be further tailored in “specificity to different things depending on whatever information the districts give them.” ESCs are known to have a close relationship with the state when it comes to standards revisions. A different district administrator described ESCs as helping them “stay ahead of the curve” by supporting their development of an “intentional plan” through which they could prepare for the rollout of revisions to the math standards. This process of state-ESC-district standards-based support coordination, according to district and state officials, has been in place through various standards revisions and has positioned ESCs as critical sources of information for districts. This state-ESC-district coordination was described by a third district administrator as providing a consistent understanding of standards by ensuring “people don’t just assume their own inferences, what the TEKS means and just go from there.” The intentionality and degree of specificity with which ESCs provide content and standards-based support contributes to the overall authority with which they were perceived by districts.

Specificity in the form of differentiated supports was a characteristic of RSCs that was alluded to in our interviews with state and district officials in California, Ohio, and Texas. In Ohio, this specificity helped offset potential negative responses to OIP and helped to build trust in the process and RSCs amongst districts. In California, RSCs have developed procedures that ensure that their support is contextually relevant. Similarly, RSCs in Texas have put in place systems of support for standards implementation that districts seek out due to their relevance and specificity. In all of the states, specificity contributed to the authority, credibility, and overall sense of reliability and relevance with which district officials described RSCs. This authority was also evident in content-based conversations.

Consistent Content-Based Expertise

As many administrators have acknowledged, when the standards were first introduced to educators, the nation had not yet developed a deep reservoir of resources that were proven to be aligned to the demands of the standards (Polly, 2017). This created an acute challenge in implementing the standards, as educators were left with the same curricular materials they had always had and lacked the standards-aligned curricular materials necessary to teach them. The RSCs were therefore tasked with scanning the environment for these resources or with creating their own aligned resources and disseminating this information out to districts that sought such information. These actions reflect the attribute of consistency.

In Ohio, districts have complete control over the curriculum they use. However, Ohio’s Office of Curriculum and Assessment leverages the authority of ESCs by asking them to develop resources about the scope and content of the standards and tools for assessing the alignment of district-created materials, and then “ask[ing] them to go out in their sphere of influence” to disseminate the information. The state also uses ESCs as a feedback mechanism, asking them to identify on-the-ground opinions of state-generated materials, such as a quality review rubric that teachers and school leaders can use to determine whether a particular lesson or unit is “high quality” in relationship to the standards, and bring this feedback back to the state. In addition, some ESCs

offer districts hands-on support in determining whether their curriculum is aligned to the state standards or in creating curriculum from scratch, but this varies by region.

Like Ohio, districts in Texas also have complete autonomy in determining the curriculum they use. Thus, providing curricular materials that are aligned to the standards falls outside of the work of the state agency. However, like Ohio, Texas leverages the authority and expertise of ESCs in order to develop and disseminate resources that promote standards-based instruction. ESC's role in the development of content and delivery of PD for teachers in math academies is an example of this work that was mentioned by both state and district officials. In a competitive process to develop the content for math and ELA academies, an ESC won the contract for Math. This ESC has been responsible for developing math content for teachers enrolled in academies and has also been involved in the delivery of the content for both ELA and math, a broader ESC task, using a train-the-trainer model. Additionally, ESC staff is tasked with "promoting to districts" additional instructional resources the state provides and develops in collaboration with ESCs through their online resource center, the Texas Gateway. One district administrator indicated that their ESC is "a great resource" that provides rich resources across content areas, though what those resources look like varies "depending on the content and how they attack it."

California also relies on its county offices to connect their districts to aligned resources; this was especially true when the standards were first rolled out. As one county administrator shared, "We were the hub of all things standards from 2010 and then for several years after that. Pretty much all of our PD at that time was about the standards." The county offices additionally made sure to spread their standards-aligned resources throughout the state by inviting different regions to come together, "identify where their gaps are in their resources and who can help fill in those gaps so that we no longer have, you know, sparsity of resources in one area versus another." In other words, if one county office excelled in the area of providing resources aligned to early childhood learning standards, then others throughout the state knew to leverage that county's offerings. Several county administrators described how this alignment of expertise reinforced their own credibility, or authority, as content experts, as the people who are typically hired to work at county offices are those with specialized knowledge of their content areas.

Across all three states, RSCs were described as providing valuable content-based expertise that promoted the authority with which they were perceived. While this was true for general content expertise, our interviews also suggest that this expertise was especially relevant to districts when it came to ELs and SWDs.

Special Populations Expertise Aligned to State Standards

Our interviews suggest that the authority with which RSCs are perceived is also connected to their expertise regarding SWDs and ELs in the context of standards-based instruction, as both state and district leaders describe relying on these regional centers to provide meaningful supports that align with the state's vision for standards-based reform. In addition to authority, this trend reflects the attribute of consistency given the RSCs' work in aligning the goals of standards-based reform with the goals of educating SWDs and ELs.

Considering the large EL demographic that Texas serves, it is not surprising that each ESC has a specific English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual department that supports districts with meeting the needs of ELs. One of the major tasks of this department is providing strategies, such as PD and curricular supports, that assist in the implementation of the state's English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) across all content areas, reinforcing the idea that teaching the ELPS is the responsibility of all teachers. These EL supports have been especially helpful to small rural districts relative to larger districts with the capacity to develop the bulk of their standards supports "in house."

Texas ESCs also provide a range of compliance- and instruction-based supports pertaining to SWDs for teachers and districts. These supports include standards-based IEP training and the popular “Teaching, Engaging, Academics, and Motivating for Success” (TEAMS) training where teachers receive instructional support and feedback based on field observations by ESC staff. While compliance-based supports are amongst the most requested ESC services for SWDs, one interviewee spoke to the ESC-wide commitment to include instructional implications in all SWD trainings to message the idea that “compliance is not enough,” further building authority for the state standards and their attainability.

In Ohio, districts sometimes contract extra EL support staff through their local ESC on a part-time basis. District employees described ESCs as offering universal for-a-fee PD on providing additional support that pushes ELs to meet rigorous standards, thus communicating to teachers that the standards are appropriate for all students and that meeting them is not an infeasible goal. In addition, when SSTs enter schools participating in OIP, they tend to focus on what barriers are preventing the school’s SWDs and ELs from meeting the standards, thus reinforcing the notion that all students should be meeting them. They offer coaching as a method to build capacity for differentiating instruction for these populations even after the school has exited OIP. All of this support, in many cases tailored to individual schools or even teachers, bolsters both the authority of learning standards as appropriate tools for driving the learning of all students and the authority of SSTs—and, by association, ESCs—as reliable sources of personalized intervention.

Like in Texas and Ohio, county offices in California provide a continuum of SWD and EL services that district officials describe as much-needed services, especially for small and rural districts. Districts in California have the option of operating their own SWD programs or of pooling together their SWD funding to run regionalized programs. For example, districts can pool together their resources for county-level speech and language services or autism support services, which is particularly beneficial for those districts with a “two room schoolhouse and a one room schoolhouse... that absolutely need a continuum of services that like this... because smaller school districts may only get one student a year with severe autism.” In terms of EL support, the state invited the county offices to roll out their integrated ELA and English Language Development (ELD) framework, which they did by simultaneously developing “belief modules” in the form of online webinars that help teachers see how they can implement the ELD framework in their classrooms. At least two California districts in the study viewed their county offices as vital sources of EL support, as “they are the ones that really have guided us with protocol and curriculum” and “their English learner team does a good job of guiding us in terms of how exactly to implement [new EL policies].”

Thus, RSCs fulfill a vital function that supports the work of district leaders—they offer guidance, resources (both human and material), and insights into state policies that are intended to advance the work of SWD and EL instruction in the context of standards-based reform. These offerings deepen the authority of the RSCs, which becomes useful capital when RSCs are called upon to assert their power as state interventionists in districts identified as low-performing, as explained below.

Leveraging Authority for Productive Use of Power

Accountability conversations have shifted nationwide in recent years, as the 2015 passage of ESSA provided states with increased flexibility to determine their state-specific interventions for their lowest performing districts and schools. In the language of the policy attributes theory, accountability reflects “power,” or the enforcement of expectations through the allocation of performance-based rewards and sanctions. In many cases, state education agencies rely on their RSCs to step into the role of interventionists for districts and schools that are identified as low

performing and in need of additional assistance. The effectiveness with which RSCs execute this role is, at least partly, premised on the authority they have cultivated with state and district actors.

Due to lessons learned from previous waves of standards-based reform, where perceptions of punitive state action negatively impacted receptiveness towards state interventions (Rice & Malen, 2003; Trujillo & Renee, 2012), California and Ohio state and regional leaders are now working to position the county offices and SSTs as authoritative entities that are implicitly functioning as power enforcers. In other words, while state officials are mandating that certain districts work with regional centers as the result of their underperformance, they and their regional counterparts have reconfigured this process to make interventions seem more like differentiated sources of support than impositional, top-down sanctions, which is only possible if the RSCs possess a certain level of authority beforehand.

In California, the state described intentionally trying to shift perceptions of their county offices by shifting their roles from compliance to support under the new accountability system, and thus from a focus on power to one of authority. As one state leader described, “the state’s accountability system requires that if you are a school district that is not meeting the needs of two to three of your subgroups of students, then you’re going to need some extra help, and you’re going to need individualized assistance.” County offices work with the 200 or so districts that are identified as needing individualized assistance to provide “coaching on helping districts plan how to get rid of those barriers, basically, and plan for what they need to do to provide the quality instruction for those students” without being militant or prescriptive in their approach. The county office was previously known to “police” districts, but the hope is that now districts will see that the county is there to offer support.

This process in Ohio happened more naturally as a result of ESSA’s tendency to push state employees to realize that “continuous improvement is everybody’s business,” according to a state administrator. State leaders familiar with both state and regional contexts believe that this change, coupled with new state leadership who emphasize sustainable coordination among offices, has fostered an atmosphere of collaboration in Ohio at every level of the system, removing people from their silos and allowing the OIP to be seen in a more positive light where the focus is implementation and support rather than compliance and paperwork. By formalizing connections with departments ranging from Educator Effectiveness to Early Learning, the SSTs have more firmly grounded their work in evidence and thus shifted from tracking attendance at meetings to ensuring the right content is covered in those meetings to move schools toward success.

Further reinforcing this atmosphere of collaboration is the two-way communication orchestrated by the ESCs, as the state capitalizes on the regional centers’ proximity to the ground to obtain feedback from districts on PD offerings and how to best support struggling districts. In describing the SSTs, one state leader referred to them as “the ones most connected to the field” who directly support buildings and districts. The 300+ SST staff members across the state are able to connect with these local educators, collect their feedback about state efforts to support districts, and channel that feedback to the state officials, who then make adjustments. By posing ESCs as a feedback mechanism for districts, the state is able to obtain the feedback they are looking for while simultaneously helping create an environment of trust between ESCs and districts.

This trust further builds ESCs’ ability to effectively utilize power. While most state-level employees are generally faceless names if known at all by district and school staff, Ohio ESC staff’s proximity to the regions they are responsible for, and the smaller number of districts for which they are responsible, means they are a friendly face in the building, even while conducting a power-oriented intervention. According to a leader in state accountability,

We're sitting here in Columbus and [a district] is three hours away... We've gotta have boots on the ground, somebody in those buildings every single week and understanding and working with the community, because obviously, you've gotta have buy-in from your business, you gotta have buy-in from parents and other community members if there really is gonna be change in that school district. So, we put people in place though that are up in those communities and are charged with turning it around.

These “boots on the ground” manage to maintain their authority even when acting from a position of power.

Fortunately, most district officials in this study interpret their RSCs' accountability-related actions in a productive light, with a few isolated instances of individuals disparaging this particular function of the regional centers. One district leader in California confirmed their state's new approach: in the past “people from the county office [came] in and kind of just [told] us what needed to be done versus working with us,” whereas they now emphasize more of a district-customized, improvement-based philosophy. In Ohio, a leader in a rural district that was mandated to participate in OIP described the individuals of the SST as huge sources of support for getting questions answered, and lamented losing proximity to them after exiting the process. Districts can opt into participation in OIP, even if they are not struggling, because of a desire to continually improve; these districts tend to view the process as, while cumbersome initially, largely helpful and support-oriented.

Despite this, the perception of compliance with the SST acting as a source of punishment for struggling districts does sometimes muddy the waters for a trusting relationship between ESCs and districts that are undergoing mandated intervention. One such district described the SST as “the compliance people” and said while discussing the process, “I mean, we've been through so many consequences over the years.” One administrator in the voluntarily participating suburban district made explicit this contrast in perspective when she said, “So you know, the Ohio Improvement Process, which the district opts into, which other districts we've talked to were much crabbier about, because they didn't opt into it, involves these different teams.” These statements suggest that leveraging authority for productive power is not a straightforward process and that states should continue to invest in authority-building efforts between RSCs and districts.

The leveraging of authority for more effective power in Ohio and California contrasts with the continued authority-based approach of ESCs in Texas. ESCs in Texas are by state law non-regulatory and as such have continued to support districts and schools in implementing state initiatives, including those related to school turnaround. For instance, when districts are identified in need of improvement they must submit a root cause analysis to the Texas Education Agency detailing the steps the district will take to improve student outcomes. ESCs offer districts assistance in developing these plans and read the plans of any district that falls within their geographic area to inform the services they offer. Some of this work might be led by an ESC turnaround team that supports districts in working with the state's Accountability Intervention System and implementing the Critical Success Factors. Even though ESCs support turnaround efforts, all accountability measures default to the state agency. The non-regulatory role of ESCs in Texas is based on the idea that authority is necessary to school improvement, and allows ESCs to continue to “develop a level of trust and assurance with both TEA and local schools” (Texas Education Agency, 2019) to ensure all parties involved in educating children are working cooperatively. As Ohio and California continue to leverage the authority of RSCs to operationalize power, ESCs in Texas offer an important counterexample of a powerless but authoritative intermediate unit system that, as our interviews suggest, has been successful in building institutional authority.

Limitations

The U.S. decentralized system is such that each state is able to conduct its own approach to supporting their districts and schools in the implementation of standards-based reform. States enact diverse implementation strategies based on the institutional and governance arrangements in their state, the number of districts they have, the extent to which educational issues are coupled with other political issues in the state, and the extent to which there is local control in the state (Dahill-Brown, 2019; Manna, 2012; Meier & O'Toole, 2006). The uniqueness of each of the three state systems in this study—California, Ohio, and Texas—are not to be discounted, and our findings are not meant to be generalized across all states. Where there are major differences, such as in Texas where their RSCs are not part of the state accountability strategy, we have illuminated these contextual factors. We also know that the structures in these three states are not representative of the diversity of state structures across the nation. By utilizing policy attributes theory, we hope to show how a theoretical framework can be applied across these diverse contexts to identify patterns, trends, and variations in how states leverage their RSCs along the universally applicable lines of specificity, consistency, authority, power, and stability.

Discussion and Implications

Education policy implementation is a process that involves a variety of moving pieces and a distribution of leadership to multiple actors throughout a state system (Pak & Desimone, 2018). This study highlights the contributions of one of these actors—regional service centers (RSCs)—in response to our observation that these critical players receive extremely limited attention in scholarship on standards-based reform. And yet, these RSCs are often the main sources of support that state agencies rely on to spread the implementation of their rigorous content standards and other initiatives, and act as the main sources of support for districts that require external assistance, especially for small or rural districts.

We draw from case studies of standards implementation in three of our partner states—Ohio, Texas, and California—to better understand the role and perceptions of RSCs as intermediary agents in the statewide system of reform and to learn from their successes in navigating this unique position. Our analyses revealed a portrait of authoritative governmental agencies rarely found in the literature. Even though it was widely acknowledged by state and district officials that RSCs operated as arms of the state, this positioning did not undermine most districts' perceptions of their credibility or legitimacy. Instead, district leaders confirmed state leaders' perceptions that the RSCs existed to provide specific and consistent sources of standards-based, content-focused support, especially support that targets historically underserved student populations.

These perceptions contrast the typical trend of local practitioners distrusting or disregarding the authority of public agencies (Farkas & Duffett, 2014; Schultz, 2019). Distrust is a phenomenon that is contingent on the negative reputation of other parties (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Yet in this case, the reputation of the RSCs seem to be generally healthy and associated with trust, according to most of the participants in this study. Having built up this reputation of authority, RSCs may be able to more productively leverage their power as interventionists sent to districts on account of their status as low performing districts. Further reinforcing this productive use of power may be state and regional leaders learning to frame their RSCs' work as relational and focused on districts' unique needs, rather than work that is impositional and compliance-based.

Given the mixed and complicated perspectives on the use of power as a lever of educational policy implementation (see Dee and Wyckoff, 2015; Hemelt, 2011), we offer our argument that

government agencies that draw from the attribute of power are more productive when they have already established their authority. Findings from this study suggest that authority can be cultivated through the other two attributes of specificity and consistency. State, regional, and district leaders described how the RSCs worked to enhance the specificity of the state standards by providing resources and PD that specifically addressed narrow areas of district improvement. These actions also enhance buy-in, or authority, when the RSC's identification of specific needs match the needs identified by local practitioners (Cohen & Mehta, 2017). Additionally, RSCs enhanced their authority by providing content-based expertise that exposed districts to useful resources and PD that aligned to the standards (i.e. consistency), and when they provided expertise that showed how to align work with SWDs and ELs to the expectations of the standards movement. Again, these alignment actions fulfilled the needs of local practitioners, which reinforced RSCs' authority. And while we did not ask this question specifically, it is also possible that the authority of RSCs is tied to the perception that those hired to work in these entities are seasoned and knowledgeable professionals, which potentially adds legitimacy to the institution (and should be considered in future studies).

District leaders in smaller and more rural districts were particularly vocal about the authority of their respective RSCs, as long as these centers are not too far from their districts. The utility of these RSCs for those districts with smaller central offices resonates with prior documentation of the critical services provided by RSCs in areas with limited capacity (Arfstrom, 2004). As district leaders informed us, when the superintendent is also the bus driver and principal of a school, or when there is one student with severe autism in the entire district, it helps to have an RSC with the capacity to provide standards-based resources and services on behalf of these central offices. One high school interventionist in a rural Ohio district said that while participating in OIP, the SST members were the first people she would seek out for any support she needed in her role, prior to even anyone at the district. RSCs were referenced as the most consistent source of support in all of our Texas district interviews.

The productive use of power by RSCs in California and Ohio offers valuable lessons for both RSCs in other states and for policymakers struggling to enforce accountability mandates because of the negative connotations power holds. The use of consistency and specificity to build authority and thus more positively wield power can be replicated in policies, programs, and the structure and roles of governmental bodies. Trusted leaders appear more able to foster buy-in to interventions, and trusted interventions are more likely to trickle down to and make an impact on the ground.

This study, however, does not address the evaluative question of whether these relationships of productive power and authority effectively contribute to the continuous improvement of underperforming districts, whether or not these districts are small or rural. Yet these questions remain in the minds of state leaders in charge of designing the state-regional-district infrastructure for standards-based reform. Said by one Texas state leader outside of this study but to the researchers of this study,

[There is still work to be done to figure out] does the structure that we have in place to provide that continuum of support from the state level to a very large state both geographically, as well as population wise in a very diverse state, is this the right model? Where are we falling short? And where can we better invest our resources? (Personal Communication, April 27, 2018).

In other words, how do we know if the RSC model for providing assistance to districts is working, given the geographic reality of the state, and how do we know if the RSC model is providing the right resources for districts? These are questions that should motivate future studies of the flow of support from the state down to the local level.

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Appendix A

Semi-structured Interview Protocol for Regional Service Center Representatives

1. How would you describe the RSC's relationship with the state department of education?
 - a. How often do you interact and plan activities together?
2. How would you describe your relationship with school districts?
 - a. Prompts: Who initiates this contact? How often do you communicate with districts? Does this vary by district? Do you work more with districts directly, principals, teachers, or through the state?
3. We have found across our interviews that RSCs have become more involved in the implementation of standards, especially for PD. Do you think that your role has expanded and, if so, why?
4. What types of information does the state collect about PD that you offer?
5. What are your most popular professional development (PD) offerings for teachers? Principals? District administrators?
6. How do you monitor and evaluate PD?
 - a. What types of feedback do you collect from teachers or principals who participate in your PD?
7. How do you establish alignment of PD with the standards?
8. How do you decide what PD to offer?
9. How would you describe your teacher and principal PD model? Do you offer more direct PD to teachers, do you train the trainers, or a combination of both?
10. What resources do you receive to meet the professional development needs of your region/state?
 - a. How satisfied are you with the resources that you receive?
11. What do you think are the challenges in implementing teacher, principal and district PD in your state?
12. What types of curricular support do you provide to districts? Do districts seem to want more or less support?
13. To what extent do you feel that district administrators in your region or state understand and implement the CCR standards?
 - a. Is this different or the same for principals? Teachers?
 - b. Have you noticed improvement around knowledge of the standards (and the corresponding instructional shifts) among these groups?
14. What are the types of concerns that teachers, principals and districts raise about the standards?
 - a. Do you feel that they are appropriate for all students (i.e. low-achieving, ELLs, SWDs)?
15. How would you describe the stability of standards policy in your state?
 - a. How does this affect your work, if at all?

Appendix B
**Semi-structured Interview Protocol for English Learner Regional Service Center
Representatives**

1. We're interested in exploring the growing role that regional service centers seem to be playing in supporting school leaders and teachers in supporting ELL students. Can you explain the RSC's relationship with the state and individual districts?
 - a. Have there been any recent changes in these relationships?
 - b. How do these changes impact ELL students?
2. Can you give me an overview of what support systems for RSC's provide for school leaders and teachers of ELL students? This might include resources, curricular supports, modules, etc.
 - a. Which of these do you think teachers find most useful or appear to be using the most? How do you monitor this?
 - b. Are there supports that teachers seem to want more of? What about districts or administrators?
 - c. Are there any challenges in providing these supports?
3. Have the changes introduced by ESSA changed the nature of your work/what the RSC's provide, specifically in regards to ELLs? If so, how?
4. ESSA requires that states develop statewide identification and exit criteria for ELL students. To what extent is the ESC involved in training teachers to work with these new criteria, if at all?
5. Does the ESC provide professional development specifically for teachers of ELL students?
 - a. How are decisions about the content and delivery of ELL student related PD determined?
 - b. How frequently is ELL PD offered?
 - c. Prompt (professional networks)
6. We're interested in exploring differentiation strategies for ELL students in general education courses. How does the RSC support teachers or districts in differentiating instruction for ELL students?
7. What resources or training do RSC's provide to district and school leaders to support their work with ELLs? (i.e., compliance with ELL policies, understanding new assessments, entrance and exit criteria, etc.)
 - a. In what ways do you determine what resources or training is needed?
8. Are there any other initiatives that the RSCs are involved in that relate to the goal of addressing the needs of ELL students?
9. Do you foresee any changes to the RSCs role, or what the RSC provides in the near future, as policies or priorities relating to ELLs shift?

Appendix C

Semi-structured Interview Protocol for Students with Disabilities Regional Service Center Representatives

1. We are really interested in the growing role that regional service centers seem to be playing in regards to supporting school administrators and teachers. Can you explain the RSC's relationship with the state, as well as with individual districts?
 - a. Have there been any recent changes in these relationships?
 - b. How do these changes impact SWDs?
2. Can you give me a broad overview of what support systems RSCs provide for administrators and teachers of SWDs? This might include resources, curricular supports, etc.
 - a. Which of these do you think teachers find most helpful, or appear to be utilizing the most? How do you monitor this?
 - b. Is there anything teachers seem to want more of? What about districts or administrators?
 - c. Are there any challenges in providing these supports?
3. Many states have changed their accountability systems as they submit new state plans under ESSA. Have the changes to ESSA changed the nature of your work/what the RSCs provide, specifically in regards to SWDs? If so, how?
4. Can you describe the RSC's approach to providing SWD-related PD?
 - a. How are decisions about the content and delivery of SWD-related PD determined (i.e. do the RSCs decide independently, does the state suggest anything, do districts?)
 - b. How frequently is SWD PD offered?
 - c. How, if at all, is the provision and content of special education PD different for gen ed teachers vs. special education teachers?
 - d. Do SWD teachers participate in any sort of regularly-meeting professional learning communities sponsored by the RSC?
 - i. Are these with other special education teachers, or gen ed teachers?
 - ii. How often do these meetings occur?
 - iii. What tends to be the focus of these meetings?
5. How is the RSC supporting teachers or districts in differentiating instruction?
6. We are interested in learning about the balance between offering compliance-oriented PD (focused on, for example, IDEA requirements, how to write an IEP) versus instruction-oriented PD (focused on, for example, differentiation, pedagogy, content). How does your RSC balance those two?
 - a. What kinds of topics does instruction-oriented PD tend to cover?
 - b. To what extent do you think this PD supports teachers in addressing a wide range of student abilities in their classrooms?
7. What resources or training do RSCs provide to school leaders to support teachers of SWDs?

- a. In what ways do you determine what resources are needed?
10. To what extent are RSCs involved in the identification process for SWDs? (i.e. training on RTI)
11. Are there other initiatives that the RSCs are involved in that relate to the goal of addressing diverse learners?
12. Do you foresee any changes to the RSCs' role, or what the ESC provides, in the near future, as policies or priorities around SWDs shift?

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