Exploring the Principal's Role in Cross-Sector Partnerships: Sensemaking and Politics in a High-Performing Early College High School

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Secondary–postsecondary partnership reforms have grown in scale and importance throughout the past few decades as part of the national agenda to increase college access, equity, and completion. However, little research has examined the role of the principal in cross-sector partnerships. This qualitative case study explores how one nationally acclaimed principal at an award-winning early college high school made sense of the cross-sector context and negotiated with K–12 and higher education stakeholders to maximize college opportunity for low-income, Latinx, and first-generation students. Our analysis integrates sensemaking and micropolitical theory to identify leadership practices that facilitate effective cross-sector collaboration, with implications for K–12 leadership and cross-sector partnership reform.

Cross-sector partnerships are a critical mechanism to support improved educational outcomes throughout the P–20 system (Henig et al., 2016). Partnerships compel two or more organizations to collaborate, or share information, resources, and activities, to achieve mutual goals that they would be unable to achieve separately (Bryson et al., 2006). Educational organizations partner with businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government entities outside of education, as well as other sectors within the education system, such as K–12 collaborating with higher education. These secondary–postsecondary partnerships between school districts and institutions of higher education (IHEs) have grown in scale and importance during the past few decades as part of the national agenda to increase college access, equity, and completion (Domina & Ruzek, 2012; Vargas, 2019). Postsecondary attainment is critical to meet modern workforce demand and enhance social mobility (Cushing et al., 2019), but completion rates have remained relatively stagnant at around 65% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), and equity gaps persist by race, class, and parent education

(Odle et al., 2022). Part of the problem is that K–12 and higher education have historically operated independently, with distinct cultures, practices, and standards. Cross-sector collaboration helps to bridge these differences and smooth students' transitions from high school into and through postsecondary education (Mokher & Jacobson, 2021).

One secondary–postsecondary partnership reform that has been scaling rapidly across the country is dual enrollment/dual credit (DC).[1] DC allows high school students to take college courses and earn both high school and college credits—often at a discount—through a partnering IHE (Taylor et al., 2022). Coursework is delivered through a variety of models, from one-off classes to comprehensive 4-year programs. For example, early college high schools (ECHSs) allow underrepresented students to earn an associate degree during high school by starting DC coursework as early as the ninth grade (Barnett et al., 2015). ECHSs operate through close working partnerships between school districts and IHEs, typically community colleges (Vargas & Venezia, 2015). Research suggests ECHSs have positive impacts on

college completion, especially for students of color and low-income students (Edmunds et al., 2020). Since the mid-2000s, DC programs such as ECHSs have gained traction nationwide, with about 90% of high schools now offering some form of DC (Shivji & Wilson, 2019).

Despite the promise of cross-sector collaboration between K–12 and higher education, little research has examined the role of principals in these reform contexts (Malin & Hackmann, 2017). Studies have documented conditions that support cross-sector partnerships, such as shared vision, mutual decision making, and trust building (Amey et al., 2010; Bryk et al., 2011). However, it is less clear how specific leaders situated in one sector or the other—and high school principals in particular—work with their partners to cultivate these conditions in the first place. This gap is concerning not only because principals have a significant influence on student success in general (Grissom et al., 2021), but also because they are increasingly expected to collaborate with IHE partners to enhance postsecondary access for their students (Malin & Hackmann, 2019). Inquiry into how principals navigate secondary–postsecondary partnerships is needed to support policy and practice around school leadership, principal preparation, and cross-sector P–20 reform.

To that end, this case study investigated the principal's role in cross-sector collaboration through the lens of an ECHS. From a multiyear project that explored DC implementation across 12 schools in a borderland region of Texas, we selected one principal to spotlight: Javier Rodriguez (a pseudonym) reached national acclaim leading an award-winning ECHS, which we call High-Performing Early College (HPEC). For nearly a decade, HPEC graduated more than 90% of its predominantly low-income, first-generation, and Latinx student population with an associate degree as well as a high school diploma. We addressed two research questions:

1. How does a high-performing ECHS principal make sense of ECHS reform within a cross-sector partnership context?
2. How does this principal collaborate and negotiate with K–12 and IHE stakeholders to realize his reform goals?

Two theoretical perspectives framed our approach: sensemaking, which foregrounds how actors make meaning of and respond to reform (Weick, 1995), and micropolitics, which considers how different stakeholder groups wield influence to shape implementation (Malen, 2006). Findings reveal that this principal made sense of ECHS reform as a process of negotiation among partners with distinct but legitimate needs and goals. Without formal authority over his external partners, this principal focused on understanding their points of view, which strengthened his ability to use informal influence strategies to advance his goals for his

school. We highlight implications for ECHS reform specifically and school leadership and cross-sector reform more broadly.

Relevant Literature and Theory

We situate the study with a brief synthesis of literature on cross-sector partnerships, particularly between K–12 and higher education, with attention to the role of principals. We then introduce sensemaking and the politics of implementation as complementary frameworks for theorizing how principals enact policy in cross-sector contexts.

Secondary–Postsecondary Partnership Reform and the Role of the Principal

The educational literature has explored the goals and benefits of cross-sector partnerships, as well as conditions that support their implementation and sustainability (Henig et al., 2016). Secondary–postsecondary partnerships can improve teaching and learning, align high school standards with those of higher education and the workforce, bolster college preparation, and smooth students' transitions (Amey et al., 2010; Mokher & Jacobson, 2021; Sarmiento-Márquez et al., 2023; Vargas & Venezia, 2015). One condition that is vital to cultivate cross-sector partnerships is developing a shared vision (Bryk et al., 2011; Kolleck et al., 2020). Other best practices for implementation include creating structures to support shared learning and collaboration, negotiating shared-resource distribution, using data to guide decisions, and cultivating stakeholder buy-in (Kamler et al., 2009). Effective and consistent leadership is also important, because administrator turnover can undermine partnership sustainability (Miller et al., 2017).

Meanwhile, cross-sector collaboration is becoming a larger part of the principal's role, especially in the context of P–20 alignment reform (Eyal & Yarm, 2018; Malin & Hackmann, 2019; Watkins et al., 2021). In college and career partnerships, two key contributions of principals include relationship building and optimization of resources across sectors (Bush, 2017; Hackmann et al., 2018). Principals serve as key liaisons between internal and external stakeholders in the implementation of career academies (Malin et al., 2020). However, principals may lack the support and information required to build and sustain these relationships. High school principals have reported feeling "in the dark" about whom to contact and how to collaborate with IHE partners (Mokher & Jacobson, 2021). These findings suggest the need for exploring how principals actually collaborate and negotiate in these partnership contexts.

Pursuing this line of inquiry through the lens of ECHSs also contributes to the growing literature on DC. Quantitative studies have identified positive impacts of DC participation on postsecondary outcomes, especially degree completion

(An & Taylor, 2019; Grubb et al., 2017; Schaller et al., 2023), although racial and socioeconomic disparities persist (An, 2013; Jones, 2014). Research on ECHSs specifically shows even stronger evidence of program effectiveness, as measured by postsecondary enrollment and persistence (Edmunds et al., 2020; Song et al., 2021), especially for Black and Latinx students (Britton et al., 2020). The model requires secondary and postsecondary partners to co-design a program of DC courses that leads to an associate degree in 4 years, at little or no cost to students (Walk, 2020). Designed to target underrepresented students who might not otherwise go to college, ECHSs provide safety nets through small class sizes, tutoring, counseling, and academic advising. Studies suggest ECHSs create a "family" feel, but that stress can be a challenge for students (Duncheon, 2020a; Edmunds et al., 2013). Duncheon and DeMatthews (2018) found that ECHS principals enable student success by targeting interventions, embedding supports, and creating opportunities for enrichment. To date, however, less is known about what leadership strategies facilitate DC and ECHS implementation with regard to the IHE partnership, specifically (Taylor et al., 2022).

Principal Sensemaking in the Context of Reform

Sensemaking is the process whereby people take in and order new information to guide future action (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). This perspective presumes that meanings are neither objective nor given; rather, people create meaning—or "make sense"—of the world as they reflect on and order their experiences (Weick, 1995). In the context of educational policy implementation, a sensemaking approach recognizes that meaning does not inhere in policies (Spillane et al., 2002b). Local actors adapt policies based on what they understand them to mean (Coburn, 2005). Spillane et al. (2002b) suggested sensemaking occurs through the interplay of policy messages, cognition, and context. Policy messages are external representations of policy objectives, or the information about a policy available to local actors. Cognition refers to mental maps or schemas, or the accumulated experiences, values, and expertise that help a person make sense of new information (Porac et al., 1989; Senge, 1990). Finally, sensemaking is filtered through context, which includes school, community, and political settings and the social interactions that occur within them (Coburn, 2001; Ingle et al., 2011).

At the school level, the principal is the primary actor responsible for translating state and district policy into practice (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Researchers have used sensemaking to explore how principals understand, translate, and act in response to new initiatives. Principal sensemaking studies have examined a variety of state and district reforms, including instructional and coaching models (Carraway & Young, 2015; Coburn, 2005; Matsumura & Wang, 2014),

accountability systems and educator evaluations (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2007; Jennings, 2010; Rigby, 2015; Watkins et al., 2021), special education and inclusive reforms (DeMatthews, 2015; Sumbera et al., 2014), school marketing (Reid, 2023), responses to COVID-19 (Murphy & Devine, 2023), and race and demographic shifts within school communities (Evans, 2007). These studies have revealed a few key trends. First, principals bring their personal and professional experience, values, and vision for their school to bear on implementation (DeMatthews, 2015; Coburn, 2005; Coburn et al., 2016). For example, DeMatthews (2015) highlighted how a principal's preparation and prior experience shaped her beliefs about and approach to including students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Reid (2020) showed how principals used their experience as teachers and school leaders to make sense of and enact new teacher evaluation systems. Carraway and Young (2015) found that principals adopting new professional development responded favorably to reform elements that reinforced their professional identities.

Second, principal sensemaking is shaped by their social context. Social context broadly refers to the facilitators and constraints of their school context, such as budget, enrollment, and resources (Bossert et al., 1982; González-Falcón et al., 2020); social and political influences, such as teacher perceptions, parent concerns, and district mandates (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2007; Coburn, 2005; Evans, 2007); and relationships and professional networks (Jennings, 2010; Rigby, 2015). For example, Spillane et al. (2002a) described how principals implementing a district accountability policy reshaped their initial approach after teachers expressed frustrations and pushback. A key takeaway is that, although principals exercise agency to implement reform in ways that align with their vision for their school and students (Koyama, 2014), principal agency is influenced and often constrained by their social context. Through the implementation process, principals are constantly making sense and remaking sense, strategizing and restrategizing (Black & Shircliffe, 2013; Porter et al., 2015).

Our study extends the literature on principal sensemaking in two important ways. First, whereas extant research has focused on implementation in traditional K–12 settings, we apply this lens in a cross-sector context. Second, as Ganon-Shilon and Schechter (2019) have pointed out, prior studies on principal sensemaking have been inattentive to politics. Because reform processes are inherently political—especially in cross-sector partnerships—we integrate sensemaking with the literature on micropolitics.

Attending to Politics

Researchers focused on the politics of implementation have argued that educational processes, structures, and

relationships are inherently political (Ball, 1987). Blase (1991) defined micropolitics as "the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organizations" (p. 11). The assumption is that people will try to shape the implementation process to satisfy their unique interests. Thus, a micropolitical lens is attentive to the strategies that diverse stakeholders use to exert influence and achieve their implementation objectives (Flessa, 2009; Malen, 2006). Political perspectives are especially important in studies of principals, who are positioned as midlevel managers between the central office and the staff at their school (Flessa, 2012; Lipsky, 1980; Spillane et al., 2002a). Principals also need to appease diverse constituencies (Shipps & White, 2009), particularly when working in cross-sector partnership contexts such as ECHSs.

Micropolitical theory suggests that implementation unfolds through political games, in which different sets of actors use influence strategies to garner support for their policy goals (Bardach, 1977; Firestone, 1989; Malen, 2006). Influence strategies can be formal or informal. With formal strategies, people exert power associated with their official role in the organization to influence others' behavior. For instance, a principal might use teaching evaluations to make teachers adopt a specific pedagogical method. Informal strategies are tactics of persuasion that do not involve the exercise of institutional authority. An example is a principal fostering buy-in for her vision through ongoing, open communication. Whether influence strategies are effective in shaping implementation outcomes depends on the interplay of multiple factors, such as a policy's popularity, local norms, existing relationships among stakeholders, available resources, and broader institutional and social conditions (Honig, 2009).

To date, the literature on sensemaking has largely failed to account for the roles of power and politics (Park et al., 2013; Weber & Glynn, 2006). Scholars have contended that Weick's (1995) conception of sensemaking and its applications have been "limited by an under focus on issues of power, knowledge, structure, and past relationships" (Helms Mills et al., 2010, p. 188). However, power and politics shape how reforms are interpreted and by whom, and how diverse stakeholders respond (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009). Different parties compete to shape policy meanings (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010), often driven by self-interest (Chase, 2016). Principals may be more or less adept at persuading others to support their desired policy vision (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), with implications for reform outcomes. In cross-sector reform contexts, political skills may carry more weight as principals are engaging with not only the district but also an IHE. Thus, our study integrates sensemaking and micropolitics to garner insight into the role of the principal in cross-sector partnership reform.

Research Design

This case study emerged from a multiyear qualitative research project that explored DC implementation across 12 schools partnered with one large community college system in the borderland of Texas. From the full sample of administrators, teachers, and students ($N= 254$), one ECHS principal, Mr. Rodriguez, stood out as an exceptional leader and negotiator. Thus, we focus on Mr. Rodriguez as an exemplary case of principal leadership in cross-sector reform. Our study describes the specifics of the case (Yin, 2014) to gain transferrable insights for leadership practice in cross-sector partnerships (Stake, 2005). We explore how Mr. Rodriguez made sense of and implemented ECHS reform through negotiations with K–12 and IHE stakeholders.

Situating the Case: State and Regional Policy Contexts

Texas has been at the forefront of DC reform as part of a statewide effort to bolster postsecondary completion rates. Districts must offer at least 12 semester hours of DC college credit to all high school students who demonstrate college readiness on the Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSIA) or an equivalent. The state is also home to nearly 200 ECHSs (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-a). State policy, as outlined by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) in its "ECHS Blueprint" (see Table 1), requires ECHSs to target and serve underrepresented student populations, and help students qualify for and succeed in DC courses to progress toward an associate degree. School district and IHE partners are required to jointly determine ECHS locations, cost allocation, decision-making procedures, and processes for sharing and monitoring student data.

The regional setting for the study is a borderland region characterized by close working relationships among K–12 districts, IHEs, and the business sector. The region's community college system, which we call Border Region Community College (BRCC), partners with eight local districts to deliver DC through a mix of one-off courses and more than 30 ECHSs and Pathways in Technology ECHSs. Some ECHSs are embedded within comprehensive high schools, and others have stand-alone campuses. DC programs are part of a regional effort, supported by the business community, to bolster postsecondary enrollment and attainment. BRCC waives tuition for all ECHS students, who complete DC through a mix of courses that are taught by BRCC professors at the college campus or online or by credentialed high school teachers in the high school/ECHS setting. A variety of BRCC administrators work with ECHS: a dean who oversees DC programs, instructional coordinators, campus liaisons, and academic deans who support instruction.

TABLE 1
The Early College High School Blueprint

Benchmark	Description
Target population	The Early College High School (ECHS) shall serve, or include plans to scale up to serve, students in grades 9 through 12 and shall target and enroll students who are at risk of dropping out of school as defined by the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) and who might not otherwise go to college.
Partnership agreement	The ECHS shall have a current, signed Memorandum of Understanding that: • defines the partnership between the school district(s) and the institute(s) of higher education (IHE) and addresses topics including, but not limited to, the ECHS location; the allocation of costs for tuition, fees, and textbooks; and student transportation; • states that the school district or charter in which the student is enrolled shall pay for tuition (for all dual credit courses, including retakes), fees (including Texas Success Initiative Assessment [TSIA] administration fees), and required textbooks to the extent that those charges are not waived by the partner IHE; • defines an active partnership between the school district(s) and the IHE(s), which shall include joint decision-making procedures that allow for the planning and implementation of a coherent program across institutions; and • includes provisions and processes for collecting, sharing, and reviewing program and student data to assess the progress of the ECHS.
P–16 leadership initiatives	The school district and IHE partners shall develop and maintain a leadership team that meets regularly to address issues of design and sustainability. Membership should include the ECHS principal/director and individuals with decision-making authority from the district(s) and IHE(s).
Curriculum and support	The ECHS shall provide a rigorous course of study that enables a participating student to receive a high school diploma and complete the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's (THECB) core curriculum (as defined by the Texas Administrative Code [TAC] §4.28) or an associate degree or at least 60 credit hours toward a baccalaureate degree during grades 9–12. The ECHS shall provide students with academic, social, and emotional support in their course of study.
Academic rigor and readiness	The ECHS shall administer a Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSIA) college placement exam (as defined by TAC §4.53) to all accepted students to assess college readiness, design individual instructional plans, and enable students to begin college courses based on their performance.
School design	The ECHS must provide a full-day program (i.e., full day as defined in PEIMS) at an autonomous high school (i.e., a high school with a principal or program coordinator assigned 100% to ECHS responsibilities who has scheduling, hiring, and budget authority), an IHE liaison with decision-making authority, and a highly qualified staff with support and training.

Note. The "Blueprint" was revised in 2019 and 2020 (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-b).

Case Selection

Of the 16 principals and assistant principals in the larger sample, we selected Mr. Rodriguez as an exemplary case. One reason was his extensive prior experience: 16 years as a high school teacher, 5 as assistant principal at a comprehensive high school, and 2 as principal at a middle school. He was also the longest serving ECHS principal in the region, in his sixth year at HPEC when the study began. Second, Mr. Rodriguez had received prestigious awards for exemplary leadership at HPEC from the State of Texas and the U.S. Department of Education. During his tenure, HPEC won TEA's distinguished school awards and a national Blue Ribbon designation. Due to his seniority and achievement, Mr. Rodriguez was a mentor for ECHS leaders across the region. One assistant principal who was opening a new ECHS explained, "We followed [Mr. Rodriguez's] lead on the ['ECHS Blueprint'] benchmarks every step of the way." College stakeholders, too, referenced Mr. Rodriguez when describing the success of their DC programs.

HPEC opened in 2008, and Mr. Rodriguez took over as principal in the spring of its second year of operation. The school is housed on BRCC's main campus, although HPEC's buildings are separated from the college's main facilities. HPEC's population of about 400 students spans grades 9 through 12 and is 90% Latinx, 70% economically disadvantaged, 14% designated "at risk" by the state, and 60% first-generation college students. HPEC's staff includes 19 teachers, 1 counselor, and 1 assistant principal. Like other ECHSs in Texas, HPEC is a public choice school, and all

interested eighth graders can apply. At the time of data collection, HPEC required a written application and an interview to differentiate applicants' interest in attending from parental pressure to apply (Duncheon, 2020b).[2] Per the "Blueprint," academic achievement was not considered.

Although this study foregrounds Mr. Rodriguez as the unit of analysis, we include other participants who offer insight into his sensemaking of cross-sector politics, including HPEC teachers (13), students (118), and BRCC administrators (8). See Supplemental Appendix 1 for more information about HPEC and the larger sample.

Data Collection

The bulk of the fieldwork for this study was completed between the spring of 2016 and the spring of 2019, although we remain engaged in research with BRCC.[3] The data we feature here stem from interviews, observations, and documents related to Mr. Rodriguez, HPEC, and the BRCC partnership. Between 2016 and 2019, we conducted four semistructured, in-depth interviews and engaged in ongoing conversations with Mr. Rodriguez. Interviews lasted between 1.5 and 2.5 hours. Interview questions changed over time and spanned a range of topics as the larger project developed (see Supplemental Appendix 2). The data we focus on here stem from questions about Mr. Rodriguez's background, perspectives on ECHS policy, experiences leading HPEC, and approach to collaborating with college and district stakeholders. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed by an external service, and edited by the research team.

We also conducted more than 50 hours of observations, shadowing Mr. Rodriguez in a variety of contexts. Two were most pertinent to this study: advisory meetings with BRCC stakeholders, which offered insight into the partnership, and ECHS recruiting events, where he represented his school to K–12 stakeholders. The observation protocols focused on Mr. Rodriguez's goals for HPEC and interactions with K–12 and IHE stakeholders. (See Supplemental Appendix 3.) We used observational data to triangulate insights from the interviews and offer context on the partnership in our findings. Finally, we drew on document data: HPEC's marketing materials, curricular crosswalks, news coverage, advisory meeting agendas, and school, district, and college websites.

We also conducted one-on-one interviews with BRCC administrators, which explored their goals for DC and ECHS and approaches to collaborating with high school partners, and HPEC teachers, which probed their experiences at HPEC with Mr. Rodriguez. Students participated in focus groups that examined their reasons for attending HPEC, experiences as ECHS students, and perceptions of their principal. These stakeholders are quoted occasionally in our "Findings" section to substantiate and/or offer context for Mr. Rodriguez's sensemaking.

Data Analysis

Our conceptualization of this case study emerged inductively during fieldwork and analysis for the larger project. We noticed ways that DC programs placed unique demands on principals, who were expected to collaborate with the community college—an aspect of the job at which Mr. Rodriguez was particularly adept. We then did thorough, independent readthroughs of all transcripts, fieldnotes, and documents related to Mr. Rodriguez and HPEC. Next, using key concepts from our theoretical frameworks, we coded all data sources in two cycles (Miles et al., 2014). For each, we first coded independently, and then met to discuss how we were applying the codebook and resolve any discrepancies. Both authors coded all transcripts for Mr. Rodriguez and BRCC administrators, and relevant fieldnotes (e.g., advisory meetings). For teacher and student data, we each coded half, focusing on data pertaining to Mr. Rodriguez and/or the partnership. Throughout the process, we recorded our evolving thoughts in analytic memos, and met to discuss emergent patterns and themes.

The first round of coding focused on Mr. Rodriguez's sensemaking, using the codes *policy messages* (e.g., *Blueprint*, *TEA*), *cognition* (*personal biography*, *beliefs about students*), and *context* (*regional*, *institutional*, *social*, *relationships*; Spillane et al., 2002b). A second round of coding explored how Mr. Rodriguez engaged with institutional stakeholders, informed by literature on the politics of implementation. We started with index codes to capture data relevant to each stakeholder group: *the community college* and *the school district/board*. We then coded for *goals*, *conflicts*, and *influence strategies* (*formal* or *informal*; Malen, 2006) to parse out what Mr. Rodriguez wanted, what stakeholders from each sector wanted (as perceived by Mr. Rodriguez *and* as articulated by those stakeholders through their interviews and relevant documents), when interests were misaligned, and how Mr. Rodriguez wielded influence to achieve his desired outcome. For instance, Mr. Rodriguez prioritized adolescent development over academic acceleration (*goal*), and the college and school board focused on degree attainment (*goal*). Finally, we met to discuss and interpret the patterns that emerged from the first round of coding in relation to the second, asking how sensemaking and cross-sector politics intersected and informed one another. A central theme that emerged at this stage was the centrality of perspective taking for Mr. Rodriguez's sensemaking and approach to negotiation. We also noticed patterns related to Mr. Rodriguez's use of formal or informal influence strategies, as he made sense of and responded to conflicts in the partnership context. This final step allowed us to develop and test our broader claims and construct findings.

Trustworthiness, Researcher Positionality, and Study Limitations

Trustworthiness was bolstered by the study's 3-year time-frame, during which we cultivated and sustained an ongoing relationship with Mr. Rodriguez. We checked in informally about what we were observing and interpreting, ECHS reform, his school, and leadership. As former teachers and administrators in secondary schools, we were able to build on our practitioner experience to build trust with Mr. Rodriguez. As authors, we engaged in reflexive memoing and conversations about how our positionality shaped our engagement with the inquiry process and Mr. Rodriguez himself. We also triangulated our data sources among interviews, observations, and documents to confirm the consistency of our findings.

In the spirit of trustworthiness, we highlight the study's limitations. One is the model of ECHS we studied. HPEC is a stand-alone school located on the campus of its IHE partner. While this model was the original vision for ECHS reform, as the initiative has scaled, many ECHSs now exist as embedded programs, and even more common are one-off DC courses that students take in traditional high schools. Our intent is to highlight takeaways from the case—in particular, Mr. Rodriguez's thinking about and orientation toward collaboration—that are transferrable to principals working in any cross-sector context. A second limitation is that we were unable to interview district leaders and school board members. We use document data (e.g., district websites) to represent district and school board perspectives. Third, data for this study were collected several years ago. Despite the time-frame, we suggest the findings remain relevant. The region where this study took place was at the forefront of ECHS reform (Williams, 2015). Many school districts and colleges are opening ECHSs for the first time. Even in established ECHSs, due to principal turnover (DeMatthews et al., 2022), new principals are acclimating to a secondary–postsecondary partnership context for the first time, and thus confronting implementation challenges and politics like those we document here. Fourth, our single-case study design means that we are exploring the politics of ECHS reform through the sensemaking of one principal. This approach has limitations, because Mr. Rodriguez's experiences are unique to his personal history and school context. However, our dataset from the larger project is robust, and we use it to enrich our portrayal of the partnership in which Mr. Rodriguez worked. We also suggest there is value in learning from an in-depth exploration of a single principal who has achieved national accolades. We offer thick description so that the reader may decide whether and how our findings might inform other contexts (Geertz, 1973).

Findings

Mr. Rodriguez made sense of ECHS reform as a process of negotiation between himself and his college and district partners. Although he had a clear vision for HPEC, he also recognized that working in a partnership context required compromise, which he approached using formal and informal influence strategies. When possible, he used his formal power as principal to pursue his goals, taking actions he could unilaterally control. When conflict arose, because he did not have formal decision-making power over his partners, he relied on informal strategies to persuade, make concessions, and reach a compromise. Underlying his approach was his conviction that cross-sector reform requires principals to see every issue from their partners' point of view:

> You've got to have the ability to put yourself in their position to see from their perspective. If you just go in demanding things, you're going to get nothing, and you're going to be known as a very negative leader. I think it's really important to negotiate by understanding as opposed to demanding.

He believed that, by taking time to see others' perspectives, "You can turn any situation into a 'nobody loses' situation." Below, we first describe how Mr. Rodriguez's biography shaped his sensemaking and vision for HPEC. We then illustrate how he made sense of and negotiated the cross-sector partnership context to pursue his implementation goals.

Mr. Rodriguez's Biography and ECHS Sensemaking

Mr. Rodriguez's personal and professional background drove his sensemaking about ECHS (Weick, 1995). A Mexican American man in his early fifties, Mr. Rodriguez grew up in a low-income neighborhood in the border region where he now works. He was adopted from the foster care system, an origin story that left him determined to take advantage of opportunities. Neither of his parents attended college, but they encouraged him to "learn and be all I can." His parents enrolled him in a private school with high academic expectations. He described the school culture—one that he believed an ECHS should replicate: "Nobody had asked us, 'Are you going to college?' The question was, 'What college are you going to?'" Mr. Rodriguez was admitted to a flagship state university away from home, which provided a set of new experiences he felt he could not have acquired locally. After completing his bachelor's in education, he returned to his home city to teach, and eventually received a master's in educational administration from the local university. His personal trajectory shaped his philosophy that students from backgrounds like his could achieve "if you just believe in kids and provide an opportunity." He saw ECHS as one such opportunity.

Mr. Rodriguez began his career teaching at a comprehensive high school, where he eventually became an assistant principal. He came to appreciate "the homecomings, the proms, the clubs, leadership opportunities" of a traditional public high school as critical for adolescent development. After 2 years as a middle school principal, Mr. Rodriguez

accepted the position at HPEC because, in his words, "I had the skillset that I thought could help the school grow." He believed his personal experience as a first-generation student at a small, academically focused high school coupled with his professional experience at a comprehensive high school made him "uniquely qualified to bring the best of both worlds . . . and help [students] be successful." He saw ECHS as a mechanism to set high expectations for first-generation students and prepare them to succeed in any higher education setting, near or far, while also supporting their social and emotional growth. To that end, he prioritized high-quality instruction and required his teachers to sponsor extracurricular opportunities for the students, a practice that one teacher commented was "very idiosyncratic to Mr. Rodriguez." In particular, he believed ECHS principals needed to take advantage of the school's partnership with the college: "If you're a traditional principal in this setting, you're totally undercutting the possibilities of what you can do with this type of model."

Sensemaking, Conflict, and Negotiation in the Cross-Sector Context

In addition to his personal and professional biography, the politics of his cross-sector context shaped Mr. Rodriguez's sensemaking and approach to ECHS implementation. Below, we discuss his negotiations with the college and then the district. In each section, we offer context on the partnership, highlight points of tension, and illustrate how Mr. Rodriguez integrated formal and informal strategies to advance his priorities for HPEC.

The Community College. BRCC was committed to increasing postsecondary opportunity in the region through its ECHSs, which were a point of pride. As BRCC's president shared, "I've yet to find another part of the state or nation that has more successful early college high schools than we do here," which he attributed to the strength of "the partnership" between the school districts and the college. Observations of advisory team meetings, in which stakeholders from the high school and college came together once a semester, revealed a culture of amiability and collegiality. In attendance from the K–12 side were Mr. Rodriguez and HPEC's assistant principal and counselor, the principals and counselors of two other ECHSs, and school district directors of Advanced Academics. From the college were BRCC's dean of DC, academic deans, college counselors, the facilities manager, and DC faculty liaisons. After engaging in small talk over donuts and coffee, attendees moved through an agenda that started with updates from the ECHS principals and then covered relevant logistical issues such as facilities maintenance, registration, and upcoming events. At one meeting, for instance, Mr. Rodriguez confirmed the date and room location for HPEC's graduation ceremony with the DC

dean. These meetings revealed enthusiasm for and commitment to the success of ECHS reform from stakeholders in both sectors.

When Mr. Rodriguez assumed the principalship in HPEC's second year, however, structures and policies related to DC programming were not yet well established. He pursued two priorities that caused tension with BRCC. The first pertained to where HPEC students took courses. At most ECHSs in the region, high school teachers delivered the majority of college coursework through DC. One BRCC coordinator explained, "Usually the way ECHSs work is by offering dual credit at their site." However, Mr. Rodriguez's sensemaking about HPEC implementation was attentive to his unique location on the flagship BRCC campus: "I looked at [HPEC's] advantages compared to [other local ECHSs]." His students could walk across a parking lot to take courses taught by BRCC professors, which he believed offered two benefits: a more authentic community college experience for students, and cost savings for HPEC.[4] Thus, Mr. Rodriguez used his formal authority to request BRCC courses for his students as often as possible, from academic core classes to electives like music and physical education.

Mr. Rodriguez's choice to enroll his students in BRCC courses led to conflict first with community college professors and second with administration, prompting him to use informal influence strategies. One HPEC teacher recalled the tensions with college faculty: "[BRCC] professors were complaining because they didn't want high schoolers in their classrooms." Mr. Rodriguez responded by engaging with professors to validate their concerns and, in his words, "try to calm their fears." He shared, "I would say, 'Our intent is not to turn you into a high school teacher. Our kids are going to perform. You hold the same standards.'" He emphasized his commitment to prepare his students for their classes. This tactic was documented in a local news article: "Principal Rodriguez and his staff met with professors, attended faculty meetings, and introduced high school students . . . to demonstrate that they could master the coursework." Years later, Mr. Rodriguez and his teachers perceived that BRCC professors had come around and that HPEC students were often the best in the class.

Conflict over course taking also arose with BRCC administration, although not right away. Initially, Mr. Rodriguez was able to outsource so many of his students' courses by taking advantage of limited college oversight. BRCC did not yet have infrastructure for managing a growing number of DC programs, and college administrators were focused on enrollment rather than tracking HPEC students' courses. As one BRCC instructional coordinator said, "No one was minding the house over on the instructional side." After 3 years, a dean position was created to oversee DC programs. Mr. Rodriguez described the DC dean as being "more initiative-minded and having more of a hands-on approach," which included auditing ECHS students' courses. The DC

dean offered concurring insight, sharing that ECHS students should take "dual credit with a purpose"—that is, credits that would transfer to an associate degree plan. She told Mr. Rodriguez that BRCC was unwilling to incur costs for non-degree-relevant credits.

No longer able to enroll his students in any courses he wanted, Mr. Rodriguez turned to informal influence strategies, which began with considering BRCC's perspective. He elaborated: "[The DC dean] wanted to know the 'why' [behind our decisions]. If I wanted to do something, I needed to justify it. And I totally understand where she was coming from." Right away, he acknowledged it was unfair for BRCC to pay for his students' electives, which only counted for the high school diploma. He agreed to hire his own music, foreign language, and physical education teachers, although he asked—and BRCC agreed—for ongoing access to the college's gym and weight room. He also made the case that HPEC students should be able to take BRCC courses that count toward the associate degree. He referenced the "Blueprint" and "Jobs for the Future" reports to argue that enrolling his students in BRCC classes honored the spirit of ECHS reform, because, in his words, "being in a classroom with a college professor . . . prepare[s] a kid for college better than anything I can do in a [high school] dual credit classroom." BRCC administration eventually conceded. Mr. Rodriguez offered DC in math, English, and history at HPEC, but his students completed most of their associate degree coursework at the college.

A second priority for Mr. Rodriguez that initially caused conflict with BRCC pertained to data sharing. Attentive to the developmental needs of high school students, Mr. Rodriguez wanted access to HPEC students' college grades so that his staff and the students' parents could intervene as needed. But because BRCC was subject to Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations, only students had access to their academic records. The dean who initially oversaw HPEC did not believe that students' records should be shared. Noting his friendship with this dean, Mr. Rodriguez explained, "For years, we had a friendly debate back and forth about [the difference between] an adult college student versus a 14-year-old." When the DC dean took over, her concern was not whether to share data, but how. In her words, "We [BRCC] had to share data. But how do we do that?" Mr. Rodriguez argued that HPEC, as part of BRCC, needed access to their students' data. He also had to clarify the limited scope of his request. He said, "Sometimes they thought I wanted all the data about the college in general. I would go, 'No, I could care less. I don't want access to your whole database. I just want my kids' records.'" Again, this example shows Mr. Rodriguez trying to understand his partner's point of view in order to reframe his negotiating approach and assuage their concerns.

Eventually, they reached an agreement. BRCC would share GPA and transcript data for HPEC students, but would not require faculty to provide "in-progress records," such as whether a student attended class or submitted an assignment. K–12 parents were accustomed to receiving in-progress data, and many did not understand why they could not, for example, call a BRCC professor for an update on their child. Here Mr. Rodriguez ran interference, explaining to parents how college differs from high school and why giving ECHS students independence to monitor their own progress in their community college classes was in their best interest. At the same time, Mr. Rodriguez's earlier relationship-building efforts with BRCC faculty worked in his favor. He had told them, "We're here to help you. Let us know if we can." Over time, some professors did reach out to HPEC staff for support with specific students. In these ways, Mr. Rodriguez capitalized on relationships and perspective taking to pursue his goals with BRCC.

The School Board. ECHS implementation also required Mr. Rodriguez to negotiate with the school board, which represented district and local community interests. The board positioned ECHSs as an essential mechanism to "promote postsecondary readiness at all high schools," the top board priority per the district's strategic plan. With representation from local business leaders and former educators, most of whom had attended the district's schools, the board was also committed to developing local talent to bolster the regional economy. Meanwhile, HPEC was the district's first ECHS, so it was, to some degree, under a microscope. Further complicating matters for Mr. Rodriguez was the fact that Mr. Johnson, his predecessor at HPEC and the principal who opened the school, had become a member of the school board. Mr. Rodriguez recalled having to go before the board and "explain what I was doing and why I was doing it" on more than one occasion. One of the key issues that created tension with the school board pertained to the rate at which HPEC students were accelerating into and through college coursework. Again, Mr. Rodriguez used a mix of formal and informal strategies to pursue his reform goals, always striving to understand his partners' point of view.

Rooted in his personal and professional biography, Mr. Rodriguez believed ECHS should scaffold students' transition into college. He worried that one risk of the model was accelerating students too quickly, without attention to their social, emotional, and developmental needs. He said, "These are not dispensable years. These are important years and we need to have the kids get some experience." In his view, high school students "have to be socially and emotionally ready" to succeed in a college environment, which required some handholding from the ECHS. Students' descriptions of their interactions with Mr. Rodriguez illustrate this philosophy. As one recent graduate of HPEC offered, "I got along with Mr. Rodriguez especially very well. When I would get in trouble for honest mistakes, he would understand. [He'd say], 'Well, I mean, what else do you expect? You're a

teenager.'" A junior conveyed a lesson she had learned from her principal about the importance of help seeking: "Mr. Rodriguez said, 'There's no way you're going to survive this school without getting any help from anyone. Like, you're not going to be a superhero that understands high school and early college by yourself.'" Students perceived that Mr. Rodriguez understood the additional demands they confronted tackling high school and college simultaneously, and he wanted them to take advantage of support systems.

To strike what he believed was the right balance between academic acceleration and student development, Mr. Rodriguez used his formal authority as principal to delay enrolling HPEC students into college coursework until the summer after their freshman year. During the ninth grade, HPEC students took pre-AP (Advanced Placement) courses, coupled with academic tutoring and TSIA test preparation for those who were not yet college ready. The Pre-AP Chemistry teacher perceived value in Mr. Rodriguez's approach, given the rigor of college-level science: "I like how Mr. Rodriguez sets it up and just has [ninth graders] do pre-AP. The pre-AP is a good foundation. And when they go to the college, they are better prepared. [Other ECHSs] just start teaching dual credit or AP to kids who don't have any background." Indeed, Mr. Rodriguez's approach made HPEC an outlier compared to other ECHSs in the region, where TSIA-eligible students started college courses in their freshman year, and some even finished their associate degree (60 credits) by the end of their junior year. In these cases, local districts and Border Region University (BRU) had worked out an agreement allowing ECHS seniors to begin taking upper-level courses at the university. Mr. Rodriguez was the only ECHS principal who did not allow his students to participate.

Mr. Rodriguez's opposition to the accelerated pathway was rooted in his belief that HPEC should expand rather than limit students' opportunities. He believed that, for HPEC students who wanted to pursue a bachelor's, spending at least 2 years in a university setting was crucial for their "personal growth," and that shortening their university experience by a third year was "not fair to kids." He also perceived that students needed more time to identify and prepare for their career path. In addition, Mr. Rodriguez wanted HPEC to be a springboard for all higher education options, including elite institutions outside the region and state. He espoused this vision to prospective parents at several recruiting events. During one presentation, he said: "The bottom line is, [your child is] going to be better prepared for college at our school than at any other high school." He worried the accelerated pathway incentivized high-achieving students to stay local, in lieu of other opportunities. Several HPEC teachers, most of whom graduated from BRU, endorsed Mr. Rodriguez's stance. As one said, "The catch is the kids who would do that fast track [to BRU] are the ones that end up at MIT and Columbia." Mr. Rodriguez was explicit that he was not questioning the quality of BRU, where he himself had earned his graduate degree. Rather, he believed that students who grow up in a geographically, politically, and culturally isolated region should have the chance to experience different people and places.

These issues created tension with school board members, who wanted HPEC students to start college coursework as soon as possible and participate in BRU's accelerated pathway. How Mr. Rodriguez made sense of and responded to board pressure speaks to his ability to take his partners' perspective. Early on, he was tempted to interpret the board's criticism, especially Mr. Johnson's, personally. However, he said, "I had to put myself in [Mr. Johnson's] position. He really wasn't after me, it was just that he had a different vision for the school." Mr. Rodriguez also understood the board's preference for the accelerated pathway, citing its benefits: "It sounds good. It's good [public relations] PR." He recognized the advantages of the pathway for the university and local economy, as well, if high-achieving students stayed local to complete their bachelor's at BRU: "If I was in charge of BRU," he admitted, "I'd do the same thing."

His sensemaking about why the school board had differing priorities informed his approach to negotiating. Informal influence strategies included tailoring his arguments based on his audience and presenting data on HPEC's success. He likened negotiating with the board as "juggling balls," because he was dealing with some "highly educated members" and others who were "local folks and grandparents." An argument that might persuade one group might not persuade the other. Mr. Rodriguez ended up bringing students, teachers, or parents with him to board meetings, and "targeting my presentations to what [certain board members] can understand and what matters to them." He also drew on existing relationships and friendships with school board members, cultivated during his time in the district: "I know them as individuals. It helps me not be scared of them." In his sixth year, he was still writing yearly reports to the school board, documenting HPEC students' postsecondary destinations to justify his stance on the accelerated pathway. However, in his eighth year, Mr. Rodriguez was forced to compromise. He said, "I was just given a directive by superintendent: You will do this." He agreed to send a limited number of students to BRU, with caveats. He set higher GPA requirements than those set by the university. He also did not allow HPEC seniors to start BRU classes until the spring semester, after they had submitted college applications. The superintendent and the school board were satisfied that HPEC students had the opportunity to accelerate, and Mr. Rodriguez felt confident that he was protecting his students' ability to pursue a range of options after ECHS graduation.

Discussion

Mr. Rodriguez made sense of ECHS reform as a process of negotiation with his K–12 and IHE partners, which required understanding their interests. Below, we use sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and micropolitics (Blase, 1991) to discuss the findings, illustrating how using these frameworks in tandem can better illuminate the complexities of cross-sector reform.

Making Sense of HPEC Implementation

Consistent with prior studies, Mr. Rodriguez's biography, or cognition (Spillane et al., 2002b), profoundly shaped his sensemaking about ECHS. Particularly salient was his own identity as a first-generation Latinx student coupled with his personal and professional experiences with different types of high schools and attending college far from home. Mr. Rodriguez pieced together salient elements of his personal and professional life to make sense of policy signals (e.g., the "Blueprint"), imagining what an ideal ECHS could provide for kids like him. He believed ECHS should immerse first-generation students in a rigorous academic experience at the community college; prioritize students' developmental, social, and emotional needs; and open doors for a wide range of postsecondary opportunities after the associate degree, both within the region and beyond. This vision shaped his initial goals for HPEC, leadership practices, and negotiations with his K–12 and IHE partners (Coburn, 2001).

Context also played a large role in Mr. Rodriguez's sensemaking (Spillane et al., 2002b). One factor was the timing of ECHS reform. The TEA "Blueprint" dictated that K–12 and IHE stakeholders work out the details of their partnership, but in the early years, there was minimal structure from the state and limited oversight from BRCC. Without a clear road map and with minimal accountability, Mr. Rodriguez experimented and took risks to advance his priorities (Koyama, 2014). Geographic context also shaped Mr. Rodriguez's sensemaking (Hallinger, 2018), because HPEC's unique location on the flagship BRCC campus presented a distinct set of opportunities. Social networks and relationships, too, influenced how Mr. Rodriguez made sense of ECHS reform (Jennings, 2010; Rigby, 2015). He had established relationships with stakeholders in secondary and postsecondary sectors, from other principals to school board members to college deans. His strong social ties enabled him to advocate for his policy preferences without fear of losing his principalship or undermining the partnership. Prior sensemaking research has highlighted the tensions and fears principals experience in the context of accountability, when supervisors and teachers have different perspectives and principals feel caught "managing in the middle" (Spillane et al., 2002a). Although Mr. Rodriguez was navigating multiple stakeholder groups with different views—at his school, at the district, and at the college—rather than feeling constrained as a middle manager, he made sense of the partnership context as an opportunity to innovate and find common ground.

Our study bolsters the literature on principal sensemaking by offering insight into the cross-sector partnership context, in which principals are compelled to compromise. Mr. Rodriguez had a clear vision for his school, but his sensemaking shifted over time as he navigated the partnership. Unilateral actions that he took early on—such as enrolling his students in electives at BRCC—had to be reconsidered when he got pushback from his college partner. Here, he had to revisit his goals, his budget, and the "Blueprint" to make new sense of what an ECHS experience at HPEC should look like, given a more equitable sharing of costs with BRCC. When the superintendent required him to do the accelerated pathway, Mr. Rodriguez had to make sense of what that pathway could look like for HPEC students in ways that did not compromise his values. Central to his sensemaking throughout these conflicts was a commitment to consider his partners' points of view. By making sense of what his partners wanted and why, Mr. Rodriguez was better positioned to imagine compromises that aligned with his vision.

Navigating the Politics of Cross-Sector DC Reform

While sensemaking illuminates the factors that shaped Mr. Rodriguez's interpretation of ECHS policy and approach to implementation (Evans, 2007; Spillane et al., 2002b), a political lens elucidates how power and influence shaped the process (Blase, 1991; Flessa, 2009). Attention to power is especially important to analyze secondary–postsecondary reforms such as ECHS because K–12 and higher education function as historically and culturally distinct systems (Mokher & Jacobson, 2021). Integrating a political perspective with sensemaking helps explain how Mr. Rodriguez translated his goals to practice with relative success. On a cognitive level (Senge, 1990; Spillane et al., 2002b), Mr. Rodriguez was willing to exercise agency (Koyama, 2014) and take risks to push his agenda. His willingness to do so stemmed, to varying degrees, from his years of experience, his preexisting relationships, and his familiarity with district and regional politics (Reid, 2020). With this mix of knowledge, skills, and social context, he was unafraid to choose a course of action and move forward until he faced resistance. At the same time, Mr. Rodriguez was astute to the political nature of partnership reform. He understood ECHS implementation as an ongoing negotiation between partners with common and competing interests. He believed his responsibility as an ECHS principal was attending to these politics in ways that resulted in "nobody-loses" situations.

To enact his goals for HPEC, Mr. Rodriguez used formal influence strategies, drawing on his authority as principal whenever possible (Malen, 2006). He crafted HPEC's academic program to align with his vision, whether keeping

students on his campus during their freshman year or enrolling upperclassmen in as many BRCC courses as possible. His chosen academic timeline precluded HPEC students from participating in the accelerated pathway, but also resulted in high rates of associate degree completion and university matriculation. When conflict arose with BRCC and the school board—entities over which he did not hold formal authority—Mr. Rodriguez negotiated using informal influence strategies. He invested in relationships and built trust with BRCC professors and administrators. He referenced policy documents, wrote reports, and cited HPEC's achievement data to justify his preferred courses of action, while also making concessions as appropriate. Our findings underscore the importance of informal influence strategies in cross-sector reform contexts; because principals lack formal decision-making authority over other sectors, they must use the power of persuasion to help external stakeholders understand their goals and identify areas of agreement (Domina & Ruzek, 2012).

Mr. Rodriguez's general success in navigating the partnership context stemmed from several factors, some within his control and some not (Firestone, 1989; Malen, 2006). Regarding the former, central to his approach was his interest in understanding his partners' perspectives. For every conflict that arose with BRCC or the district, Mr. Rodriguez was quick to appreciate the priorities and concerns of his partners, even when he held a different view. Consider how he acknowledged the value of the accelerated track for BRU and the local community, and by extension the school board. In turn, Mr. Rodriguez was willing to compromise. He compromised with BRCC when he hired his own music and physical education teachers, and with the school board when he agreed—in compliance with the superintendent's mandate—to accelerate a select number of students to BRU. By understanding where his partners were coming from, he was able to compromise without undermining his vision for HPEC. That he had cultivated personal relationships with stakeholders in both sectors worked to his advantage here, too. The takeaway for principals working in cross-sector partnerships is to, in Mr. Rodriguez's words, negotiate "by understanding rather than demanding."

Beyond his control, Mr. Rodriguez benefited from a regional context where cross-sector collaboration was prioritized. In part due to the region's geographic isolation on the border, as well as the community's majority-Latinx, low-income, and first-generation population, the school districts, community college, and local university were invested in working together to improve educational attainment. The ECHSs were a source of pride for the region and for BRCC. Mr. Rodriguez did not have to build buy-in around the reform's promise (Kamler et al., 2009)—he merely had to advocate for the best way to put the model into practice. In short, preexisting relationships, strong partnerships, and political will created a favorable environment for Mr. Rodriguez to pursue his vision for HPEC (Honig, 2009).

Sensemaking and the politics of implementation collectively reveal the complexity of the principal's role in cross-sector partnership reform. HPEC was a success in large part due to Mr. Rodriguez's vision and skill as a principal and a politician. At the same time, ECHS reform was buoyed by collective commitment and enthusiasm from the region's partnering institutions. These stakeholder groups had different priorities for ECHSs, from preparing well-rounded, college-ready students to pursue their own path (Mr. Rodriguez), to conferring associate degrees (BRCC), to developing local talent (the school board). Nevertheless, Mr. Rodriguez's commitment to finding mutually beneficial compromises enabled him to balance the preferences of his K–12 and IHE partners alongside his vision for ECHS reform.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Inquiry

To be sure, Mr. Rodriguez and HPEC represent a unique case. He was principal at an ECHS located on a community college campus, where he had more access to college resources than most principals who are situated in stand-alone or comprehensive high school campuses. While we offer some specific takeaways for ECHS reform, we also suggest that Mr. Rodriguez's mentality regarding cross-sector collaboration—in particular, his ability to see his partners' points of view—is instructive and transferrable for all principals who work with external stakeholders.

This research has important implications for school leadership and principal preparation. Principals today are increasingly expected to collaborate with external stakeholders—including IHEs (Malin et al., 2020). At the secondary level in particular, most high school principals now work with IHEs in some capacity, with 9 out of 10 high schools offering some form of DC (Shivji & Wilson, 2019). Our study suggests that participating in cross-sector partnerships is complex and political. Yet, current principal standards and many principal preparation programs have largely ignored the politics of school reform, district administration, school board relations, and cross-sector partnerships (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2018; Petzko, 2008). Because few secondary principals are trained to work with IHEs, most learn through trial and error (Bush, 2017), with potentially negative consequences for students. Preparation programs and school districts need to ensure that current and future principals are ready to work with a variety of external stakeholders in ways that benefit all students. Future inquiry could explore effective leadership practices for principals working in a variety of cross-sector collaborations across regional, institutional, and state settings. Future studies should also identify forms of principal training and support that would be most useful. In addition, since one limitation of our study was the lack of interview data with school district personnel and board members, future research should explore how districts perceive and support principals in partnering among sectors.

The study also has implications for secondary–postsecondary partnership reforms such as DC and ECHS. The ECHS design emphasizes early exposure to and completion of college coursework (Vargas, 2019). Although enthusiastic about this goal, Mr. Rodriguez worried about prioritizing credit and degree attainment over adolescents' social and emotional needs. Our case illustrates the importance of balancing academic acceleration—whether in ECHS, DC, or other advanced academics—with adolescent development. Relatedly, much of the policy discourse and existing research on ECHSs has tended to focus on quantitative metrics of college success: students earning college credits and associate degrees (Berger et al., 2013; Song et al., 2021). ECHSs are an effective mechanism for conferring free or low-cost college credit and can be an engine for equity when they save underrepresented students time and money (Edmunds et al., 2020). Yet, by creating a pipeline into the public 2- and 4-year sectors, DC programs such as ECHS can potentially exacerbate the phenomenon of undermatch, whereby underrepresented students enroll in institutions for which they are overqualified, with implications for their futures (Jagesic et al., 2021). Mr. Rodriguez wanted to prevent ECHS from predetermining the postsecondary trajectories of students who were predominantly first-generation, low-income, and Latinx. Our study suggests the value of ECHS and other accelerated academic programs as springboards for a range of postsecondary destinations, including elite IHEs.

Regarding cross-sector reform generally (Bryson et al., 2006), our findings highlight the importance of considering alternative viewpoints, stakeholder buy-in, and principal autonomy. As we have argued, Mr. Rodriguez's commitment to understand his partners' points of view was a key driver of his success as a negotiator. HPEC was also successful due to buy-in from IHE and K–12 partners. Participating organizations need to hire administrators who are forward thinking, innovative, and invested in what cross-sector reforms are trying to accomplish. A related avenue for future inquiry is to consider how IHE stakeholders prioritize and negotiate within secondary–postsecondary partnership reforms. Finally, our data point to the value of principal autonomy in cross-sector initiatives. Arriving on the scene early in the ECHS reform movement, Mr. Rodriguez was able to innovate based on what he thought was best for his students—albeit with consideration of his partners' priorities. Our study suggests that principals engaged in P–20 collaborations would benefit from leeway to take risks and work creatively with IHEs.

Facilitating students' transitions throughout the P–20 pipeline requires joint investment and cooperation from K–12 and IHE stakeholders. Through the case of one high-performing ECHS principal, this study illustrated the importance of making sense of multiple stakeholders' perspectives to negotiate and find compromise in the politicized context of cross-sector reform. Building leadership capacity for effective cross-sector partnerships is critical to move the needle on postsecondary access, completion, and equity.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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Notes

1. We use the term *dual credit* (DC) to reflect the terminology used in Texas, where this study took place.

2. After fieldwork for this study, the interview was removed from the process and HPEC began using a blind lottery, to comply with changes to the "Blueprint." The school's demographics and achievement metrics remain consistent.

3. Mr. Rodriguez left HPEC in 2021 to accept a leadership role at the district. HPEC remains a high-performing school.

4. Mr. Rodriguez used his budget to keep class sizes small and invest in instructional improvement. Multiple HPEC teachers discussed the range of high-quality professional development opportunities that Mr. Rodriguez supported.

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