
“Smart Power” in Standards Implementation after No Child Left Behind

T. PHILIP NICHOLS

Baylor University

ADAM KIRK EDGERTON

American University School of Education

LAURA M. DESIMONE

University of Delaware

Purpose: As the federal government has retreated from taking a dominant role in encouraging implementation of common K–12 standards, states and districts have moved to fill this education policy vacuum. This study aims to understand how state and district leaders are navigating this new policy environment. **Research Methods/Approach:** Drawing upon 47 interviews with state and district administrators conducted in 2016 and 2017, we used deductive coding based on a policy attributes theory to examine the co-occurrence of codes for specificity, consistency, authority, power, and stability. Throughout this process, we assessed interrater reliability through paired coding, research team discussions, and recoding to uncover broad themes. **Findings:** We identify the concept of “smart power” as a ubiquitous mechanism that leaders are utilizing to balance buy-in (authority) and accountability (power). We find that this balance remains precarious and highly dependent upon local political contexts. Smart power can allow for more thoughtful and sustainable implementation strategies that increase teacher support for these policies—or it can become a rhetorical device without substantive change. **Implications:** We reveal the enduring appeal of accountability policies even when administrators express reservations about falling back on the legacy of No Child Left Behind. These findings hold broad relevance for the implementation of K–12 standards moving forward, particularly as states consider how to build legitimacy and buy-in toward new and revised standards-based policies in the wake of the pandemic.

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In the United States, standards-based accountability in K–12 schools has been accused of simultaneously alleviating and exacerbating inequity. Its proponents point to the “checkered history of state education policy making” that leaves historically disadvantaged students without an advocate when the federal government backs away from civil rights enforcement (Fusarelli and Ayscue 2019, 35). Conversely, opponents argue that an overemphasis on standardized testing has narrowed the purposes of schooling and privileged top-down, colonialist modes of thinking and governance (Booher-Jennings 2005; Desimone et al. 2019; McNeil and Valenzuela 2001). How are state and district policy makers making sense of this ongoing debate? In this study, we draw on interviews with state and district leaders to examine how K–12 standards implementation is occurring in light of this tension. We suggest decision makers are using a kind of “smart power.” A concept borrowed from Wilson’s (2008) and Nye’s (2004) analyses of implementation in other public sectors, “smart power” refers to the strategic balancing of rewards and sanctions, integrated with attempts at building legitimacy, understanding, and buy-in among stakeholders. We consider some implications this form of governance holds for education policy and practice.

Negotiating Power since No Child Left Behind

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), despite the best efforts of advocates, were not seen as a substantive departure from No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Rather, they became viewed as a continuation of NCLB’s legacy, a doubling down on the Bush-Obama education consensus (Edgerton 2020; Tampio 2017). Ladd (2017), and others have outlined the many shortcomings of NCLB—most notably, its use of harsh punishments to ensure compliance (Desimone 2013). The CCSS, coupled under Race to the Top with test-based teacher evaluation reform, became an extension of NCLB’s top-down administration (McGuinn 2012) thanks in part to a coordinated social media campaign (Supovitz 2017).

T. PHILIP NICHOLS is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Baylor University. He studies how science and technology condition the ways we practice, teach, and talk about literacy. ADAM KIRK EDGERTON is an adjunct professorial lecturer at the American University School of Education and a senior researcher at a nonprofit, nonpartisan education research and policy organization. He studies policy implementation and collective bargaining. LAURA M. DESIMONE is director of research at the College of Education and Human Development and professor in educational statistics and research methods in the School of Education at the University of Delaware. She studies policy implementation and effects on teachers and students.

Brass (2016) and Edgerton (2020) detail some mechanisms of the CCSS that contributed to their delegitimization in the eyes of stakeholders. Whereas voluntary standards movements of the pre-NCLB period often included a range of professional organizations and forms of public oversight, the CCSS were developed by trade groups (e.g., Achieve, Inc.), policy entrepreneurs (e.g., David Coleman), philanthropists (e.g., the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation), think tanks (e.g., The Hunt Institute), nonprofits (e.g., Student Achievement Partners), and testing companies (e.g., ACT). Brass (2016) suggests this created a crisis of legitimacy for the CCSS—where the very people who were expected to be part of its implementation were suspicious of the origins, quality, aims, and efficacy of the policy. Edgerton (2020) shows that this suspicion led to an inevitable backlash among the practitioners who felt alienated from the decision-making process. The federal government responded to these complaints by weakening its own authority under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in December 2015 (Edgerton 2019; Fusarelli and Ayscue 2019).

But how have individual state and district administrators responded to this backing away of the federal government? In our previous work, we found that state administrators adopted the language of “local control” and expressed an eagerness to take a “hands-off” approach to implementation (Desimone et al. 2019). We also found, through survey research, that even as less stringent policies have been put into place, many teachers still report feeling there are punitive accountability measures looming over them (Edgerton and Desimone 2018, 2019). This leaves questions about how districts are actually navigating the power dynamics of standards implementation during the transition into a post-NCLB policy environment like ESSA. How are district administrators putting schools and communities at ease while also providing the support and resources necessary to meet the demands of the standards? How are they working to ensure buy-in to standards and assessments, even as these face a “crisis of legitimacy” in wider social and political arenas (Desimone et al. 2019; Henderson et al. 2017; Reckhow 2016; Supovitz 2017)? In what follows, we examine commonalities across states and districts in how they are providing guidance, resources, and support for educators while upholding the post-NCLB imperative of “local control.” We emphasize the centrality of “smart power” strategies (Wilson 2008)—mechanisms that balance the use of force with the cultivation of buy-in—in these efforts.

Theorizing Power in Education Policy

As Bell and Stevenson (2006) suggest, power is often acknowledged in education research but not always problematized or studied in practice. Levinson and colleagues (2009) argue that education policy, as a means of distributing and regulating social goods, is inherently entangled in agonistic power relations—both of

those in position to shape policy, and the mechanisms by which others are able to participate in or condition its implementation. Policy attributes theory (Porter 1994; Porter et al. 1988) is among the frameworks for education policy analysis that explicitly attend to formations and uses of power in practice. The theory posits that implementation is dependent on relations among five attributes: power, authority, stability, consistency, and specificity. It has been used widely in policy research to analyze systemic reform efforts (Clune 1993), comprehensive school reform (Berends et al. 2002), and research-practice partnerships (Desimone et al. 2016). Although the theory is intended as a comprehensive framework, these component attributes can also be studied independently or in relation to one another to elucidate their place in the process of policy implementation. For our purposes, we focus on the two attributes most closely associated with the negotiation and use of power—power and authority.

“Power,” in policy attributes theory, refers to the use of rewards and sanctions to ensure compliance in policy implementation. In the parlance of political science, this is a kind of “hard power” (Nye 2004), which relies on punitive force and stringent regulations to make resistance to or deviation from a preferred policy outcome undesirable or, alternately, to encourage compliance to earn material rewards. “Authority,” by contrast, takes a different approach to gaining compliance: cultivating buy-in among stakeholders. Although on its surface this might seem disconnected from power, the notion of “authority” in policy attributes theory derives from Weber’s theorizing of administrative authority—this is, how legal, traditional, or charismatic leadership can cultivate a “belief in legitimacy” (1978, 213) that results in obedience. Authority, then, functions as a form of “soft power” (Nye 2004), which differs from hard power by stressing attraction and buy-in rather than force. The interplay of these power dynamics echoes Foucauldian theories of governmentality (1975), which conceptualize power not as a unidirectional flow of top-down pressure, but something multivalent, that can circulate through a variety of techniques—some that are more overt (or “hard”) and others that aim to steer conduct at a distance (or “soft”; Miller and Rose 2008). Previous scholarship using policy attributes theory has compared outcomes from these distinct modes of power. Desimone (2002), for example, demonstrates that hard power tends to be effective in gaining short-term compliance for a policy, but soft power strategies can sustain a reform over a longer time span.

Importantly, power and authority need not be zero-sum techniques for implementing policy. A growing literature in political science has theorized the concept of “smart power” as an emergent strategy for adopting the two in tandem (Nye 2009). This orientation involves using “contextual intelligence” to devise novel combinations of hard and soft power that will be suited to particular contexts and situations (Nye 2004). Wilson (2008) argues that “smart power” often becomes necessary when policy makers or governing institutions face a crisis of legitimacy—where distrust among stakeholders clouds efforts for smooth

implementation. In such an instance, administrators may find it desirable or necessary to configure a form of power-backed authority, where soft power strategies are used to enlist stakeholders in the implementation process and hard power rewards and sanctions are used to ensure the results align with the policy's intended outcome. As Brass (2016) suggests, the present education policy landscape may be facing such a crisis of legitimacy: The punitive accountability measures of NCLB have fractured support for standards-based reform, leaving states and districts to implement post-NCLB policies with strained buy-in from stakeholders. For this reason, examining how states and districts are configuring power and authority—through hard, soft, or smart strategies—can provide critical insights into how leaders are navigating this crisis of legitimacy in post-NCLB standards implementation. It can also shed light on the contextual factors that condition their efforts to build compliance, buy-in, or both across scales and sites of practice (cf. Bartlett and Vavrus 2014) and the implications for post-NCLB policy implementation.

Method

To understand how states and districts are negotiating power and authority in efforts to implement standards and assessments in the present policy environment, we draw from the first 2 years of a 5-year study examining the implementation and impacts of college- and career-readiness standards. We use interviews with state and district officials in three states, selected for their geographical diversity and their distinct relationship to college- and career-readiness standards: Kentucky, Ohio, and Texas. Kentucky was the first state to adopt the CCSS, and state officials considered themselves leaders in the CCSS movement until political shifts caused a statewide repeal of the standards. Ohio likewise adopted the CCSS, but backlash against the standards prompted officials to replace them with state-created standards and assessments in 2017. Texas has developed internal college- and career-readiness standards since 2009, and it was the largest of the eight states that decided not to adopt the CCSS and compete for Race to the Top funding (Dahill-Brown 2019; Edgerton and Desimone 2018).

Within these three states, members of our research team conducted qualitative interviews (Weiss 1995) with state administrators and district officials working in urban, rural, and suburban contexts. Selected districts were embedded within a larger state-representative survey study, which used multistage sampling design with districts selected with probability proportional to the square root of student enrollment size. From this sample of districts (42 in Texas, 42 in Ohio, and 89 in Kentucky), we targeted those with populations of students with disability (SWDs) and English-language learners (ELLs) representative of the state average for recruitment as case studies in our interview study. Among these, we also aimed to

reflect variation in urbanicity, enrolling districts from urban, rural, and suburban areas. In all, we conducted 46 phone interviews in 2016 and 2017: 18 with high-level administrators (e.g., associate commissioners, curriculum coordinators, supervisors for special populations)—6 in each state, and 28 with district administrators (e.g., superintendents, curriculum specialists, supervisors of special populations)—9 in Kentucky, 11 in Ohio, and 8 in Texas. These interviews were semistructured using a piloted interview protocol (appendix [appendix is available online]) and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, depending on the interviewee's role and the breadth of questions their expertise allowed them to address.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using multiple rounds of inductive and deductive coding (Miles et al. 2014). In the first round, our research team developed deductive codes based on the policy attributes (power, authority, specificity, consistency, stability), as well as key reform areas (e.g., curriculum, professional development, SWDs, ELLs). This was followed by a second round of analysis that added inductive codes arising from the data (e.g., governance, communication strategies, community outreach, instructional shifts). In this process, we assessed interrater reliability through paired coding, research team discussions, and recoding (Saldaña 2015). From this analysis, we created a data matrix to map how reform categories interacted with the policy attributes of power and authority. This allowed us to identify themes in the ways states and districts were using top-down rewards and sanctions, bottom-up techniques for cultivating buy-in, or combinations of the two as they worked to implement college- and career-readiness standards in the wake of NCLB. As we identified these themes, we regularly returned to the interview transcripts themselves, looking for evidence that might affirm or complicate our emergent findings.

Two limitations are worth noting. As in most qualitative interview research, the depth afforded by structured interviews comes at the cost of breadth, and as our state and district interviewees were selected purposefully, they are not (and were not intended to be) nationally representative. Although the findings we report cut across geographical contexts, and few appear to be locally bounded to states or districts, it is certainly possible that other interviewees in other settings might report different pressures or strategies emerging in post-NCLB implementation. Our findings, then, are demonstrative, not definitive, and our study should be understood as exploratory, laying groundwork for further inquiries that reflect vantage points that were inaccessible within the scope of our interviews. In addition, as we elaborate below, the timing of our interviews in 2016 and 2017 fell before states formally implemented ESSA transition plans. As such, even though our interviewees discuss ESSA in the abstract, their insights are more illustrative of a “post-NCLB policy landscape” that includes the transition to ESSA than they are of actual ESSA implementation. We see targeted examination of power dynamics in state-specific ESSA implementation as a fruitful extension of the research reported here.

Findings

We group findings into four broad areas of change in how states and districts operationalize smart power in leading standards-based reform efforts: (1) greater variation in components of accountability systems, (2) expanded testing and institutionalized data use, (3) teacher-led curriculum adoption, and (4) more intentional standards-aligned professional development and coaching.

Greater Variation in Accountability

When asked how rewards and sanctions factored into decision-making, several district officials expressly delineated between “the old way”—which they associated with the stringent accountability measures of NCLB—and “the new way.” The contours of this “new way,” however, were not as clear-cut as the “old way” with which it was contrasted. In the absence of hardline direction from states, some districts used their newfound “local control” to replicate NCLB-era accountability practices at a more local scale, whereas others replicated the state-level rhetoric of “local control,” turning decision-making over to individual schools. Importantly, across these contexts, states and districts continued to retain sanctions—even in those settings most enthusiastic about breaking from “the old way.” The layering of these impulses in rhetoric, policy, and practice can be understood as attempts to mobilize “smart power” strategies in implementation: States and districts employed the language of hands-off “soft power” even as they retained mechanisms of “hard power” in their accountability systems. As we describe below, there was variation in how districts deployed these mechanisms.

In Ohio, a suburban district administrator outlined a list of NCLB-era sanctions (e.g., being placed “on watch,” subjected to improvement protocols, or threatened with state takeover) and projected that the transition to ESSA reflected a change in the landscape that reinforced a transfer of power from states to districts. “I feel like there’s going to be more of that decision-making and movement at the district level, versus everything going back to the state,” they said. “I just think there’s going to be a lot more power at the district level under ESSA.” This view matches a national rhetoric that has surrounded ESSA since its passage in 2015 (Edgerton 2019). But it is important to note that, at the time of our interviews, ESSA had not been fully implemented (and many of the sanctions this administrator listed still existed at the Ohio state level as “hard power” nudges toward accountability). This suggests that statements like theirs are not tied to the legislation itself but to a general sense that more overt forms of rewards and sanctions were not the most effective means of aligning standards with practice. Indeed, without exception, those we interviewed distanced themselves

from NCLB accountability measures, even when they described accountability techniques common in that era. For instance, when asked if the state penalizes their district based on assessments, an urban district official in Kentucky said, “They used to do it, but they don’t do that anymore.” However, this individual proceeded to describe their continued use of categories like “focus school” and “school of distinction” to reward schools based on performance. In other words, the punishments simply exist under a different name or are not as stringently enforced. These designations are carryovers from early waves of standards-based reform (Mintrop and Trujillo 2005) and have been demonstrated to affect public trust in schools, local real estate values, and school funding (Dee et al. 2013; Schneider 2017)—factors of consequence as districts consider how best to adapt and implement policies.

Thus, there were two overarching trends in accountability. First, hands-off rhetoric at the state level, backed by power, still put pressure on districts to live up to some of the NCLB-era accountability requirements. However, unlike in the past, states now provided fewer specific directives, for fear of being accused of overreach—leaving districts to make determinations about how best to legitimize, implement, and enforce these policies on their own. As one Ohio district official put it, “[State officials] communicate policy to us, but they won’t have thought through implementation.” Second, given these circumstances, districts tended to adopt “smart power” orientations that combined “hard” and “soft” mechanisms for compliance: cultivating local buy-in by replicating the rhetoric of “local control” at the district level, and continuing to use rewards and sanctions to ensure their policy outcomes were being met. In other words, as NCLB-style governance faced a wider crisis of legitimacy, and state and district officials aimed to distance themselves from it, “smart power” became, to them, a promising middle ground—even if it yielded variation (and contradictions) within and across districts in terms of their orientation to punitive force.

Expanded Testing and Institutionalized Data Use

Although there is a history of districts using locally generated assessments to gauge performance and alignment throughout the school year (Koretz 2017), these data were not typically systematized to inform pedagogical interventions (Stecher and Hamilton 2014), despite relationships between more stringent evaluation and achievement (e.g., Alexander et al. 2017). However, in the present policy landscape, where it has become desirable for districts to distance themselves from top-down NCLB-style evaluative mechanisms, locally generated assessments are increasingly serving as another indicator to be read alongside other data sources to isolate and articulate needs and supports for schools, classes,

and instructors. This is evinced in the growing place of “data analysis” in teachers’ collaborative planning and professional development (Huguet et al. 2014; Supovitz and Sirinides 2018). One Texas rural district official described the distinction between these locally generated assessments and broader state assessments as the difference between “responsibility” and “accountability”: Where state tests offer accountability through standardized, summative assessments, district-wide common assessments allow districts to take responsibility for tailoring instruction for students. “We place a great deal of emphasis on formative assessment,” the official said, “because that is when you’re able to adjust your instruction to provide quality instruction to the student and be able to meet their needs.” In this way, although the move from state-level rewards and sanctions has shifted new responsibilities for implementation to districts, many officials view this move as a means for districts to use data and assessments to better address their responsibility to students and teachers. Of course, the districts we interviewed varied in their capacity to apply and use formative assessments in this way, but all acknowledged the potential influence of such measures in evaluating and shaping reform efforts.

As mentioned, these uses of data are not only concerned with monitoring growth in a descriptive sense but also increasingly being systematized into improvement models to actively intervene in instruction. Many districts we spoke with specifically discussed the importance of having an integrated, data-driven system that could inform professional learning and practice. A Kentucky official reported that their urban district had gone so far as to create a data department and to hire a designated data director to support the use of assessment information. “We need to be data-driven,” the official said. “We need to use data in order to drive our instruction.” In this district, officials use data from standards-aligned assessments, as well as from other available measures like ACT scores and English as a Second Language (ESL) data, to create district-wide improvement goals. From there, each school is tasked with using available test data to devise school-specific goals—at least one of which must be aligned with a district goal. These plans, in turn, become frames for the school’s professional development plan, as well as for each individual teacher’s personalized improvement goals. Although few districts we spoke with had a designated data director position, almost all had implemented or piloted similar programs where districts, schools, and teachers could use available data to articulate standards-based goals that could be systematically aligned with context-specific needs.

In earlier waves of standards-based reform, assessments tended to be mobilized in ways that reinforced top-down accountability (Alexander et al. 2017; Donaldson and Woulfin 2018). The growing use of formative assessments alongside of these summative evaluations is reflective of the wider shift toward “smart power” strategies in district governance. In our interviews, respondents overwhelmingly expressed that the role of data—much like accountability more generally—was evolving from “the old way” of punitive force. Of course, as we

note above, many of the same rewards and sanctions from the NCLB era still persist in present implementation efforts, but district officials we spoke with worked to distance their emerging data practices from these “hard power” tactics, stressing the place of data as a generative aid to decision-making and growth. When asked if there were penalties for educators or schools for underperformance on local common assessments, one Ohio district official said, “I wouldn’t call them penalties—it would be more like, ‘You have data showing this, then you need to have an improvement plan . . . and see how you’re going to make changes you need to make.’” Another Ohio administrator in a different district echoed this: “Your goal is not to get rid of someone. Your goal is to make them better.” They went on to describe what they deemed as more productive uses of data, like finding specific ways to support instructors with resources, mentoring, or professional development. A Texas urban district official described this approach as taking a “longitudinal perspective”—that is, one that looks at teacher and school performance over time rather than doling out punishments or rewards based on fragmentary snapshots.

These orientations to data use, on their surface, seem to reflect a district emphasis on “authority” (soft power, cultivating buy-in) more than “power” (hard power, securing compliance through rewards and sanctions). However, at times, it became clear that the two were actually being leveraged in tandem—as a strategic use of “smart power.” For instance, in one Texas district, an administrator narrated their local data practices as strictly nonevaluative, distinguishing it from the punitive ways the state has historically used data. Echoing other districts in our study, they said their common assessments were not about rewards or punishments, but about “having conversations with teachers” and “providing them with instructional coaching.” And yet this official then went on to describe a district-wide practice involving monthly recognitions where trophies were distributed to schools and administrators who demonstrated improvements in targeted areas. Even as the tenor of these rewards is distinct from past waves of reform, because they are tied to district-generated goals rather than passed down from the state (cf. Porter et al. 2005; Schoen and Fusarelli 2008), they still map a logic of carrots and sticks on top of the district’s “soft power” rhetoric. In other words, they reflect an orientation of “smart power”—where affirming language and supports are put in place to encourage buy-in, yet these are still paired with looming threats or promises of recognition to incentivize compliance. In most cases, these “hard power” mechanisms were less stringent than under NCLB, but they were no less present. And in some instances, they even mirrored the punitive practices of NCLB, as when districts shuffled school administrators between buildings based on performance data or encouraged them to do the same with teachers in their buildings. When we asked an administrator in a rural Texas district whether this was a common practice, they said, “I would say no, but really—yes . . . they’re gonna move you if your scores aren’t good.”

Teacher-Led Curriculum Adoption

The shift to “smart power” also manifested in curriculum adoption. As in other key reform areas, the emphasis on “local control” in post-NCLB state-level rhetoric put greater responsibility on districts—in this case, to select and implement curriculum aligned to the standards, often without specific guidance or recommendations from the state. Officials we spoke with were mostly enthusiastic about the autonomy this afforded them. An administrator in a suburban Ohio district reported, “We’re really fortunate that we weren’t tied to a specific curriculum . . . or a textbook,” as they worked with teachers and other administrators in the district to implement the standards. Another official in a Texas suburban district suggested that the standards provided “a long list of things to do,” which became the basis for local-level curriculum development using an Understanding by Design framework (Wiggins and McTighe 2005). Much like data and assessments, then, our interviewees viewed curriculum adoption as an opportunity to build local buy-in (or “authority”) to the standards; yet these soft power strategies for building capacity did not operate in isolation. They came bundled with the understanding that local curriculum adoption would still be measured against state metrics, which, as we suggest above, remained loosely tied to hard power rewards and sanctions. For the district leaders, we spoke with, this “smart power” orientation allowed them to enroll more stakeholders in decision-making processes, which distributed the sense of responsibility for ensuring alignment and compliance with the standards.

In some districts, the pressure to find standards-aligned curricula led stakeholders to adopt, wholesale, textbooks and curriculum packages whose publishers advertised them as “aligned” to their state’s standards (cf. Zeringue et al. 2010). Two districts in our study (one in Ohio, another in Kentucky) reported that such decisions were made at the central office with some input from instructional specialists working with content-area teachers across buildings. More commonly, districts turned over these adoption decisions to committees of teachers, coaches, and administrators to evaluate and select from available curriculum packages. In a Texas urban district, officials invited a range of program and resource providers to present their various textbook and program options to a cross-district team of educators. This team synthesized their findings into a series of recommendations that the district could then act on.

Other districts opted to expand their curriculum piloting efforts. In an Ohio suburban district, administrators examined the alignment of various textbooks to the state standards to create a short list of viable programs. These were each piloted in one or two classrooms throughout the district to determine whether the materials merited more expansive testing in full grade levels or across buildings. One official in this district noted that their expansive piloting had developed a

reputation among building leaders and teachers: “Everybody jokes. We never met a pilot we didn’t like.” Of course, piloting programs in this way is not a new phenomenon; however, in the post-NCLB landscape, the processes detailed by our interviewees reveal some subtle shifts in district decision-making. Not only are districts increasingly looking for opportunities to cultivate buy-in among more stakeholders, but they are also not taking for granted that the materials being vetted are meaningfully “aligned”—as evinced in the detailed vetting protocols used throughout the approval process. This instinct accords with a growing research base that suggests that alignment to standards varies considerably across curriculum providers (e.g., Hill 2011; Polikoff 2015; Spillane 2009), which can result in instruction that does not prepare students for standards-based assessments. Piloting, then, became a mechanism for building authority and also a gentle reminder of the rewards and sanctions at stake if advertised “alignment” is taken for granted and not tested.

This tendency was perhaps clearest in the districts we spoke with that determined not to adopt a singular textbook or curriculum package but to assemble their own curriculum—one that they could ensure was actually aligned to the standards. In some cases, these decisions were distributed on a building-by-building level. In Kentucky, for example, individual buildings are legally required to have site-based councils to select and implement materials. In an elementary school in one of our case districts, a council decided against instituting an immediate replacement for its aging K–6 math curriculum and instead chose to assemble a standards-aligned kindergarten program in-house. To ensure that those students who would not receive the new program would still have access to this standards-aligned instruction, the council also convened meetings of grade-level teachers to update their lessons and resources to bring them into alignment with the current standards. According to a district official, this approach not only cultivated buy-in among teachers by inviting them into the redesign process but also produced “resources that were fully aligned, so teachers did not have to hunt for standards” to ensure they were not missing key areas for instruction. This reflects a shift from the conventional wholesale adoption of curriculum, common under NCLB, that stressed compliance over more careful implementation.

Importantly, even among the districts that enlisted stakeholders to create aligned materials, none of these were able to implement this process entirely in-house. These districts reported using a combination of strategies, mixing locally generated resources with fragments from diverse commercial programs, including English in a Flash, National Geographic Edge, Rosetta Stone, Teachers Pay Teachers, and enVision Mathematics. It is notable, however, that absent from these references were major publishers and vendors such as McGraw Hill or Prentice Hall, whose textbooks had dominated previous periods of standards-based reform (Polikoff 2012, 2015). Instead, officials seemed to prefer a more flexible orientation, providing teachers with a diverse repertoire of resources that

could be used to meet curricular expectations, all while leaning on common, low-stakes assessments to ensure consistency. We can see in this orientation both hard and soft strategies at play. The process of balancing teacher buy-in with weakened (but no less present) rewards and sanctions certainly entails more work for districts and schools, but for those we interviewed, the “smart power” approach shored up the legitimacy of curriculum and goodwill among those being asked to implement it.

More Intentional, Standards-Aligned Professional Development and Coaching

Although professional learning communities (PLCs) have existed, in various forms, for decades, they have taken on new meaning in the present wave of standards-based reform, and how this time is used matters (see Desimone 2009; Desimone and Pak 2017; Dever and Lash 2013). Early on, PLCs were focused on developing teacher knowledge and honing skills, but often this was done only through one-shot workshops (Desimone 2011; Garet et al. 2001). Over time, PLCs became more formalized in school and district programming as they began to analyze results of No Child Left Behind-era tests (Phillips et al. 2011). From the beginning, the persistent challenge in supporting such communities was providing enough time and resources—and competing demands often meant that PLCs were difficult to meaningfully sustain. In our suburban Ohio district, teachers across the district agreed to alter their schedules and work an 8-hour day to accommodate more collaborative planning time with content-area or grade-level partners as well as with ELL and SWD educators. In exchange, the district realigned the academic calendar to provide additional days for professional learning and weekly 2-hour planning blocks for educators to collaborate. However, these blocks largely focused on data analysis—of state, district, and school-wide assessments.

Although our focal districts emphasized the value of PLCs for more effective and distributed curriculum planning and data usage, they also recognized the importance of providing integrated and relevant professional learning opportunities. Given the hands-off approach of states in the current wave of standards-based reform, this has created some difficulties—and prompted some creative decision-making—at the scale of districts. After all, the “local control” mandate often means district officials must organize data-driven professional development without specific guidance or resources from the state. In the absence of such supports, many of the officials we spoke with hinted that, as states retreated from issuing top-down recommendations for professional development, districts have had to take on the responsibility of bridging the gap between the expectations of the standards and classroom practices by seeking out intermediaries who can provide targeted, on-the-ground feedback for educators. These have primarily taken the form of local university partnerships and coaching.

The role of professional development, like PLCs, has evolved over the duration of standards-based reform. In the 1990s, professional development was often focused on exposing teachers to the standards and mapping them to whatever textbook or curriculum the school used (Garet et al. 2001; Kennedy 2016). Under NCLB, the focus shifted to developing lesson plans that mapped to particular standards and identifying areas where teachers might need more support in teaching the standards (Desimone 2009; Kraft et al. 2018). Early in the present wave of reform, some of these tendencies toward focusing on exposure persisted. Some officials we spoke with described these first steps as “surface level.” In our rural Kentucky district, one administrator explained, “We weren’t really given any specific training on standards other than, you know, the same thing: here they are, deconstruct them super quick so you understand them, and then roll it out.” Another official, in our rural Texas district, suggested that many teachers “don’t even know the [English language arts] standards”—pointing to a dual challenge in standards-based professional development: (a) the need to familiarize educators with the specificities of and changes to the standards and (b) the need to provide them with learning opportunities that will support them in helping students meet these standards.

To address these challenges, many of our focal districts had begun to experiment with more integrated, standards-oriented approaches to professional development. This often meant explicitly aligning larger building- or district-wide teacher learning with workshops and activities that examined changes in and uses of the standards. As one Texas official said, “If there are specific changes to the standards, then we adjust the type of professional learning we expect teachers to go through.” They went on to provide the example of a recent shift in the elementary math standards that had yielded a series of professional learning days focused explicitly on how instruction might be tailored to better address this change. “Rather than giving [teachers] a choice to attend math or social studies or language arts, we made every [elementary teacher] earn a professional learning credit in math,” they explained. In other districts, these forms of standards-aligned development opportunities build on new configurations of PLCs and collaborative planning time. In another Texas district, one official explained that the district now provides a 2-day ESL Academy, where teams of ELL and content-area teachers are brought together for collaborative training. These academies then become the basis for subsequent professional learning, as teams are reunited for monthly check-ins that extend and support the previous collective learning. Moves like these point to an expanded effort among districts to provide targeted teacher learning that works with the standards and meaningfully extends to practice.

Examples like the cross-disciplinary ESL Academy in Texas signify another shift in the way districts are designing professional development in the present wave of standards-based reform. Where previously teachers of ELLs and SWDs were separated from general education teachers for professional learning (Desimone

2002), many of the districts we spoke with indicated that they had moved toward more integrative approaches that group teachers of ELL, SWD, and general education students. As one Kentucky district official said, “I think in the past there was an exclusionary mindset of separatism from special ed. and general ed.” They went on to say that this line was beginning to dissolve as PLCs and professional development were increasingly being used as opportunities for teachers to learn and share strategies about how they could best support all students—a marked difference from certain models of isolated support for instructors of ELLs and SWDs that dominated past waves of reform (Edgerton et al. 2020; Fuchs et al. 2015). According to this same official, this integrative approach was a way to foster “instructional coherence and organizational coherence”—which, in turn, could provide a more durable foundation for educators to address the individual needs of diverse learners.

Although many of the districts we spoke with indicated movements toward more targeted, standards-aligned professional development and integration of general and special educators in professional learning, there were significant variations in the frequency, depth, and success of such efforts across these contexts. One reason for this is the uneven distribution of time allotted for such activities. In Ohio, officials in our focal rural district reported only having standards-based professional learning opportunities every other month—compared with our focal suburban district in Ohio, which allots one period per week for district-led teacher learning. Across states, we found a similar pattern, as less-resourced districts did not always have the capacity for the same intensity and regularity of professional development. In Kentucky, officials in one rural district had tried to devise a workaround: providing a 3-day retreat to all teaching staff, and then scheduling biweekly meetings for principals to convene and coordinate across schools.

But even among those districts that did manage to find time and resources for such programming, this did not always lead to frictionless transfer between professional learning and classroom practice; in other words, the problem of actual integration remained a challenge. One Kentucky official we spoke with delineated three points of tension in standards-aligned professional development. First, they said that the emphasis on alignment did not always lead to meaningful integration (e.g., in the ways skills associated with informational reading or writing might be reinforced across content areas). “Sometimes we still are working in isolation,” the official said, suggesting there is greater need for professional learning that supports standards implementation across the curriculum rather than being bounded to particular content areas. Second, they pointed to substantive differences in the ways grade-level instructors receive and respond to professional development. The official noted that, whereas elementary teachers have been responsive to standards-based support, secondary instructors have tended to push back. As a result, they said, “I’m not sure we’re really implementing the new standards at the high school level in the way in which they were intended.” And

finally, the official noted a third challenge that is layered on the previous two: Not all professional development opportunities are required. “It has been need-based,” the official said. “If you’re in a school and you know you’re not getting strong results, then we suggest you may want to send teachers to this training or that training.” In other words, professional learning related to the standards had been a way to “bring teachers up to speed” rather than something positioned as integral to the practice of all educators. However, as this official suggested, this was slowly beginning to change as professional development increasingly became organized around “district priorities”—which would include standards-based instruction.

The two strategies for bridging standards and instruction that surfaced throughout our interviews were school and district partnerships with outside organizations (e.g., universities and education support centers) and the use of instructional coaches. With states adopting a “hands-off” stance, districts increasingly looked to partnerships and coaches that could provide support to teachers in ways that augmented more general, building- or district-wide professional development. One way to do this involved cultivating partnerships at the local and national levels to provide some of the specificity that, in previous waves of reform, might have come from the state itself. Such partnerships included a range of universities, subscription services, academics, and consultants. Once again, the availability of these partnerships was not always evenly distributed, matching prior work showing how partners tend to cluster within networks rather than dispersing to meet need (Bridwell-Mitchell 2017). Urban and suburban districts we spoke with were more likely to send district representatives or teacher leaders to more distant opportunities—for instance, the Great Minds training in Washington, DC, or a leadership academy at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Likewise, they were more likely to partner with big-name, out-of-state research universities like the University of Virginia, the University of Connecticut, Pennsylvania State University, and Harvard for instructional materials, resources, and consulting. Rural districts were interested in cultivating partnerships but, given certain geographic constraints, officials we spoke with usually named regional universities as their most frequent and dependable partners. In other words, although all states and districts faced the same challenge of finding reliable external supports for instructors, finding partners was more of a challenge for some districts than others, with resourced areas usually having the most partnerships.

In contrast with partnerships, every district we spoke with reported an increased reliance on professional coaching to support teachers in implementing the standards—a finding that keeps with the strong evidence for the effectiveness of coaching in raising student achievement (Kraft et al. 2018). Although there was little geographic variability in this trend, there were still contingencies in the ways different districts employed instructional coaches. In some districts, coaches remained in place in every building, or were shared across buildings, either

full-time or part-time throughout the year. In Ohio, officials described a system of structured support by which a coach would work with teachers to create 90-day action plans that targeted specific instructional goals related to the standards. In such districts, coaches were seen as nonevaluative peers, providing feedback and resources without the threat of punitive oversight. However, in other districts, coaches were more explicitly linked to district- and building-wide rewards and sanctions—some even completing formal evaluations of teachers with whom they worked. Officials in these districts reported tensions with local teacher unions that viewed evaluative coaching as intrusive, with one official going so far as to suggest that unions were “barriers” to coaching. Tensions like these further highlight the challenges districts face as the locus of power has shifted from states to “local control.” Whereas in some districts this has led to more distributed, authority-based consensus building by creating networks of coaches and partnerships for professional learning, in others the same top-down power dynamics that were criticized in previous waves of reform can still be instantiated at the local level. Where in the past districts could operate as intermediaries between state power and school instruction, increasingly they are being asked to take a more active role in negotiating and reconciling differences—almost always without an increase in state support for doing so.

Discussion and Implications

Reading across our four major findings centered on accountability, assessment, curriculum, and professional development, how are the power dynamics associated with standards implementation evolving (or not) in the post-NCLB era? Even though state-level assessments are being used more judiciously, they remain enough of a looming threat that they continue to drive nearly every element of the policy system, are embedded into district- and school-level decision-making, and shape how common assessments are planned and used. Accountability, then, has shifted from the hard power of the NCLB era to something that more closely resembles Nye’s (2004) and Wilson’s (2008) “smart power,” where a weakened form of rewards and sanctions are paired with a rhetoric of “local control” and mechanisms for more distributed stakeholder participation. This turn has resulted in an expanded set of practices for legitimizing and implementing standards-based reform. But it is worth highlighting that, despite the intimations of its name, “smart power” strategies do not necessarily mean “better power” or “wiser power.” Wilson’s (2008) theorization of the concept clarifies that it is not an ideal orientation to policy implementation, but one that emerges from necessity during a “crisis of legitimacy”—much like the sort faced by standards-based reform after NCLB (Brass 2016). As such, examining where and how “smart power” emerges in standards implementation helps make visible tensions

and contradictions in the policy landscape that administrators are straining to address.

One such tension revolves around “local control”—a term that surfaced widely throughout our interviews. Local control is often delimited by the conditions in which it unfolds. When the soft power of localism is engrafted into wider systems of accountability with residual attachments to hard power—particularly those already facing a legitimacy crisis—then this localism can be more rhetorical than real. In our interviews, it was clear that states and districts continue to emulate one another in language and practice, which at times meant that “local control” replicated some of the same top-down disciplinary tactics that the turn to the local was meant to counter. This highlights a significant challenge of a “smart power” orientation: Even when it uses “bottom-up” language of localism, as a strategy, it continues to place the locus of decision-making on those in the position to wield the levers of hard and soft power, not those local actors who must enact those decisions. Although such a technique may make sense in international diplomacy, where the concept of “smart power” originated, in education, it means that districts are often positioned to replicate forms of state power in ways that might overlook the local contingencies that might undermine or complicate such efforts.

This tendency helps shed light on some other trends in the literature—namely, these strategies are often intended to create buy-in, but they are often experienced as hard rather than smart power. We differ from recent scholars who have suggested that standards advocates can expand existing structures or work “with rather than against American pluralism” (e.g., Cohen and Mehta 2017, 682). We believe existing structures are, in fact, the issue. The use of smart power can build authority, but it does not change the fundamentally hierarchical nature of standards-based reform. And the quasi-experimental evidence seems clear that the Common Core has not benefited economically disadvantaged students (Bleiberg 2021; Polikoff 2017; Song et al. 2019). Our work provides qualitative evidence that contextualizes these findings, and we suggest that providing curricular resources is a fertile ground for building authority. Leat and Thomas (2018) suggest that curriculum brokers—intermediaries—can play an important role as governments shy away from prescribing curricula. Smart power involves balancing multiple competing organizational tensions, but this approach that can still undermine buy-in to assert power—a trade-off that threatens the durability of instructional reform (Bryk 2010; Desimone et al. 2019; Spillane and Hopkins 2013; Superfine 2019).

In addition, there is empirical evidence, primarily from self-report surveys, that shows that significant differences between teachers and administrators in how they experience the policy environment remain widespread. Desimone and colleagues (2019), for example, have used survey results to show that teachers and school leaders often continue to feel punitive pressure, even as states and districts

have adopted the rhetoric of hands-off implementation. Our findings here help to contextualize such results, as educators who are unfamiliar with the actual policies may be attuned to the hard power techniques that are often embedded within the soft power strategies of states and districts. They know, for example, that even if their jobs themselves may not be in danger as under NCLB, test scores will still be reported publicly, and they can be shifted to other classrooms, where they may not be eligible for the same prep time or merit pay. Even when rewards and sanctions are not enshrined in policy, the “smart power” techniques mean that even these softer strategies carry a big stick.

There are a number of serious policy implications. First, we cannot expect that a future reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) will substantively change conditions on the ground. The 2002 reauthorization (NCLB) was a sea change that enshrined at the federal level what many states had already begun to do—test and hold individual schools and teachers accountable for the results. Congressional leaders, governors, and state superintendents can purport to “weaken” accountability, but teachers can be suspicious of smart power moves. Teachers are often skeptical of top-down standards according to longitudinal survey evidence (Desimone et al. 2019; Henderson et al. 2017). The mere presence of standardized testing looms large in the minds of educators regardless of the specific policies attached to it.

But the necessity of these tests has suddenly been called into question. The suspension of standardized tests in 2020—from the SATs down to grade 3—as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has made a world without them suddenly more viable. Rather than renew a focus on federal or even state-level policy, leaders would be wise to focus on the specifics of practice. Districts will still need specific curricular resources, professional development, and strategies to boost teacher morale (Darling-Hammond et al. 2020). To preserve the gains of the past 2 decades, administrators will have to wield smart power more consciously, with a heightened awareness of the drawbacks of pure hard power. Our interview findings suggest that without concrete steps toward increasing buy-in, there may be additional noncompliance with accountability policies.

All of these also point to questions about what alternate framings of power might be possible. The kinds of curricular and instructional adaptations that are critical for standards-aligned instruction may be undermined when there is a looming shadow. What infrastructures might be established to develop legitimacy in a period when this legitimacy is lacking? An enduring challenge moving forward, then, remains how to configure power and shore up legitimacy. Whether this mode of smart power is a transitional phase—a way of implementing standards in the wake of NCLB and its legitimacy crisis—or if it is the new normal remains to be seen. But it is telling that it is difficult to imagine modes of governance outside of these techniques. Importantly, curricular and fiscal resources are not neutral. Resources exert their own pressures, institutionally, on the attitudes

and incentives of those who wield them. To a person with a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. To a person with “smart power,” every problem looks like a calculus of hard and soft mechanisms to coerce buy-in, which may or may not be in the best interests of more rigorous standards-based policies—or of the students they are meant to serve.

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