Article

The Politics of District Instructional Policy Formation: Compromising Equity and Rigor

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Abstract

This qualitative case study extends the literature on urban district instructional policymaking by analyzing the ways in which normative and political pressures shaped district leaders' instructional policy decisions. Drawing on concepts from the politics of education, it shows how teachers and principals repeatedly nullified policies that aimed for equity-oriented, rigorous changes in one urban district when leaders opted to pacify constituents, rather than uphold controversial policies. It complements present explanations of how district instructional policies come to be by comparing the consistency between the values and ideologies of district leaders, principals, and teachers and those implicit in district policies.

Research on district instructional policymaking teaches us that districts are nonmonolithic in nature, and that divergent philosophies of education undercut district responses to state policies when individuals approach the problems of teaching and learning from different angles (Spillane, 1998). Indeed,

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views on instruction are deeply rooted in technical, normative, and political notions of what constitutes ideal learning experiences for students (Oakes, 1992). As such, district instructional policymakers need fluency not just in the technology of instruction, but in the norms and beliefs that condition educators' receptivity to change.

Literature on the politics of education illustrates how such normative differences trigger political resistance to district policies targeting equity-oriented, ambitious change (Oakes, Welner, Yonezawa, & Allen, 1998). Architects of district instructional policies contend with different opinions about practical strategies for change *and* entrenched values about what quality instruction looks like and for whom. Despite this evidence, scholarship on the district instructional policy process concentrates primarily on technical considerations of organizational conditions, interpretive processes, or formal political arrangements that shape decisions and implementation (e.g., Coburn, Toure, & Yamashita, 2009; Honig, 2009; Spillane, 2000a), or on technical accounts of policies' effects on student outcomes (e.g., Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). In-depth interpretations of how central office and school staff's values and ideologies shape district instructional policies themselves are in short supply.

This article extends this literature by explaining how and why district instructional policies may be compromised from the outset—before questions of implementation or effectiveness ever arise. It shows how educators repeatedly nullified policies that aimed for explicitly equity-oriented, rigorous changes in one urban district when leaders opted to pacify constituents, rather than uphold controversial policies. It complements present explanations of how district instructional policies come to be by paying attention to the consistency between the values of district leaders, principals, and teachers and those values implicit in district policies. The following questions guided this study:

1. What are district leaders', teachers', and principals' values and ideologies about what quality instruction looks like and for whom?
2. What political processes transpire when individuals' values and ideologies conflict with the values and ideologies implicit in district policies?
3. How do these political processes influence district leaders' instructional policy decisions?

I frame my inquiry with concepts from research on the politics of education to explore the values and ideologies that underpin district leaders' willingness

to design, protect, or retract more and less equity-oriented, rigorous instructional policies. I present findings from a year-long case study of an urban district in California that show how district leaders' attempts to craft equity-oriented, ambitious instructional policies were eclipsed by ideological schisms among district leaders, teachers, and principals. The result was a set of compromised policies that resembled those highlighted in the research on effective districts—regulations for standards-aligned curricula, tests, and training; common instructional routines; and monitoring—but that dispensed with equity-oriented, rigorous challenges to the district's status quo.

Literature Review

Educational Policy Formation

Scholarship on educational policy formation has tended to fall into three broad categories. The earliest, most predominant is the instrumentalist view (e.g., Walker, 1990; Weimer & Vining, 1989). This technical perspective, dubbed by Stone (2002) as the "rationality project," assumes that policy makers behave in a rational, linear fashion; they are goal-directed and purposeful, and they logically design policy instruments according to specific objectives.

The pluralistic view represents the second most common type of research in this area. This standpoint frames policy formation as a political process in which multiple, competing interests bargain or negotiate policies' details (e.g., Boyd, 1979; Kirst, 1984). Like the former, this view assumes a high degree of rationality and focuses on formal channels for crafting policy.

The organizational view departs from these rational accounts by framing policy decisions in terms of a "garbage can" model of decision-making (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972). From this perspective, problems, solutions, interests groups, or larger political trends converge to shape decisions in irrational, unpredictable ways. This field calls attention not to the formal channels through which policies are formulated, but to the informal, complex structures, processes and random events that shape policy agendas before policies are ever rolled out (Kingdon, 1995).

Each of these views exemplify a positivist orientation to research on policy formation in that they study explicit, observable patterns to explain how policies are designed (Yanow, 1993). Yet, others offer more interpretivist accounts in that they posit that less overt normative or ideological positions also inform policy design. For instance, Gándara and Gómez (2009) maintain that differing values about integrating and educating immigrants and

preserving group identities weigh heavily on the types of language policies that are adopted. Similarly, Shoenfeld and Pearson (2009) argue that conservative ideological trends shaped national "back to basics" reading and math policy agendas. These interpretations suggest that policymaking can be explained not just in terms of concrete, readily seen processes, but in terms of less visible normative and ideological forces that act upon those who craft agendas and policies.

Urban District Reform

One of the more recent branches to grow out of the educational policymaking literature focuses on urban district policymaking. Much of this literature investigates the effectiveness of policies that urban district leaders design to boost student outcomes, typically measured by test scores. This field tends to show that top-down district policies for creating standard-aligned curricula, assessments, and professional development; common instructional routines; and coherent monitoring and evaluation spur test growth (e.g., Elmore & Burney, 1997; Firestone, Mangin, Martinez, & Polovsky, 2004; Massell & Goertz, 2002; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988).

Other literature focuses on micro-level factors that shape urban leaders' decisions about district policies. For example, some research investigates how leaders' cognitive processes influence policy decisions and the ways in which district policies shape teachers' opportunities to learn about instruction (Spillane, 2000b). Others examine the interpretive and organizational dimensions of district leaders' policy decisions (Coburn et al., 2009).

Macro-level research considers institutional forces like academic disciplines that inform the design of urban district policy (Burch & Spillane, 2005). And, at a meso-level, other research takes up questions about the formal political arrangements between urban districts and external support providers, and how these relationships shape district policy decisions (Honig, 2009).

Collectively, this research teaches us much about the technical characteristics of urban district policies that are tied to higher test scores and about the nuances of implementation. Yet, missing from these accounts are studies that explore the normative or ideological forces that may shape district policies from the outset. In-depth studies of urban district instructional policymaking that place norms and ideologies at the nucleus of their conceptual model are still needed. This article addresses this gap by detailing the ways in which value conflicts triggered district leaders' political concessions, and the implications of their compromises for equitable, rigorous instructional policies.

Conceptual Framework

To understand the ways in which normative and ideological positions incited political resistance to or support for a range of district instructional policies, I guide my analysis with concepts from the politics of education. This literature is helpful in analyzing urban district instructional policymaking because it acknowledges the politically charged nature of equity-minded, ambitious policies. Such changes tend to precipitate political conflicts over resources that are perceived to be scarce, as well as ideological conflicts over values and beliefs about teaching and learning (e.g., Oakes, et al., 1998; Welner, 2001). Disparate views among district leaders, principals, or teachers can prompt heated micro-political battles when individuals are concerned about resource allocation or when policies imply norms about students that differ from their own. Such political cleavages can dispose district leaders to craft policies that elicit the least controversy to maintain harmony among different constituencies (Hess, 1999).

To explore these normative dimensions of district instructional policymaking, I guide my analysis primarily with the concept of the "zone of mediation" (e.g., Oakes, et al., 1998; Welner, 2001). This notion marries the concept of the "zone of tolerance," or the degree to which community members permit educational policies that are consistent with their own social goals and values (Boyd, 1976; McGivney & Moynihan, 1972), with the concept of "mediating institutions," or the systems that assimilate macro-level political, social, or economic forces and channel them to individuals or sites (Lamphere, 1992). The zone of mediation, therefore, is a conceptual tool for articulating the sphere in which an organizational system mediates between large-scale institutional forces and individual sites of interaction, as well as a tool for illuminating the boundaries of debate for a given issue (Welner, 2001, p. 95).

The zone of mediation situates districts and schools within certain localized enactments of larger political, economic, or social patterns, and helps explain community members' willingness to embrace particular instructional changes. Specifically, this perspective posits that the consistency between the norms and values implicit in policies or reforms and those held by community members determines their inclination to adopt or reject certain changes.

Applied to this district-level analysis, the zone of mediation refers to the sphere in which an urban district mediated between national, political, and social movements in which business logic and practices have been applied to the social sector and educators' values and ideologies about what constitutes quality instruction and for whom. I consider the values and ideologies represented among district leaders, principals, and teachers, and the ways in which

their normative positions corresponded or conflicted with those implicit in the district policies. I detail which instructional policies district leaders ultimately rolled out, and distinguish between those that promoted equity-minded, rigorous instruction and those that reproduced the status quo.

Method and Data

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative, case study design of one urban district in which I triangulated multiple data sources to better understand individuals' experiences crafting and experiencing district instructional policies (Stake, 2010). I chose Westside School District[1] as my site because it resembled several of the cases that are highlighted in the district effectiveness literature; it seemed to be designing highly rational policies aimed explicitly at boosting test scores through standards-aligned curricula, assessments, professional development; common instructional routines; and coherent monitoring and evaluation. At the same time, findings from pilot interviews revealed a markedly humanistic, equity orientation among some central office leaders and a more rational, bureaucratic orientation among others. As such, Westside presented a naturally bounded case for constructing a deeper understanding of the values and ideologies implicit in district policies and those of administrators and teachers, and for learning how normative dynamics within a district might explain leaders' decisions to maintain or forgo different instructional policies (Merriam, 2009).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data sources included 72 interviews with 46 participants, 59½ hours of meeting observations, and 49 documents and secondary data. I used purposive sampling in which I began by interviewing relevant central office staff from the district's instruction department. From these initial data, I used snowball sampling to identify other central office and school site staff, external consultants, and other support providers who were recommended as individuals possessing valuable knowledge about the district's instructional policies. I held 16 interviews with 12 central office administrators, 35 interviews with five principals and 10 teachers, and 10 interviews with the superintendent and four out of five board members. I interviewed several participants twice, usually from one to three hours. Interviews addressed district and individuals' instructional goals, district instructional policies, and attitudes about teaching, learning, and accountability. See the appendix for a list of interview questions.

I conducted semi-structured observations of central office meetings and professional development sessions for principals and teachers to better understand district instructional priorities; the specifics of the district's instructional policies; and the normative, political, and technical ways in which district staff worked with one another to craft policy. I also collected substantial data through informal conversations, which I summarized in memos and coded.

I collected several documents, including board meeting, retreat, strategic planning, professional development, and cabinet meeting agendas; email correspondence; PowerPoint presentations; online information; newsletters; and state improvement plans. The data provided background on district policies, leaders' communication about them, and schools' responses.

I coded transcripts and documents using pre-assigned, theory-based and inductive, data-driven codes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). All data were coded using Atlas.ti, Version 5. I created multiple data displays (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in which I compared and contrasted patterns and contradictions within the central office and between the central office and school sites. Examples of codes used in this analysis include "policy: equity-oriented," "policy: status quo," "policy: rigor," "policy: simplicity," "norms and values: rational," "norms and values: humanistic," "value conflict," "value consistency," "business practice," and "zone of tolerance." I ensured intra-coder reliability and validity in two ways. I recoded previously coded data, compared results, and adjusted codes accordingly. I also conducted "member checks" by sharing certain findings with key participants to judge the accuracy of my interpretations. All data were collected from spring, 2007, to spring, 2008.

The State and Federal Policy Context

The study setting was California, which has maintained a centralized, results-based accountability system since 1999. State curriculum standards and state-adopted textbooks align with its standardized test, whose results determine an annual gauge of district and school performance, the Academic Performance Index (API). API scores range from 200-1,000. The state sets API targets for each school and district, though the overall goal is at least 800. At the time of the study, persistently low scores were met with federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) corrective actions. NCLB mandates that states institute sanctions for those districts unable to consistently meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets, which include changing curriculum, replacing staff, and closing districts. The sanctions are intended to motivate district leaders to craft policies that will improve teaching and learning and ward off punitive intervention.

The District Context: Westside School District

Westside School District is located in a major metropolitan area. Roughly 80,000 residents comprise the city of Westside. The median household income for Westside families was just under US$42,000 and the per capita income was slightly more than US$11,000, figures that fell significantly lower than the state's figures of US$53,000 and US$23,000, respectively (US Census Bureau, 2000). Many Westside neighborhoods were economically depressed; long swaths of "For Sale" signs stretched down streets, and vacant properties were common sights.

Twenty-one schools comprised the roughly 20,000-student district. Its students were 91% Latino, 1% African American, 4% Asian and 2% White. Forty percent were English learners and 80% qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (CDE, 2007).

Westside's central office was organized in a traditional hierarchy. A five-member board governed the superintendent, who oversaw a deputy superintendent and two assistant superintendents. The office was divided between instruction and business departments; the former managed instructional issues; the latter managed operational matters.

As for test performance, the district continuously met its state API targets. At the time of the study, the district's API was 674, which fell below the state's general goal of 800, but grew steadily enough, along with other indicators (e.g., test participation rates) to forestall being tagged "Program Improvement" according to federal AYP criteria.

Findings

District Leaders' Values and Ideologies

Westside's superintendent came from a military and business career in which highly streamlined, results-oriented experiences shaped his orientation to school change. Although he was skeptical about some aspects of NCLB legislation, he embraced the idea of increasing his number of "proficient" students—those students scoring at or above a designated cut score on the state's standardized test. He also shared that the API served as a helpful monitoring device that could motivate teachers and principals to improve teaching and learning to boost scores.

Board members consistently echoed this bureaucratic orientation. Each cited API goals when asked about the district's priorities. In their eyes, API

targets provided an efficient, results-oriented system around which schools could organize instruction.

Like the superintendent and board members, the deputy superintendent was committed to "constructively engaging" (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2007) with accountability policies, but for different reasons. For her, the system provided a lever for increasing equity in underserved schools. She explained this view:

> I believe that the quality of education that a student receives should not be totally dependent on a particular teacher's experience level or access to materials . . . Content standards finally guarantee that first grade should be first grade whether it's at school X or district Y. They give us a way to guarantee that there is some information that every first grader in the state of California should be taught . . .

In the deputy's eyes, content standards leveled the educational playing field by compensating for disparities in teacher quality and resources. Their associated tests, in her view, revealed "good" schools by uncovering which served all students and where achievement gaps lie. As she put it:

> [The accountability system] gave us a way to . . . say, "What is a good school?" Is a good school when some students succeed or when all students succeed? Can you say it's a great school except our English Learners don't do that well, but everybody else does? . . . It gave us a way to say, "No, you're not a good school. You have to serve everyone."

This quote shows how the deputy's values reflected not just the bureaucratic ideology of the superintendent and board—though she certainly showed an affinity for rational levers like standards and testing—but a moral ideology grounded in concerns about equity and rigor. For her, the system stood to catalyze equitable changes in otherwise complacent schools. She saw hope in the urgency with which schools were compelled to set sights on common goals, and trusted that the focus could bolster efforts to meet traditionally underserved students' needs.

District Leaders' Notions of Good Instruction

When asked what good instruction looked like and for whom, the superintendent and board were agnostic—beyond expectations about standards-alignment. The superintendent explained that he delegated instructional

particulars to his deputy, yet some district staff saw his lack of instructional expertise as problematic. This administrator explained:

> On instruction, . . . there's a lack of expertise when complaints come in, so there's not a filter to judge if the complaint is legitimate. So if the union is complaining about the Small Learning Communities at the high school, he doesn't really understand the reason behind SLCs . . . Then that becomes just another problem with negotiations and he's more likely to want to keep the peace versus pushing what the instructional leadership wants . . .

For this employee, the superintendent's instructional shortcomings were exacerbated by what she viewed as ill-informed, impulsive decision-making and a tendency to conciliate rather than support potentially ambitious, but unpopular instructional changes.

In contrast, the deputy exhibited clearer, stronger instructional standards. School staff regularly cited her high expectations and tenacious approach to change. For example, one of her first policy decisions mandated that all high school students enroll in a full course load each year—a halt to the custom of seniors taking the minimal state-required courses. She explained, "How are they going to meet [college entrance] requirements if they take nothing but physical education (PE) and a couple of blow-off classes that last year? . . . And which ones do you think are going to take the other classes?" For her, the policy promoted more equitable, rigorous education for all students.

Some principals supported the urgency with which the deputy championed such changes and attributed the district's overall performance to her steadfastness, but her proposals often challenged district norms; some found her directives too radical. Here, she recalled the resistance that another equity-oriented policy sparked:

> When I first came here, . . . I said, 'No more fifth and sixth grade general math in high school and no more Everyday Math . . . ' because our kids could do better than that if we changed our attitude. One principal was furious because the teachers came back and said, 'She's making the expectations too high. All the kids are going to flunk.' Their attitude was that these kids can't do it . . . . and that's just infuriating . . . What do you mean that these kids can't do it? I said, 'We're going to do it anyway . . . ' Thank goodness that I had the backing of the superintendent at the time. When the courses weren't offered anymore, they had to do it . . . and there were no more F's than they previously had.

In this case, the deputy's equity-minded values about which students could learn at higher levels conflicted with those of educators accustomed to holding students to different standards, yet the prior superintendent's support buoyed her authority and protected the policies. In the end, the deputy's values about what quality instruction looked like, and for whom, stood out among lower expectations and test-centered goals. Values among central office staff echoed this schism.

A Split Vision: Westside's Fragmented Central Office

Of the 12 central office staff that I interviewed, seven articulated the same rational, bureaucratic instructional vision as the superintendent and board. For them, Westside aimed for all students to "reach proficiency." Woven into this "proficiency vision" was a reliance on state standards and their related testing targets. One administrator was particularly confident in the schools' acceptance of this vision, as she shared here: "We all know what the standards are. We all know what our goal is. We all know that we're working toward all students being proficient and advanced . . . Another administrator reiterated this thinking: "At the district, we want our principals to always be asking, 'Am I getting more proficient students or less?' That's the goal."

Yet, others were less convinced of this unity. Five of the 12 central administrators I spoke to dissented with this "proficiency" vision. This respondent summarized their view:

I think you'll find the dominant way of thinking here in tune with an essentialist view given that we have to meet accountability [goals]. We're focused on . . . curriculum and instructional strategies in line with a Skinnerian approach, scripted teaching that is based more on instructional programs . . . and tests.

She went on to attribute more shallow learning experiences to this dominant orientation:

When you're looking at the accountability system and . . . you use the one-size-fits-all program, . . . students don't maintain the learning . . . [T]hey've not internalized it. The material is not relevant, it's not student-centered and there is no scaffolding of learning.

Another administrator criticized the district vision for emphasizing results over development:

I think we get away from the human element and we look at the product base in this district . . . We've got people here who are product-based . . . and other people who are [asking], "How do I build capacity?"

Like Westside's senior most leaders, its central office staff was also ideologically split. A modest majority was on board with a highly rational, technocratic results-based orientation, but several dissented based on humanistic values about rigor, relevance, and developing capacity.

Competing Values, Competing Policies

Despite this divide, Westside's deputy was tasked with crafting policies for strengthening curriculum, instruction, leadership, and professional learning to meet accountability goals. Yet, normative conflicts and political concessions led to a set of diluted, highly rational policies when teachers' and principals' dismay over certain changes reached the ears of board members and the superintendent. Challenged to reconcile competing demands, the superintendent repeatedly prioritized district harmony over a more ambitious, equity-oriented agenda.

Central office staff often broached the theme of conciliation when reflecting on the superintendent's leadership; several worried that his eagerness to maintain favorable ties with teachers, union officials, and the board went too far. They cited instances in which he opted to mollify constituencies, rather than champion unpopular causes and jeopardize his support. One district official characterized him this way: "He's the type of superintendent that has to see harmony . . . [H]e will always insist that all people . . . are happy with what's happening . . . , which affects how contracts get settled and makes people buy into him." As a result, Westside's chief routinely pressed his deputy to scale back normatively contentious policies, and she obliged.

In what follows, I describe a *sampling* of policies related to curriculum, instruction, instructional leadership, and professional learning on which district leaders compromised and those they preserved, and the reasons that respondents articulated behind each decision. I then aggregate *every* district policy to which respondents referred as being maintained or withdrawn, and distinguish between those intended to foster greater equity or rigor and those that were not.

Compromising an equitable, rigorous curriculum for all students. One of the issues on which the deputy was most vocal during interviews was her staunch position against curricular tracking. When she arrived in the district six years

prior, she found a rigid tracking system in which mainstream and honors classes were reserved for a small minority of students—usually native English speakers and the few non-Latino students. Remedial classes comprised the bulk of the curriculum for the rest. Recently, she had attempted to abolish honors and remedial language arts classes by heterogeneously grouping all students. Arguing that curricular differentiation restricted opportunities for all students to have access to high quality, grade-level content, she proposed an anti-tracking policy that ran up against fierce normative challenges by educators. Teachers, by her account, opposed the policy on the grounds that "the regular textbooks are just too much for many of these students." The deputy explained:

> They think they can't do it, but . . . this is what the curriculum should be for all of them. We've got to have high expectations for all our kids! It doesn't work if we say we're doing it, but only for this group over here, but don't look at our English Learners and don't count these kids . . . They all deserve access to rigorous, standards-based classes!

Principals corroborated her account. All but one described a situation in which they listed heterogeneous classes on the books, but preserved the original tracked ability groups in classrooms, or in which they simply maintained the tracks in their original form. Three of the five I spoke to reasoned that senior teachers would not stand for mixed grouping, as grade-level, standards-based curriculum was too challenging for students not yet fluent in English or who were reading several years behind grade level. "Do you know what would happen if I made [the senior teachers] teach them?" one principal asked. "It's not worth the fight . . . " she lamented. Eliminating tracking represented values about greater access and beliefs that all students were capable of performing at higher levels, which neither teachers nor principals communicated. Rather than incite upheaval among teachers, principals complained to the board. Two board members urged the superintendent to relax the policy, and he urged the deputy to do the same. In the end, the policy was never enforced, and tracking was passively maintained.

In another case, the deputy proposed a policy to prohibit language arts activities that "lacked rigor," in her words. These included read aloud, silent reading, word searches, puzzles, or other cognitively simple activities or games. Her directive drew sharp criticism from a cross-section of teachers, principals, and the union, in part because it equated silent reading and read aloud—practices considered integral to a balanced literacy program—with games, but also because some were reluctant to use more demanding tasks. Here, she defended her directive:

Draw me a continuum with ten being high, very rigorous, and one being low, not rigorous at all. Where do you think word searches would fit on that instructional continuum? What about games or silent reading? If we're trying to get our students to proficiency or better, shouldn't we be on the top end of this continuum . . . ?

Every teacher I interviewed decried the proposal, and union officials staged an aggressive public remonstration, arguing that the policy unjustly curbed teachers' professional authority. This middle school teacher represented the more offended half of those I spoke to about the policy:

Now we're not supposed to read to them. The [central office] just sent out an email saying we can't do silent reading and no read aloud. This is bullshit! They don't fucking read, so I have to read to them . . . ! This district is so fucking out of touch! Look at [the students]!. Just look at them!

This teacher's frustration reveals her beliefs that her students were immutably low skilled and apathetic, and her vehement opposition to a policy that implied they were capable of more. In response to pressure to repeal the policy from the union, two board members, and the superintendent, the deputy conceded. Teachers maintained the practices.

Despite such compromises, Westside preserved several less contentious curricular policies. All schools were required to regularly teach the same standards-aligned, commercial test preparation program and routinely administer its associated tests. State-mandated, standards-aligned textbooks, novels, and intervention programs formed the basis of all schools' curriculum. A scripted writing program, known for its close alignment with California's writing standards and didactic approach to constructing sentences, paragraphs, and essays by filling in blanks, provided a uniform system for teaching writing. Both teachers and principals expressed a passive acceptance of these rational policies for standardizing the curricula (save for a minority of teachers who admitted deviating to use below-grade level materials); rarely did anyone intimate that the policies conflicted with their beliefs or values about students. Thus, policies that aimed for a more redistributive or rigorous curriculum were usually retracted, whereas others endured.

Compromising equitable, rigorous instruction for all students. Westside's central office also sought to roll out specific instructional techniques and routines across schools, some of which required teachers to engage in fairly shallow instructional changes and others that aimed for more challenging,

equity-minded classrooms. Like before, the latter usually proved unpopular among teachers; district leaders habitually retreated from the initiatives in favor of more tolerable ones focused on the least sensitive features of classrooms.

In one case, the deputy introduced a policy that all teachers employ questioning strategies grounded in concepts from language acquisition theory about effective feedback for English learners. The policy proved unpopular; teachers complained informally to board members and formally to union officials that the policy was unnecessary. This teacher explained why the policy conflicted with teachers' judgments about students' skills and needs:

> Why was [the English Learner questioning] even necessary? If most of them are several years behind, how are they going to do it anyway? . . . This isn't what they need, but my principal is supposed to make sure I'm doing it . . .

By the end of the year, the policy was distilled to a mandate that teachers include *any* question during lessons as evidence of "checking for understanding"—a simple activity that did not differentiate between English learners and the others and that provoked no resistance.

Authentic writing assessments represented another point of contention between the deputy and others within the district. A cross-section of teachers criticized the tests; they cited a lack of instructional time to create opportunities for authentic writing, students' inability to produce grade-level appropriate compositions, and the futility of scoring rubrics that were too demanding and yielded unconstructive information because few students were capable of passing the tests. Several board members supported teachers' views and pressed the superintendent to eliminate the requirements. The deputy recalled the pressure:

> Now we're looking at cutting . . . our local assessments. [The superintendent] said, '[T]here's too much testing. I don't want anymore testing,' because [teachers] went to the board . . . I said, 'Please, don't make me do things that are not sound instructionally.' They're going to hurt our kids . . . but, there was pressure from a group of teachers and the board saying that we have too much testing.

In the end, the instruction department eliminated the authentic writing assessment.

Still, less ambitious instructional policies aimed at greater efficiency endured. The district distributed laptops and computerized whiteboards to

use in every class. All teachers were required to monitor reading comprehension with a computer program. All were expected to teach from bell-to-bell, or throughout an entire period, as well as to post student work on walls. And all were required to routinely post lesson standards and objectives in clear view. Ultimately, Westside's administrators settled on a set of mild instructional mandates that stirred up little or no normative conflict, but that also skirted attempts at more challenging or equitable instruction.

Compromising rigorous, equitable instructional leadership. Westside's deputy also tried out a series of policies for cultivating instructional leadership among principals, though the previous pattern continued. Teacher evaluation rubrics represented one embryonic policy lever that was never realized. In this case, principals developed diagnostic tools for formatively evaluating teachers, guided by the California Standards for the Teaching Profession and that included criteria for instructional delivery, room environment, and the like. Once district administrators announced that the tools would guide classroom visits, teachers complained vociferously to union officials and board members, who eventually counseled the superintendent to discard the rubrics; after months of principal input, the central office abandoned the tools. This principal recounted the district's policy reversal:

> They told us to start using them and then we got this email two days later that said not to use them, to throw them away, and to shred them! . . . [M]any principals feel like the district is being wimpy and they're not supporting us . . . They won't stand up to [teachers or the union] or stand behind us when we need it . . . [T]here's nothing that says we can't evaluate teachers intermittently besides the formal evaluation process . . . I could've really used them with some of my staff.

In her view, the concessions hampered her ability to formatively evaluate and support teachers.

In another case, principal coaching conferences, originally conceived of as opportunities for in-depth coaching, mentoring, and supervision by the deputy and assistant superintendents, were reduced to brief check-in meetings after some principals complained to board members about them. Whereas some principals coached by the deputy found the conferences helpful, others were uneasy with her intensity. At the same time, those coached by the assistant superintendent found the coaching to be unconstructive. This principal explained the tension:

> [The deputy] would spend three hours with a principal going into every room, looking at student work, giving him feedback, talking about

personnel, setting up goals, and [the assistant] would buzz through every classroom. She would say, "good job, everything's a good job," and not have any meaningful discussion about instruction.

Every board member I interviewed interpreted the complaints as signs of the deputy's unrealistically high expectations for principals. They urged the superintendent to eliminate the coaching, and the meetings were cut to short, infrequent check-ins with no classroom visits.

These setbacks notwithstanding, more innocuous, managerial leadership policies still survived. Teacher evaluations were limited to minimal, state-mandated evaluations every two to five years. Principals were to hold monthly data meetings in which teachers analyzed test data to identify "focus students"—students whose movement toward testing "proficiency" would maximize gains on state accountability indicators. The students were to receive specialized instruction, but the lists were an empty mandate; principals and teachers reported no follow-up for the students. Westside's policy levers for investing in instructional leadership went the way of other policies: leaders protected policies that provoked the fewest normative challenges and repeatedly threw out ones that aimed for higher standards, expectations, or norms.

Compromising equitable, rigorous professional learning. Finally, Westside's administrators attempted to regulate professional learning, though here, too, district leaders found themselves exchanging contentious policies for widely tolerated ones. One compromise included teacher professional development. One of the instruction department's goals was to develop an ongoing system of professional learning that was intended to dispense with the dominant "workshop approach" in exchange for more cumulative learning grounded in regular, communal planning, instructional modeling, reflection, professional reading, and coaching. Many central office staff reasoned that they could not adequately design such a system within the mere three student-free days that presently existed and requested that the district increase the contractual number of student-free days. Each time the proposal was on the table during union negotiations—the conventional settings for crafting such changes to teachers' contracts—the superintendent was expected to secure more student-free days in return for hefty teacher raises, yet each time he granted raises without requesting the contractual changes. The deputy described the concessions this way:

I wanted more student-free days because professional development is so important, and to try to do it all after school and pay teachers on Saturdays is unfair . . . But I was told, no, I can't go there . . . [H]e gives

in. He told me, 'No, I don't want to go there. I don't want any contro-
versy. I just want this to go smoothly.' So it's peace at all costs . . .
without regard to instruction.

In this case, the deputy's values about professional learning conflicted
with the superintendent's desire to maintain peace with teachers and the
union. In her view, the district's political harmony trumped teachers' learning
needs.

Professional learning policies that were tolerated were restricted to mini-
mal trainings to standardize or align teachers' instruction. One example
included a district workshop for training teachers to implement the manda-
tory, highly scripted, standards-aligned writing program in which facilitators
familiarized teachers with worksheets on which students would write por-
tions of sentences and paragraphs until they amassed a collection of work-
sheets that amounted to an essay. Another regular in-service the district
preserved was the state-mandated training in California's standards-aligned
materials for new teachers. The central office also maintained weekly com-
mon meeting times in which teachers met to review state or district test data
or align curriculum with standards. In the end, the fate of Westside's profes-
sional learning policies turned out like the rest: most with the potential to
effectuate more ambitious change were lost in the test of wills between the
deputy, the superintendent, and the bloc of board members and teachers.

Mediating peace at all costs: Compromising equity and rigor. The aggregate of
Westside's political compromises was a set of rational, bureaucratic instructional
policies for regulating normatively tolerable changes that did not challenge the
status quo among principals or teachers. Attempts at equity-oriented, rigorous
changes were routinely squelched to maintain harmony between the superinten-
dent or deputy and school staff. Table 1 distinguishes between those policies that
were intended to foster greater equity or rigor and those that were not. It shows
how the bulk of the policies which endured targeted simple, rational practices that
were neither explicitly redistributive, nor rigorous in nature.

At the end of the day, the superintendent's political calculations drove him
to settle on a policy agenda that fell within the parameters of educators' values
and norms about teaching and students, or within the district's zone of media-
tion. Policies that fell outside of this normative zone were almost universally
prohibited. The result was a rational, bureaucratic policy system that most of
Westside's staff could tolerate, and that resembled several of the exemplary
districts highlighted in the district effectiveness literature. The final policies
closely aligned curriculum with state standards and testing; fostered more stan-
dardized, orderly classrooms; focused principals on minimal requirements for

Table 1. Westside's Instructional Policies, by Equity and Rigor.

	Status quo, simple	Equity-oriented, rigorous
Curriculum	• Standards-aligned core textbooks and novels[a] • Standards-aligned intervention programs[a] • Writing for Excellence writing program • Test preparation program aligned with state test • Test preparation program's benchmark assessments • *Instructional guides*	• *Elimination of curricular tracking* • *Elimination of instructional games (e.g., word searches), silent reading, and read aloud*
Instruction	• Computerized white board in all classrooms • Laptops for instruction for every teacher • Computerized reading comprehension test program • Bell-to-bell instruction • Posted student work • Checking for understanding • Lesson objectives posted in classrooms • State standards posted in classrooms	• *English Learner questioning strategies* • *Authentic writing assessments* • *Theory-based instructional techniques*
Instructional leadership	• Evaluations of teachers every two-five years[a] • Data team meetings to identify "focus" students • *Principal accountability plans*	• *Principal coaching meetings* • *Formative teacher evaluation rubrics* • *Principal classroom observations*
Professional learning	• Teacher in-service in scripted writing program • Teacher in-service in standards-aligned textbooks • Principal in-service: Using data to get more from core programs[b] • Weekly common meeting time	• *Principal professional development* • *Principal sharing breakfast meetings* • *Principal peer groups* • *Expanded teacher learning days* • Teacher in-service: Beyond standards, writing with rigor[b]

Note: *Italic* font = policies that district leaders abandoned or did not enforce
Regular font = policies that district leaders maintained in their original form
[a]Required by state; [b]One-time professional development session (no follow-up)

judging effectiveness; and trained teachers in standards-based materials—all policies that fell within the boundaries of most educators' values. Policies that challenged principal and teacher norms about how to equitably distribute

resources or opportunities, which students were capable of achieving at high levels, or what type of learning was required to lead more ambitious improvements were steadily scaled back or unenforced.

Discussion

This in-depth case study examines how central office and school staff's values and ideologies shape urban district instructional policies. The analysis suggests at least three major findings. First, patterns in this case show how urban district leaders' attempts to craft equity-oriented, ambitious instructional policies were eclipsed by normative schisms among central office leaders, teachers, and principals. Second, the case shows how a district mediated between both macro-level policy and political trends and micro-level, localized enactments of these trends. Finally, the case illustrates *why* urban district leaders designed a set of instructional policies that resembled those highlighted in research on effective districts, but that dispensed with equity-oriented, rigorous challenges to the status quo. In what follows, I discuss the implications of these findings for research on urban district reform and educational policy formation. I close by considering implications for policy and practice.

Implications for Research

These findings extend the literature on urban district reform by showing how district leaders who attempted to create equity-oriented, rigorous instructional policies were not crafting normatively neutral mechanisms of change. Patterns in Westside show how equity-minded district leaders roused potent resistance by principals, teachers, and others in the district who did not feel normatively or ideologically aligned with their proposed policies. More specifically, these findings show how urban district leaders created instructional policies within locally and globally constructed zones of mediation that blended micro-level, local values with macro-level, political and economic forces. The case is an example of how individuals' values about what good instruction looks like and for whom, interacted with large-scale trends toward adopting business practices in the social sector.

Since the turn of the century, U.S. public schools have assumed ideas and techniques grounded in a business ideology about the purposes of schooling and the most effective means of achieving those purposes

(Callahan, 1962). Since the era of the administrative progressives, political and economic pressures have compelled educators to adopt business practices grounded in rational values of productivity, efficiency, and competition (Tyack, 1974). These norms have endured in both business and education, as corporate elites have shaped school procedures with respect to curriculum, assessment, instructional routines, leadership models, and teachers' professional autonomy. This dynamic is reflected in public schools' reliance on highly rational routines like standardized testing, increased technology, objectives-based planning, performance-based monitoring, data-driven decision-making, and organizational alignment (Cuban, 2004).

Districts, as intermediaries between the state and schools, have historically channeled these corporate practices down to principals and teachers, despite fluctuations in districts' centrality to school improvement efforts (Tyack, 2002). Thus, districts act as mediating institutions in which individuals' values about what constitutes good instruction and for whom, interact with collective political or economic calls to take up rational, bureaucratic practices inside schools. Today's high-stakes accountability policies represent the most recent iteration of this mediation; they place districts at the nexus of multiple provisions for testing and standards.

In Westside's case, principals' and teachers' responses to proposed or recently implemented policies repeatedly underscored the degree to which they had internalized the highly rational values underlying national high-stakes accountability policies and the broader business logic that has historically shaped public school processes. And their repeated nullification of policies grounded in values of equity and ambitious instructional aims revealed the boundaries of their tolerance for change. Policies that hovered within the upper limits of Westside's zone of mediation focused on simple, bureaucratic changes that preserved the status quo and mirrored the rational, market-based ideology that drives business. These policies included a heavy reliance on testing, standardization, alignment, simple evaluation and monitoring, and cursory data review. Policies that fell below the lower limit of the district's zone of mediation targeted redistributive, equity-oriented practices that represented humanistic ideologies. These included policies for eliminating tracking, increasing instructional rigor for all students, cultivating teaching strategies specific to English Learners, and fostering in-depth, ongoing professional learning. Such patterns illuminate how the boundaries of Westside's zone of mediation were shaped by local and national forces.

These findings also contribute to studies of urban district reform in that they highlight the political dimensions of top-down district change efforts. In one sense, Westside's narrative lends support to research which suggests that top-down policies centered on standards-alignment and state testing can prove to be a viable strategy for district leaders hoping to endure state accountability pressures. However, this case shows how bottom-up, school-level resistance triggers political pressure for leaders to regulate only the most superficial, least sensitive features of instruction. As such, details of urban district instructional policies may be subject to negotiations that are not necessarily explained by instructional or organizational forces, but by political ones. Products of negotiations represent arrangements on which constituencies are willing to meet each other halfway; they are, by their nature, compromises. Consequently, top-down district instructional policies, as products of political negotiation, may contain inherently weakened directives about curriculum, instruction, leadership, or professional learning. Studies that concentrate narrowly on the technical implementation of these top-down policies or their effects on test scores overlook a key factor in their design. Their conclusions may discount the political forces that compel district leaders to trade controversial, top-down policies for challenging the status quo for top-down policies that minimally prompt continuous growth on state tests; they may overestimate the potential of "effective" district policies as catalysts for fundamental changes in teaching and learning; and they may fail to explain why these policies flounder on more ambitious, equitable goals for improvement.

Finally, although this case study is not designed to generalize to other cases of urban district instructional formation, it does contribute a case of district policymaking that mirrors the broader political and cultural policymaking climate. In this way, this case study complements the literature on educational policy formation by showing how a district's policymaking process can be representative of larger political and cultural trends. In the wake of federal No Child Left Behind (and, more recently, Race to the Top) policies, educational reforms have assumed a decidedly more conservative character (Ylimaki, 2011). Both neoliberal and neoconservative discourse on accountability, results, competition, and standardization have become commonplace (Kumashiro, 2008). Federal and state sanctions and rewards hold districts and schools to account for standardized test performance with consequences that infuse highly rational, corporate-style responses to "failure"—conversion to a charter status, restaffing and restructuring, handing over management authority, and even full closure. Grounded in conservative ideologies that embrace a prominent role for privatization in public education,

these policies represent a retraction from equity-based reforms in that they promote exceedingly narrow purposes of education for districts that serve high numbers of children of color and poor children—the populations who traditionally score low on standardized tests. In such districts, testing demands limit the purposes of education to primarily economic ones—the cultivation of basic, standardized skills that are measured by tests and presumed to prepare students for the workplace. Through their emphasis on efficiency and measurable effects, these reductive goals detract from more humanistic purposes of education, like fostering civic engagement, relationship-building, or critical thinking. Thus, the dilemmas in this district illuminate how broader conservative politics can intensify existing inequities in districts that serve historically marginalized communities by furthering policies that promote narrowly economic purposes of schooling.

Implications for Policy and Practice

These findings also demonstrate how urban district leaders can respond to state and federal accountability pressures by crafting policies that produce a coherent, standards-aligned system which adequately bumps up scores and avoids sanctions. However, these policies may do little more. Westside's political strategy of appeasement was effective by state indicators, but when an equity-minded district leader tried to use accountability policies to catalyze changes aimed at broader social goals, her proposals clashed with dominant norms in the district. The upshot of the political resistance and habitual scaling back of ideologically unpopular policies was the reinforcement of safer, less ambitious instructional policies for the district's students.

These patterns teach us that equity-minded district leaders do not only mediate broader policy messages. They mediate their district's specific contextual conditions. In Westside's context, dominant norms and values about what constitutes appropriate instruction and for whom, were of a highly rational, bureaucratic character. These conditions constrained an individual leader's efforts to equitably redistribute resources and opportunities and increase rigor for all students. Yet in another context, one in which more educators, administrators, board members, or a superintendent shared more humanistic values about teaching and learning, an equity-minded leader may be more likely to enact challenges to the status quo. Thus, equity-minded district leaders who communicate more than present policy expectations, and who instead *model, make explicit,* and *nurture* values about teaching and learning beyond than those conveyed by present accountability policies, may be more apt to facilitate contextual conditions that favor more equitable, rigorous instructional policies.

Leadership preparation programs can develop such equity-minded district leaders by examining the nonneutral contexts within which leaders craft instructional policies. Such analyses can equip future leaders with concrete tools for addressing the normative dimensions of reforms. Likewise, preparation programs that cultivate leaders' ability to distinguish between minimally effective instructional policies for standards-alignment and more equitable, redistributive policies for interrupting historical patterns of under-performance may prime a new generation of equity-minded leaders to aim for the latter when crafting district instructional policies for urban students.

Appendix

Preliminary Interview Questions for Central Office Staff, Principals, or Teachers

District/School Organization. How is the district/your school organized (departments, responsibilities, divisions)?
Who is responsible for securing and/or allocating resources for schools? What do they do?
Who is responsible for curricular and instructional decision-making? What do they do?
Who is responsible for developing/overseeing district assessments? What do they do?
Who plans and sets district-wide goals? How does this process work? What do they do?
Who is responsible for analyzing data? What do they do? What kind of data do they use?
Who is responsible for developing and/or implementing professional development? What do they do?
Who is responsible for working with school site administrators? What do they do?

District Characteristics and Capacity. How would you describe your role in the district/school?
What successes and challenges have you encountered in your efforts to help improve your district/school?
How would you describe the teachers in this district/your school?
Who participates in district decision-making? Who plays key leadership roles—formal or informal?
How are district policies made? Can you share an example?

Where do parents or community members fit in the district's/school's activities?

What role does the county play? External consultants? How?

Improvement Goals and Strategies. How do you think the district/your school is doing right now?

To what do you attribute the district's/your school's recent test scores?

How does the district/your school organize its English language arts curriculum? What materials are used?

What improvement strategies has the district/your school tried?

Are there particular milestones that you think distinguish the district's/your school's development?

What instructional goals would you say the district has for its schools?

What instructional goals do you have for the district's schools/your school?

What instructional goals do you have for your teachers/yourself?

What instructional goals do you have for your students?

District History. How has the district changed, if at all, over the past five years?

What changed over time?

How did these changes come about?

Attitudes toward Testing and Accountability. What role does testing play in your district? State standards?

What role has API or AYP played in the district?

District Role in Instruction, Curriculum, Monitoring, and Professional Learning. How much flexibility do teachers you have in planning English language arts lessons?

Are teachers encouraged to teach in a particular way? How?

What role does the district play in:

. . . language arts lesson planning?

. . . curriculum?

. . . instruction?

. . . classroom assessments or benchmarks?

. . . professional development?

How does the district communicate its expectations to you?

What do you think are the pros and cons of [the district's expectations]?

To what degree do you carry out [the district's expectations] in your classroom?

What else influences your instruction?

Who follows what happens in your classroom?

What would a classroom look like in which [specify the district's expectation] is being implemented?

(For principals) What would it take to get a teacher to do this?

What is different about teaching [according to the district's expectations] than teaching another way?

Are [specify the district's expectations] important for students? Why?

What would a student learn by being taught according to [specify the district's expectations]? Is this different from how s/he would be learning otherwise? How?

What does it mean for a teacher to be doing [specify the district's expectations] well?

What is your sense of how much [specify the district's expectations] have permeated your school? How do you know? Why do you think this is the case?

What kinds of support or information or professional development might teachers need to do more [specify the district's expectations] in their language arts teaching?

What has the district done to get teachers to work toward [specify the district's expectations]?

What kind of professional learning do you feel principals need? Why?

What kind of professional learning does the district provide?

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Note

1. I use pseudonyms for all names to protect the confidentiality of the district and individual participants.

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