Superintendents as Policy Makers: How District Leaders Interpret and Implement State Level Policy

Dissertation

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Abstract

This study analyzed the process of state policy interpretation and implementation by a large public school district. It used Ohio’s Credit Flex policy as a lens to examine how district leaders make decisions about how to craft and implement Credit Flex policy, how the existing contexts and policy ecologies influenced the fidelity to the policy aims, and how policy actors interpreted policy and influenced the policy implementation process at the local district and school-building level. Data was collected through document analysis and interviews. Document analysis was conducted using state-level policy documents and school-district documents detailing their Credit Flex policy. Interviews were conducted with members of the original state policy committee, and with the district superintendent, building leaders, and school counselors. This study aimed to provide insight into the policy implementation process for school district leaders. Additionally, this study highlighted practices in policy implementation that could yield successful management of policy actors and policy contexts so that policies are implemented with high amounts of fidelity to their original policy goals.
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Fields of Study

Major Field: Education: Educational Policy and Leadership
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Chapter 1: Credit Flexibility in Ohio

The policies of an organization are the guiding principles that drive the operations. Policies that exist in organizations are frequently created at the management level, or even at the state or federal level. Then policies are passed down to the lower levels of the organization to the people who will actually be responsible for crafting and implementing the policies. Public schools in Ohio are no exception to the process of policy creation that happens at the top levels of government, and the process of policy interpretation and implementation that happens at the local level (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Honig, 2006b; Odden, 1991; Young & Lewis, 2015).

Superintendents, school boards, and central office personnel receive policies from local, state, and federal governments that must be implemented in school districts. Although school superintendents are employees of school boards, and school boards are the governing body that actually approves and makes policies official, superintendents of school districts play a key role in policy making (Heifetz, 2006; Honig, 2006b; Odden, 1991). Most policy interpretation and negotiation in school districts happens before the school board votes to make a policy official, and most school superintendents are heavily involved, or sometimes even lead, the policy interpretation and negotiation process with the school board and other relevant parties (Heifetz, 2006; Honig, 2006b; Odden, 1991).
Once superintendents and school boards have made decisions about the “what” and the “why” of policy, the school personnel at the building level are tasked with the “how” of implementing the policies adopted (Heifetz, 2006; Honig, 2006b; Odden, 1991).

Superintendents are the liaison between school building personnel and the school board. In each school building community, there are several groups who are affected by policies passed by legislators and/or those adopted by the school board. These school board policies could be as low stakes as a dress code policy or a student cell phone policy. However, these policies could be as high stakes as a policy for graduation requirements, a policy about professional licensure, or a policy about spending or financial reporting. At the school-building level, teachers, guidance counselors, community members, parents, and students could all be affected by policy decisions made by superintendents, school boards, and legislators.

These complex policy environments are the focus of this study. The aim of this study is to analyze the multifaceted process of state policy interpretation and implementation by a large public school district. This research examines the role of the superintendent and other school district actors in translating and implementing policy. This study started with interviews of state level policy makers to uncover the original policy intent, and continued with investigation into how superintendents come to understand state policy and subsequently implement state policy in a school district. With a close look at policy implementation across multiple schools in a single school district, this project brings to the surface the factors that influence the degree of fidelity in policy implementation throughout the district.
Credit Flexibility Policy in Ohio

In 2009 in Ohio, school superintendents were faced with a new policy requirement passed along to them by the State Board of Education. In March of 2009, the State Board of Education in Ohio adopted “Credit Flex” as a part of the Ohio Core portion of Senate Bill 311 (SB311). The Ohio Core increased the number of credits students needed to graduate from high school in Ohio, and included a mandate that school districts must provide students with alternative methods—besides the Carnegie Unit—to earn credits. According to the Ohio Department of Education’s page dedicated to Ohio’s Credit Flexibility Plan, the policy specifically states that students must be able to “earn units of high-school credit based on a demonstration of subject area competency, instead of or in combination with completing hours of classroom instruction” (Ohio Department of Education, n.d.-a).

The mandate specified that school boards must provide methods for students to earn high-school credits beyond the options that previously existed, which were dominated by the Carnegie Unit. When the policy was adopted, the guidance provided by Ohio’s Department of Education was minimal: districts were given a one-page, 13-bullet-point information sheet. The options provided by the State were broad and unrestrictive. They allowed districts freedom and flexibility to craft options that fit the needs and desires of their local constituents. The options as they are listed on the credit flexibility plan section of the ODE website are:

- Completing coursework
- Testing out of or demonstrating mastery of course content
• Pursuing one or more “educational options” (e.g., distance learning, educational travel, independent study, an internship, music, arts, after-school/tutorial program, community service or other engagement in projects and sports).

Given the newness of the policy, and the amount of freedom provided to districts to make their own credit flex plans, there is great opportunity to study how districts created their credit flex plans, and how individuals in the district are implementing the plan. There are ethical issues to consider, unintended consequences to examine (Jian, 2007; Merton, 1936; Norton, 2008; Roots, 2004), and policy implementation plans to study (Coburn, 2016; Honig, 2006a; Odden, 1991; Young & Lewis, 2015).

The policy adoption stage for the implementation of the Credit Flex portion of SB311 was phased over a 3-year period. SB311 passed the General Assembly and was effective in April of 2007. A design team was formed by the Ohio Department of Education in 2008. The design team was tasked with developing policy recommendations for the State Board of Education to adopt in 2009. After the State Board adopted the policy, local boards were forced to adopt the policy and to develop implementation strategies at the local level for the 2010-2011 school year (Ohio Department of Education, n.d.-a).

The Evolution of the School Superintendent: From Simple to Complex

The role of the top decision maker in a school district—the superintendent—has evolved over time. Once hired as simply part-time employees with limited responsibilities, superintendents of today’s school districts are essential to a school district’s operations. The responsibilities of today’s superintendents include leading
schools towards high levels of student achievement and student growth; managing facilities, media relations, and fundraising; balancing budgets, and interpreting and implementing policy (Heifetz, 2006b; Honig, 2003; Ohio Department of Education, n.d.-b). Wolfe (1988) asserts that the expectations of superintendents have evolved because they are influenced by the cultural dynamics at work in the local context during the time of the superintendency.

Describing the role of the first school superintendent hired in 1837 in Buffalo, NY as a “part-time educational evangelist,” Wolfe (1988) traces the progression of the superintendent over time into that of an efficient manager, further progressing into a leader who is expected to be an expert in politics and public relations and is also expected to be an expert in teaching and learning (p. 9). Of the many roles that they play, the political work often proves most challenging for superintendents. Heifetz (2006b) says that, because of the political environments in today’s education systems, “school superintendents may have the hardest government job in America” (p. 512). Given that most school superintendents started their careers as schoolteachers, and not as politicians, it should surprise no one that the political arena proves challenging for them.

As the role of the superintendent evolves into that of that of policy maker, policy implementer, and policy evaluator, the previous role expectations remain. The superintendent who was hired as an expert in teaching and learning is also expected to have strong skill sets in efficient management and expertise in politics and public relations. Honig (2003) asserts that the demands on superintendents and central-office staff have become more complex than before.
According to Honig (2003), past requests placed on central-office staff were simple; historically, central-office personnel were asked to monitor schools' compliance with single-sector policies. Now policy demands on central-office staffs of public school districts are evolving and growing more complex (Honig, 2003). In contrast to previously single-focused policies that required monitoring, more recent requests have involved policies that include the involvement of multiple partners and complex, multi-faceted patterns of flow. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) argue that adaptive leadership is necessary to effectively navigate the intricacies of today’s school policy environment. The ability to redefine and reshape the work of the people in an organization is key to successful navigation of shifting political environments. Successful superintendents practice the multidimensional task of adaptive leadership.

The Public School Superintendency in Ohio

The complexities of the role of the school superintendent are evidenced in Ohio’s model superintendent evaluation plan, which was developed by the Ohio Department of Education in 2009. This sample plan includes job descriptions that districts can use to post job openings and a sample timeline for a board and superintendent to use for the evaluation process. The sample plan also includes five standards that they offer as guidelines for superintendent performance. The 5 standards are (1) vision, continuous improvement and focus of district work; (2) communication and collaboration; (3) policies and governance; (4) instruction; and (5) resources (Ohio Department of Education, n.d.-b).
The superintendents’ role in policymaking and governance is listed as a specific metric in the model evaluation plan. Ohio’s sample evaluation plan articulates an emphasis on the superintendent’s role in policymaking, policy implementing, and policy evaluating. In the policy and governance metric of Ohio’s superintendent evaluation system, it is stated that superintendents will “review, develop, and recommend” effective district policies. Additionally, Ohio’s plan calls for the superintendent to “implement and continually assess policies and practices.” Ohio’s evaluation plan also articulates that superintendents should implement and evaluate policies that “maximize student achievement” (Ohio Department of Education, n.d.-b).

Superintendents as Policy Makers

Simple recognition on the part of the superintendents that he or she will need to craft, implement, and revise policies as part of their employment activities is not a guarantee that policies that are crafted and implemented will result in the desired outcomes. Heifetz (2006a) asserts that many school superintendents “underestimate the need to think politically” (p. 512). While they might correctly determine which resources are needed to solve problems and craft policies, they frequently do not build the necessary consensus among the policy implementers to actually implement with fidelity.

Implementation of policy is a task that is influenced by factors both in and outside of an organization (Coburn, 2005b; Honig, 2009; Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014). Even if superintendents craft policies that are well-designed, devise implementation strategies that lead to faithfulness of policy implementation, and employ evaluation tools that provide meaningful feedback, there is no assurance that the result will be policies that are
implemented with fidelity. Furthermore, simply following the steps of the policy cycle does not guarantee that the original aims of the policy will be achieved (Honig, 2003; Heifetz, 2006b; Odden, 1991, Wolfe, 1988).

Factors Affecting Policy Fidelity and Policy Variance During Implementation

The evolving role of the superintendent requires that superintendents have a working knowledge about the policy process and accurate perceptions of the policy environments in which they are working. Weaver-Hightower (2008) argues that policies are in and of themselves political; they are complex. He proposes that educational policies are most appropriately conceptualized using the metaphor of ecologies to demonstrate the complexities and interdependencies that are at play during the policy process. Weaver-Hightower asserts that policy ecologies exist in every environment that receives policies. Studying the "international, national, regional, and local dynamics" of the environment where a policy is being implemented could provide insight into how/when/where to intervene in the policy process (Weaver-Hightower, 2008, p. 2).

Once a superintendent makes a policy, the implementation phase begins. Even in the most thoughtfully designed policies, there are many opportunities for the intended policy outcomes to go astray. In their work on effective policy implementation, Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980) argue that implementation is a critical stage of the policy cycle. Frequently, implementation is the part of the process where policy initiatives become skewed (Jian, 2007; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980). It is common for there to be a discrepancy between what the policymakers intended and what the actual policy implementation looks like—there is variance. The variance that exists in policy
implementation allows for the policy implementers to personalize the implementation process to meet the needs at the local level—the cost of this variance is that the possibility exists for the original policy initiatives to become diluted (Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980). Flawed implementation processes can result in effects that diverge from the policy’s original intentions and often lead to failure.

Policy Actors in Educational Environments

Within each organization, there are actors who are involved in policy translation and application. Actors at the ground level (i.e. street-level bureaucrats) employ discretion to make decisions about enactment of the policies of the organization (Elmore, 1979; Maupin, 1993; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). In public schools, teachers are commonly recognized as street-level bureaucrats, while central office-staff are recognized as the upper level of the organization that passes policies down to school buildings and uses their resources to stifle local discretion and increase notions of centralized knowledge and expertise (Honig, 2003).

Superintendents must accept that each educational policy that is implemented—at every level (i.e., state, federal, and local)—undergoes a complex mediation process at the classroom, schoolhouse, and district that influences the how the policy is actually implemented. The policy recipients in each context (i.e., principals, counselors, teachers, parents, and students) have the potential to develop his or her own interpretive schemes and margins of maneuver. One group in particular, school building leaders, because of their position between the district office and the teachers, are influential parts of the sense-making process (Spillane et al., 2002).
Unintended Consequences

Developing an understanding of the system and non-system actors and following the policy cycle does not guarantee that policy outcomes will reflect the initial policy aims. Effects of the policy that were not anticipated by the policy makers often occur. In the literature, these unanticipated effects are frequently labeled unintended consequences (Jian, 2007; Merton, 1936; Norton, 2008; Vernon, 1979).

The notion of unintended consequences—the idea that the actions of people and governments all have unanticipated or unintended effects—is an element of policies that are widely acknowledged, frequently discussed, but rarely codified or defined. (Jian, 2007; Merton, 1936; Norton, 2008; Vernon, 1979). The unanticipated consequences that arise from policies and actions are varied, and are frequently unpredictable.

Each policy that exists in schools has potential unintended consequences and is also subject to the implementation practices and interpretations of the individuals at the building level who are operating the school and making the day-to-day decisions. Personnel at the school building are making meaning of policies in a dynamic, shifting environment—frequently with limited information (Spillane et al., 2002).

Purpose of this study

Superintendents make decisions to craft and distribute policies (and revisions to policies) multiple times in a year. This study uses Ohio’s Credit Flex policy as a lens to examine how district leaders made decisions in crafting and implementing the policy from the abstract to the concrete, how the existing contexts and policy ecologies influenced the fidelity to the policy aims, and how policy actors interpreted policy and
influenced the implementation process at the local district and school-building level. This study will provide insight into the policy implementation process for school district leaders.

This study of the policy implementation process, the influence of policy ecologies, and roles of policy actors will highlight issues in policy implementation, and will identify some potential approaches for superintendents to consider as they act as policy makers in their districts. Additionally, this study highlights promising practices in policy implementation and successful management of policy actors and policy contexts so that policies are implemented with high degrees of fidelity to their original goals. This study will also provide insights for policy makers as they consider topics like guidance for implementation, and ongoing evaluation and assessment of policy. Finally, this study contributes to the literature about the role of the superintendent as a policy maker, about the intersection of state level policy and local school district implementation, and about informal networks in school districts.

Preview of this study

The Norman City School District (pseudonym) has a total enrollment of around 7,000 students, and their high school is structured into four separate academies. Each academy has its own college/career focus, and its own building leader. The academies operate with some degree of autonomy. They are each under the direction of the school board and the superintendent, but each building principal has authority to direct the use of personnel and fiscal resources as she or he likes (Norman City Schools, n.d.).
This research attempts to answer the following questions: “How does policy interpretation between local schools and the state Department of Education happen, and what are the factors that influence the degree of fidelity to the policy as it is implemented?” How has the policy evolved since its initial implementation?

Methodology

Given that the goal of the study is to understand the ways the target groups of Credit Flex constructed their understanding of the policy and how they implemented their perceptions in their specific contexts, the research paradigm that is most appropriate to a study of a district’s policy implementation of credit flex and its interpretation and implementation is a qualitative study. Glesne (2006) argues that a qualitative study is one that “seeks to understand and interpret” how the research participants constructed their reality. She says that if the purpose of the research is to develop understanding, contextualization, and interpretation, then a qualitative study is the appropriate choice. In contrast (according to Glesne, 2006), a quantitative study seeks to generalize, predict, and provide causal correlations.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) offer that qualitative research is a “situated activity that locates the observer in the world” in which the researcher engages in research practices that “make the world visible” and “transform the world” (p 3). To study policy interpretation and implementation differences in high schools, the research was situated in high schools. Specifically, research occurred in the central office of the school district where the Credit Flex policy language for the district was crafted and disseminated, and
the research also occurred in the high-school buildings where the Credit Flex policy is being deployed with and to students, teachers, and families.

The specific methodology of this study is a case study methodology. Case studies are best used in research studies that seek the answer the questions how or why (Gilson, 2012; Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2009). This study is well-suited for a case study methodology because the research questions are driven by the how and why of the credit flexibility initiative at the state level, and this study is also concerned with the how and the why of credit flexibility state policy interpretation and implementation at the local school district level.

Other components of case study research are that the researcher does not have control of the events that are being studied, and the events that are being studied are happening in a real-life, contemporary setting (Gilson, 2012; Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2009). In this study, I did not attempt to manage the behavior of the research participants, instead I attempted to uncover the behavior, understand the motivation for the behavior, and then consider how the motivation and behaviors impacted the policy implementation.

The number of contexts, cases, and units of analysis are the factors that determine the type of case study used (Gilson, 2012; Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2009). This study involved multiple contexts and multiple actors involved in this case study make this study an embedded, multiple case study. Since the goal of this study is to understand how the policy actors at the school building level interpreted the policies of about Credit Flex that were determined at their district level, a deep understanding of the local context will be
critical to developing a thorough analysis of the path of the Credit Flex policy from the state level to the building level.

Qualitative methods provide opportunity to develop a robust understanding of each participant’s construction of reality and how the circumstances of each research site contributed to the local policies about Credit Flex. By studying the policy recipients and policy creators in each of their constructed realities, I will be able to more effectively make each of those worlds visible to the broader audience of school district policy makers. Illuminating the realities of policy actors at the school building level will inform the perspective of policy makers both at the central office, and at the state level as new policies are passed down.

Limitations

This study has limitations that result from study design, and from methodologies used to collect and analyze data. As a qualitative study, this project is not designed to survey large numbers of individuals and develop generalizations regarding a specific data point (Glesne, 2006; Yin, 2009). Instead, this study is designed to uncover the behaviors and underlying motivations of policy actors at the level of school district implementation, and then compare those behaviors and motivations with the motivations and intended policy aims of school district and state level policy makers. This study strives to present a deep analysis of a specific situation that will provide insight into the logic, drive, and decisions of policy actors at various levels.

Another limitation is that this case study is designed to examine a single policy interpretation and implementation. Policy makers and school districts are faced with
multiple policy interpretation and implementation decisions every year. It is possible that
the issues identified in this study about Credit Flexibility Policy are unique to that policy.

Conclusion

This study is designed to provide a close look at a policy implementation in a school district. In order to do that, this study began with several interviews with state level policy makers who crafted a new policy for schools in Ohio. The opportunity to examine the initial policy aims of a new policy in a state is a unique chance to uncover how policy was made, and what the hope were for policy implementation.

The second and third phases of this study provide an in depth examination and analysis of how that state level policy was interpreted and implemented in a school district. These parts of the study uncover how superintendents work within their local policy environment to manage and influence state requirements. Additionally, this study traces the policy interpretation and implementation throughout four high schools in a district. That data collection and analysis revealed that the initial policy aims are not being recognized, and also revealed that implementers held misconceptions about the policy, and were uneasy with district implementation.

Upon review of the literature, this study offers recommendations for the participating superintendent to assess and influence policy implementation in the district. These recommendations offer value and insight to superintendents in other districts as they interpret and implement policy in their own districts. The analysis of the literature also offers value and insight for state level policy makers. The findings of this study
suggest that simply crafting and adopting a policy is not sufficient to ensure appropriate interpretation and implementation with fidelity.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Effective policy implementation in education is complex and can be politically charged. Implementation often involves changing the behavior of people who have long-held beliefs about how education should work. Even if new educational policies are adopted, there is no guarantee they will be implemented with high degrees of fidelity. Ensuring fidelity to the original policy’s aims is difficult when policymakers are unable to manage those charged with implementing the policy as it was conceived.

In contemporary educational policy, public school districts are given policies to implement from federal and state education agencies, and local school boards create policies that provide structure for school district operations (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Honig, 2006a; Odden, 1991; Young & Lewis, 2015). Within the local public school district, there are several actors involved at multiple levels of educational policy implementation and interpretation (Coburn, 2005b; Honig, 2009; Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014). Among these actors are superintendents, routinely faced with complex decision-making (Honig, 2003; Heifetz, 2006b; Odden, 1991, Wolfe, 1988).

For Ohio’s public school superintendents, understanding effective policymaking and policy implementation practices is an important part of the job. In Ohio there are five
standards used to evaluate superintendents, one of which is *policy and governance*, the ability to effectively make and implement policies within their districts (“Ohio Department of Education. Ohio’s Superintendent Evaluation System” n.d.).

The interactions superintendents have with policies have evolved over time. The role of the superintendent as policymaker has become increasingly complex as the aims of educational policies have become more comprehensive in scope and scale (Honig, 2003; Heifetz, 2006b; Odden, 1991, Wolfe, 1988).

Odden (1991) and others argue that the aims of educational policies have shifted over time and have expanded in terms of the goals of the policies, the number of students affected by them, and the range and quantity of actors involved in implementation. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), enacted in 1965, is an example of early educational policy (Honig, 2006a). The policy, although the first of its kind, was fairly simple; it called for specific interventions for specific students. Today’s educational policies are far more complex than ESEA. Over time, education policy aims have become more comprehensive and more difficult to implement. Contemporary educational policies tend to be designed to facilitate achievement for all kids. Achievement of policy aims relies on actors inside and outside the school building and often requires mandatory trainings, specific instructional tools, and measures of effectiveness (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Honig, 2006a; Odden, 1991; Young & Lewis, 2015).

Just as educational policies have grown in complexity, policy environments are increasingly difficult to navigate (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Honig, 2006b; Odden, 1991; Young & Lewis, 2015). For policy actors, being aware of the concepts
associated with policymaking, policy interpretation, and policy implementation is the minimum threshold of understanding for negotiating a political environment (e.g. a public school district). However, simply being aware of the bare nuts and bolts is by no means a recipe for success for policymakers. There is a higher level of sophistication required on the part of policy actors who wish to direct and influence the policy cycle (Heifetz, 2006; Honig, 2006b; Odden, 1991). Policymakers who craft policy that is easily interpreted and implemented with fidelity have more than a basic understanding of how policy comes to be; they have developed the skills to influence situations and people so that the policies they design are implemented with fidelity. Those policymakers understand that the relationships between place, people, and policy are intertwined and interdependent, and they navigate those relationships with nuance and sophistication (Coburn, 2016; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Honig, 2006a; Werts & Brewer, 2014; Young & Lewis, 2015).

As superintendents consider policymaking, it is important to be aware of and able to negotiate their local contexts. Honig (2006a) proposed a framework for the examination of the context of policy implementation, covering people, place, and policy. She argues that policy implementation can generally be examined through the policy, the people the policy will be affecting, and the place in which the policy is supposed to be implemented. Superintendents exploring their policy context must be aware of, and more importantly, must be able to influence each of the three categories—policy, people, and place.
The literature reviewed in the following section explores these three pillars of policy implementation—policy, people, and place.

Policies: How They Come to Be and How to Influence Them

*Moving Beyond Analysis to Agenda Setting*

Before policies are formed and implemented, there is a process that brings the policy idea to the surface for public conversation—agenda setting. Agenda setting is an important part of the policy process Kingdon (1984, 1995). In fact, agenda setting is critical; if an issue does not make it to the agenda, it will not be addressed through policy (Lieberman, 2002). In other words, there will never be a policy that does not begin with an agenda set to be addressed. This component of the policy cycle is, like policy implementation, complex. Agendas can be set at the local level, but they are frequently set at higher levels in an organization and handed down to lower levels. For example, superintendents implement policies in their districts (like credit flexibility) that were set by the State Department of Education.

In his work on the policy process, Kingdon (1984, 1995) offers a framework for agenda setting that draws on the analogy of a stream—actually multiple streams. In Kingdon’s multiple-stream framework for agenda setting, he names three streams; each stream is involved in the agenda setting process. The three streams, policy, politics, and problem generally develop and function independently of each other (Kingdon, 1995; Lewis & Young, 2013; Lieberman, 2002).
In Kingdon’s (1984, 1985) streams, all possible agendas float along bumping into each other. Some agendas rise to a more prominent position, and as a result of the newfound prominence, receive attention and are addressed. The rise to prominence is not happenstance. Kingdon’s formula for an agenda’s rise to prominence is multifaceted and full of subtleties and nuances. If an agenda is tightly coupled (i.e. successfully blends the right mixes of people together, addresses a timely problem, and appropriately addresses issues that are important in the political context) the likely result will be policy formation (Kingdon, 1984, 1995).

Kingdon’s (1984, 1995) theory describes strategies within multiple streams for pushing an agenda. In the problem stream an issue is classified as a policy problem. Kingdon distinguishes between conditions and problems. In his framework, the trick to getting a problem addressed is to reframe a condition as a problem. This creates a sense of urgency, which gets it addressed (Kingdon, 1984, 1995; Lewis & Young, 2013; Lieberman, 2002). Kingdon (1984) offers the example of public transportation; lack of public transportation is a condition until it is framed in the context of transportation for people with disabilities. The lack of transportation for people with disabilities is a rallying issue, one that tends to rally others to engage in and to call for finding a resolution.

Another of Kingdon’s (1984, 1995) streams is the political stream, which is subject to the changing perceptions and initiatives of politicians. Sometimes the political stream is disrupted by a national vote, a change in government, or pressure from special interest groups. (Kingdon, 1984, 1995; Lieberman, 2002). Additionally, the political
stream can be influenced by policymakers’ perceptions of the national mood about a topic (Kingdon, 1984, 1995; Lewis & Young, 2013).

Some policy actors are skilled at navigating the policy streams and agenda setting process. In Kingdon’s (1984, 1995) framework, these skilled policy actors are known as *policy entrepreneurs*. Key players in agenda setting, policy entrepreneurs are individuals who operate within the policy stream and political windows in three key ways. They push their concerns through the stream, they push their solutions through the stream, and make couplings. They are willing to invest resources in exchange for agenda setting of policies they favor (Kingdon, 1984, 1995; Lieberman, 2002; Lewis & Young, 2013).

Educational leaders could learn from successful policy entrepreneurs. Policy entrepreneurs are persistent and politically astute; they have an awareness of when and what kind of political windows will open and the capacity to combine problems and solutions floating around in the policy stream so that they are tightly coupled. Policy entrepreneurs are skilled at framing or connecting their policy agendas to problems that officials view as important or urgent (Kingdon, 1984, 1995; Lieberman, 2002; Lewis & Young, 2013).

Beyond understanding the policy, problem, and political environment and attacking policymaking with an entrepreneurial approach, there is another component of successful policy formation—recognizing when policy windows open and successfully influencing them. Kingdon (1984, 1995) asserts that policy windows are critical parts of agenda setting. Policy windows are moments in which the public is likely to be open to an agenda. These could result, for example, from a shift in the national mood or a change
in political leadership. Policy windows only stay open for a short period of time, and policy entrepreneurs must act quickly (Lieberman, 2002).

*The Policy made it to the Agenda—Now on to Implementation.*

Successful implementation of new policies is hard work. Although setting the agenda and crafting a policy are complex, the actual implementation of a policy can be even more difficult. Policymakers might be advised to turn to the literature to determine what works and to figure out how to use it in their own context, a task that may prove difficult. Scholars argue that implementation should be considered when analyzing policy, but even 40 years ago, implementation literature was characterized as "long on description short on prescription"—mostly case studies about specific circumstances (Elmore, 1979, p. 601).

Although the study of policy implementation has been part of policy literature since the 1960s, there is currently no fail-proof implementation model (Coburn, 2016; Honig, 2006a; Odden, 1991; Young & Lewis, 2015). Some researchers like Coburn (2016) criticize the research community for “learning the same lessons over and over again” and task them with “mov[ing] the field forward” by “digging beneath what are now truisms” (p. 473) (e.g. leadership matters, teacher quality matters) to figure out what factors matter most and why. The challenge has been issued for the study of policy implementation to move past the documentation of policy evolution from design and initiation and to "unpack how and why policy evolves as it does" (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002 p 419).
This is not a new criticism. Nearly 40 years ago, Elmore’s (1979) seminal piece about backward mapping addressed this shortcoming in implementation research and the lack of a road map. Ironically, Elmore suggests that the more conscientious the researcher is about not generalizing the findings of single case study, the less likely he or she is to offer an influential implementation guide. Arguing that

When drawing conclusions from their data, case writers are characteristically and honestly cautious. They are typically careful not to generalize more than a step or two beyond their data. Thus, when we look to the most influential implementation studies for guidance about how to anticipate implementation problems we find advice that is desultory and strategically vague (Elmore, 1979 p. 601).

This assessment seems to suggest that the more careful and cautious the researcher is, the less he or she is capable of adding to the understanding of implementation in the discipline.

Young and Lewis (2015) ask a set of rhetorical questions about the usefulness of more case studies with varied theoretical perspectives and methodologies instead of deeper research into past findings. Elmore (1979) asserts that the focus in an analysis should become identification and isolation of the key intersections in a policy environment that are closest to the solving the problem, followed by articulation of what needs to happen during key problem solving moments.

Honig (2006a) answers these criticisms. While some seminal and contemporary literature challenges researchers to do more with implementation research, Honig suggests that educational leaders who are policymakers can still find value in reviewing policy implementation concepts and applying them to their own context, or in her language, place. She argues that implementation case studies “confront the complexity of
implementation” and offer educational leaders a perfect medium from which to learn and a place for ideas and possibilities that could meet the needs of their own context to surface; deliberations based on the conclusions in these studies can then inform decision-making. Honig acknowledges the critique that embracing the complexities in literature could result in the saturation of studies that offer in-depth portraits of complex, perhaps interesting, policy implementation examples wanting in real help for practitioners and policymakers, but she points out that just as education policy research has evolved, so have the roles of practitioners and policymakers (2006a).

Weible, Heikkila, deLeon, & Sabatier (2011) also find the complexity of policy implementation research appropriate. They argue that multiple research frameworks reflect the complexity of the implementation work in a way that a single unifying theory could not. They also assert that multiple research frameworks provide multiple perspectives, which help researchers avoid ethnocentric views of their own work. They maintain that the policy process is “so complex and multifaceted” that to demand a single theoretical perspective is “absurd” (p. 2).

Honig (2006a) asserts that practitioners and policymakers should review the contemporary the literature in order to address the question “Under what conditions within my own school district, school building, or classroom would this particular policy initiative result in positive outcomes for my students?” Her theory is empowering for practitioners who turn to the research for help implementing policy. Honig’s idea that educators and policymakers can synthesize and evaluate across multiple data sources
implies that educational leaders can use the higher-order thinking skills that form part of the goals for the students in their local schools.

Policies develop in cycles

Policymakers may think their job is done when a policy is adopted, but policy adoption is not the final step; it is only one in a policy cycle, a dynamic, multistep process that continues after adoption. Lasswell (1951) proposed a theory of policy cycles that includes seven steps: intelligence, recommendation, prescription, invocation, application, appraisal, and termination. While many others have modified Lasswell’s stages of implementation to include fewer or more stages, his early work is considered foundational in policy cycle literature (Jann & Wegrich, 2006; Weible et al., 2011).

Gaining an understanding of the policy cycle is the first step of a policymaker’s effort to navigate the agenda setting process, to craft policies, and to get them adopted. However, the role of the savvy policymaker does not stop there.

Shifting to Implementation—Choosing an Approach

After adoption, policymakers at all levels face important policy implementation decisions for which there are multiple options. Policy implementation could follow a top-down approach, or a bottom-up approach. A top-down approach looks to the policy and the policy documents that are created and distributed by policymakers as critical sources of implementation guidance. A bottom-up approach looks to the policy actors on the group, and considers how their prior knowledge and beliefs systems influence their
understanding of and willingness to implement the policy (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002).

Elmore (1979) articulates two paths for policy implementation analyses: forward mapping and backward mapping. Forward mapping involves stating an objective, listing the strategies for achieving the objective, and naming an outcome against which the policy success can be measured. This is the typical method of evaluating policy represented in textbooks. A major weakness with forward mapping is that it promotes the “noble lie” (Elmore, 1979, p. 603) that policymakers have control over the implementation process.

In a forward mapping analysis, the focus starts at the top of the hierarchy, and follows a traditional chain of command of descending progressively in formal power and decision-making rights. In forward mapping, the policymaker is understood to be far removed from the policy implementer, so the temptation is for the policymaker to include multiple checks and balances along the hierarchy chain. This kind of implementation plan is slow and is subject to multiple approvals and affirmations before an action is taken. These steps pose a problem, because the more steps that are required to complete an action, the less likely it is that the action will be carried out. Finally, a forward mapping focus does not encourage discretion or good decision making at the organizational level where the policies are actually being implemented. Organizations that rely solely on forward mapping are often seen as inflexible, bureaucratic, and averse to innovation (Fiorino, 1997). Instead of rewarding competence, forward mapping rewards compliance (Elmore, 1979).
Elmore (1979) asserts that instead of a forward mapping approach that focuses on controlling behavior by enacting rules and approval systems, policymakers should consider a backwards mapping approach. Fiorino (1997) proposes that backwards mapping is the most effective strategy when there is an absence of consensus on the kind of change needs to happen or even disagreement about the need for change at all.

According to Elmore (1979), a backward mapping approach addresses the concern that policymakers have: that their policies are implemented with fidelity. In backwards mapping, policymakers start by describing the outcomes that will result from new policy implementation. After that, policymakers work backwards through the organization, asking each level or unit: “What is ability of this unit to complete the appropriate behaviors required?” and “What are the resources they need?” Finally, organizations should direct resources to the levels that will have the greatest effect on fidelity (Elmore, 1979).

Successful backward mapping requires policymakers to start at the lowest level of implementation, that is, the level at which the policy is implemented with or without fidelity. Elmore (1979) calls this level *street-level discretion* and provides examples of people with high degrees of discretion, like police officers who take statements after an accident and income tax auditors who review tax returns. These are the people who actually implement the policies handed down from policymakers at higher levels. In schools, the classroom teacher, the secretary at the main desk, and the school building principal, represents this level of discretion and influence. Weatherly and Lipsky (1977)
popularized the phrase *street-level bureaucrats*, and this literature review provides a more in depth analysis of that concept in later in this chapter.

In contrast to the belief that high degrees of control and hierarchy, especially close to policy initiation, will result in greater influence over policy implementation, backwards mapping assumes that the people closest to the problem have the greatest influence. In other words, those closest to the actual implementation are more likely to have success initiating the policy. In order to strengthen the likelihood of success, policymakers must “maximize discretion” at the level where the problem is most evident (Elmore, 1979, p. 3). Fiorino (1997) suggests that backwards mapping has the potential to provide more flexibility and discretion in context shaped by circumstance.

*Policy Implementation: Beyond policy adoption*

It can be tempting to think of policy implementation as an exercise in inducements and sanctions, when in fact, policy initiatives only cause changes in policy agents if there are reasons for policy agents to question their current behaviors and consider alternatives (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002).

As previously mentioned, it is important for policymakers at all levels to recognize that simply making and communicating a policy decision does not guarantee that the policy will be implemented with any fidelity. Successful policy implementation is complex; leaders must therefore ensure that the policies they seek to implement are clearly stated and free of conflicting messages (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Regardless of the approach to implementation, policymakers should be sure that the new policy provides direction that is clear and consistent. It may seem surprising that
policymaking bodies often hand down policy for implementation that is ambiguous and conflicting. This is less surprising, however, considering the consensus building and compromise that characterizes the process behind policy adoption. A lack of clarity can cause implementation failure; no one follows through with policy they do not understand (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002).

It can also be tempting for policymakers to think that simply stewarding a policy to adoption is the end goal; however, policy adoption does not necessarily fix a situation. Elmore (1979) wrote, “policy itself does not solve problems” (p. 612). He asserts that policy directed individuals toward problems that needed solving, and while policy could provide individuals with an opportunity to find solutions and exercise judgment, it is not the policy that solves problems.

People: Considerations About the Policy Implementers

Embedded in the implementation of policy is the interpretation of policy. Interpretation of policy is a component of the policy implementation process that provides room for those who are actually doing the policy implementation to change the effectiveness of the policy. By ignoring or amplifying certain aspects of the policy, implementers have significant power to influence how a policy works.

*The Influence of Street-Level Bureaucrats in Policy Implementation*

Street-level bureaucrats are individuals who actually carry out the policies that are created at upper levels of organizations. Street-level bureaucracy can take several forms, including non-compliance, partial compliance, avoidance, and rationing. These
behaviors, among others, are those that either make or break a policy (Brodkin, 2012; Elmore, 1979; Maupin, 1993; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). The more options for how a policy gets implemented, and the more demanding a policy, the more freedom implementers have and take during actual deployment. The notion of how demanding the policy is to implement is a crucial one to understand when considering how much discretion street-level bureaucrats might employ to implement the policy (Brodkin, 2012).

Street-level bureaucrats are frequently required to use discretion at the point of service; they draw upon their personal expectations, values, and agendas when implementing policies (Maupin, 1993; Brodkin, 2012). They must manage the demands of policy implementations and of the day-to-day responsibilities of their positions. Simply put, in order to do their job in a way that makes sense to them, street-level bureaucrats make adjustments or adaptations to policy initiatives (Brodkin, 2012; Elmore, 1979; Maupin, 1993; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). The interpretations of and adjustments to policy at this level effectively render these policy actors the actual policymakers (Brodkin, 2012; Maupin, 1993; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977).

What can from the outside look like a refusal to fully engage in policy implementation can in actuality be just a reaction to being overwhelmed. For example, rationing time and attention for policy implementation may seem like a refusal to participate in (or disagreement with) a policy. However, street-level bureaucrats, especially those in public service, are often overworked and overburdened (Brodkin, 2012; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977).
The value of street-level bureaucracy is debated, revealing tension between control and discretion at the local level as something that policymakers should consider. One camp considers street-level bureaucracy a natural part of the policy cycle while others attempt to remove room for implementer discretion (Brodkin, 2012; Elmore, 1979; Maupin, 1993; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977).

Although policymakers with a rational, hierarchical decision-making model view the adjustments made by street-level bureaucrats as disruptive and deviant, the street-level bureaucrats view their own actions as rational and logical. When organizations refuse to account for the perspective of the street-level bureaucrats in their selection of top-down versus bottom-up decision-making, they run the risk of squashing creativity and overlooking the talents of the people at the implementation levels of the organization (Maupin, 1993).

Elmore (1979) asserts the need to shift from a view that values compliance to one that values discretion. Instead of harmful disruption, local discretion and influence on policies could instead be seen as a checks and balances mechanism between central governments and local policy recipients (Scholz, Tombly, & Headrick, 1991).

Street-level bureaucrats exist in every organization, including schools. In order for a superintendent’s policy to be implemented with high levels of fidelity, the superintendent will need to consider the actions of the street-level bureaucrats (e.g. principals and teachers) within the school district.

One way for superintendents to consider the possibilities that exist for street level bureaucracy in their school is to realize the reciprocity of authority in the organizations in
which they work. Reciprocity of authority in organizations takes two forms—formal and informal. Formal authority comes from top down; informal authority (earned from practitioners with experience and skill) travels from bottom to top. Capitalizing on authority reciprocity could lead to backwards mapping; policymakers who are effective in their practice possess a clear understanding of the relationships, task locations, and where the critical performance/problem intersection is (Elmore, 1979).

Interpretation

Even when a policymaker crafts what he or she thinks is a clear policy, the individuals who receive and must implement the policy will interpret it in a way that makes sense to them. That interpretation will probably not match the precise interpretation intended by the policymaker. Failure to recognize the policy aims will lead to implementation issues (Coburn, 2005a; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Weick, 1995).

Often, implementers’ apparent misunderstandings of policy aims are rooted in the general tendency for people to attempt to preserve much of their previous behaviors and understandings. The interpretation and implementation of a policy can be influenced by the perceived effects that a new policy initiative will have on one's self-image. The new initiative can be construed as an affront to those who already believed themselves effective. Additionally, sometimes policy agents can fail to recognize the changes or differences in a policy that appears similar to an old policy (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002).
Policy implementation failure is sometimes placed solely on the implementing agents and are sometimes attributed to rebellion against the policy aims, unwillingness to conform to policy aims, and lack of ability to conform to policy aims. Perhaps, however, the failure is not deliberate, but instead the result of a breakdown in the implementers’ sense-making process (Coburn, 2005a; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Weick, 1995).

Policy implementers interpret policies by sense-making, that is, building an understanding of a current situation by considering prior knowledge, past experiences, and personal beliefs (Coburn, 2005a; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Weick, 1995). When faced with policy initiatives, the implementers organize policy intent through their current individual cognitive structures—knowledge, belief, attitudes, the situation(s) the implementers are in, and the policy signals (Coburn, 2005a; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Weick, 1995). Sense making happens both within and between individuals. In other words, it is done individually and collectively (Coburn, 2005a; Gawlick, 2015). Instead of understanding new information by learning it in isolation, policy implementers “situate their sense making in thought communities” (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Thought communities are made of people who have influence over how a person views the world. Thought communities can be composed of members of a person’s ethnicity, political beliefs system, religious organization, and other formal and informal groups that influence how an individual views the world.
The framework of sense making has been used in the research literature to examine the effectiveness of different policy initiatives over time, including school building leaders’ understanding of reform efforts (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016), implementation of reading policies (Coburn, 2005a), how charter school leaders interpreted accountability data, (Gawlick, 2015), and even how college presidents develop an understanding of their roles (Smerek, 2011).

Considering that sense making is a complex process, it is likely that differences in policy implementation at the street level could be attributed to issues of interpretation and understanding (Coburn, 2005a, Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Policymakers who want their policies interpreted and implemented appropriately should consider how to account for the sense-making process of their policy implementers (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Sense making can be an emotional process for participants, so policymakers should strategize and facilitate effective management their team members’ emotions (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Weick, 1995). The goal of policymakers should be to bring clarity to both the concrete and abstract elements of a policy in a way that helps implementers to make sense of the intended goals and outcomes (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Ensuring clarity of policy aims is the first step of policy implementation that maintains high fidelity to the intentions of the policymakers (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002).
Other Policy Actors for Policymakers to Consider: Non-System Actors

Policymakers, including superintendents, must recognize that individuals not directly implementing policy will also influence the policy implementation process. Superintendents should not end their search for influential actors with the individuals who are part of their existing school districts, but should look outside their district for non-system actors. Coburn (2005b) cautions that focusing only on the formal policy system “excerpts” the policy process (p. 23). “The formal policy system does not exist in isolation” (Coburn, 2005b p 23). Non-system actors have tremendous influence on the policy translation, promotion, and interpretation.

Honig (2009) describes non-system actors as those who “exchange funding, support, and information for influence” (p. 410). Non-system actors have been cited as mediating links between policy and practice. Specifically in school systems, three groups that frequently function as non-system actors are nonprofit organizations, membership organizations, and for-profit firms. These types of non-system actors influence street-level policy implementation through professional development and curriculum offerings, information, and financial arrangements. Non-system actors are influential, and are outside the control of policymakers. They participate in their own translation and interpretation practices (Coburn, 2005b; Honig, 2009; Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014).

Some contemporary examples of non-system actors in educational philanthropy are national funders with multimillion-dollar portfolios (e.g. Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation, the Walton Family Fund, the Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative, etc.). Non-system actors who influence a school district’s agenda can also take
the form of smaller local foundations, local government (e.g. the Mayor’s office), and local non-profit agencies who have a mission to influence the operations of the district.

Relying on non-system actors can be an effective alternative to navigating public bureaucracies (Coburn, 2005b). For some time, public and private organizations have been collaborating to solve problems in public policy arenas like welfare, health care, and legal aid (Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014). Public organizations—school districts included—cannot solely rely upon the policy actors that exist in their own systems. State departments of education are often fully subscribed with their own policy agendas and do not have the capacity to address some of the school districts’ concerns. As a result, large public organizations often trust non-system actors to assist with policy interpretation and deployment (Coburn, 2005b; Honig, 2009).

Deliberate interaction between system and non-system actors can enhance the policy implementation process. Some ways that non-system actors engage with school systems is to provide money for the purchase of curricular materials or professional development offerings (Coburn, 2005b). For example, in Honig’s (2009) case study on the Oakland Unified School District, non-system actors provided help with special topics, like leadership training for senior level administrators and facilities planning.

Each of the concepts outlined in the previous sections influence the policy implementation in local school districts. As superintendents balance the demands of state-level policy decisions, their local school board agendas, and the school building personnel in their districts, they are confronted with an intricate, interdependent system of competing agendas and power struggles. Even the most astute, self-aware superintendent
who thoughtfully analyzes the type of decision, the actors involved in the decision, and the possible issues with policy fidelity can be blindsided by unintended consequences of policy decisions.

Place

One concept that policymakers attempting to implement new or revised policies should study is organizational fields. Roach, Smith, and Boutin (2011) discuss institutions as part of a larger organizational field, a group of similar institutions that share ideas, norms, and values.

Understanding the formal and informal links between and among school districts is important for superintendents as they make policy decisions. Each school district and the buildings within it could be its own organizational field. Organizational fields can be quite powerful influencers of patterns of behavior. Roach, Smith, and Boutin (2011) emphasize that institutional change can be difficult in an organization that is part of a network that is closely linked. A strong network can “contain, diffuse, or mediate institutional change” (p. 80). Tightly coupled organizations sometimes adopt similar policies, even if the organizations are not similar in terms of size, population, and financial stability. This concept of institutional isomorphism—when organizations adopt polices and belief systems that encourage patterns of like-minded thinking and common behaviors—is important to recognize when policymakers wish to influence their policy environment (Roach, Smith, and Boutin, 2011).

Superintendents seeking to make changes in their own districts will be more successful if they are aware of the levels of institutional isomorphism in their own
districts and buildings. Once superintendents have determined the strength of the
organizational field, they will be better able to strategically plan for the organizational
change required to meet the desired policy aim. The level of an organization’s
institutional isomorphism will have some bearing on the level of receptiveness that can
be expected during policy changes.

Another concept that can inform superintendents about the appropriate language,
implementation, and evaluation plans for their decisions is the policy ecology of the
environment. Weaver-Hightower (2008) describes ecologies as complex systems in
which each organism or variable in the system has relationships with other participants in
the system. Policy ecologies function in the same way; each policy and group of policies
exists as texts and discourses within the “environment of their creation and
implementation” (p. 154). The policy environment of schools can be as complex as the
ecology of a natural system like lakes, fish tanks, and rainforests.

An analysis of policy ecology requires a thorough examination of the context.
Weaver-Hightower (2008) states that ecologies are more than the sum of their individual
parts—some actors have more power than others do. The same holds true for schools; the
dynamics of decision-making and patterns of behavior found in districts and schools is
more than the sum total of each individual’s thoughts and actions. Identifying the
powerful actors is a key component of policy ecology analysis. Attention is given to
anyone who could influence the policy formulation, implementation, and discourse,
including inter-related groups such as parents, religious groups, and spouses of key
players.
Analyses of policy ecologies force policy actors (like superintendents) to examine existing and emerging power relationships and to identify stated and implied policy outcomes, as well as counterarguments to the policy (Weaver-Hightower, 2008). This provides an opportunity to gauge the existing problems and strengths of an organization. Although the idea of sorting through the complexities can be daunting, a policy ecology lens encourages scholars to look beyond the obvious power players in the foreground, to think about the ripple effect of policies, and to examine and question the effects of even seemingly small policies.

*Unintended Consequences of Policy Decisions*

Superintendents should recognize that every policy decision they make will result in unanticipated outcomes. In his analysis of unintended consequences, Robert Merton (1936) separates unintended consequences into two categories: those consequences for the actor, and consequences for others effected by the implementation. He asserts that consequences can be both formal (i.e. organized) and informal (i.e. unorganized). Bastiat (1848) proposes a three-unit system—comprising the actor, the recipient, and the beneficiary—the latter of which is frequently unseen. Jian (2007) suggests that a study of unintended consequences should “pay attention to organizational tensions in a change process, the reciprocity of intentional activities of management and employees, and the reconstitution of meaning and practice by employees” (p. 9). Jian asserts that the reality of the senior-level employees (i.e. the policymakers) is different than of the employees who experience the change in policy.

Merton (1936) acknowledges the difficulties that exist in an examination of
unintended consequences—the attribution of a causal relationship between an action and a result is a complex argument that “must be solved for every empirical case which is studied” (p. 897). Determining which consequences were the direct results of specific actions is not a simple matter. The second difficulty Merton recognizes exists in situations in which unintended consequences have been attributed as intended consequences after the fact. Merton suggests that analysts probe deeply into the overt actions, the contextual specifics, the actors involved, and the articulated purpose of the policy.

Merton (1936) proposes five possible causes of unintended consequences: ignorance, as it is impossible to foresee the future and predict every consequence that could result from an action or policy; error, from having mistakenly assumed previous solutions will work for current situations or from misperceptions of current conditions; immediacy of interests, that is, permitting urgent, proximate needs to outweigh possible long term consequences; basic values, when possible consequences are ignored because the immediate action is tightly coupled with the actors’ core, fundamental values; and self-defeating prediction, when a prediction of an impending action causes actions in the present that end up eliminating long-term prediction.

Jian (2007) argues that uncovering the process that creates unintended consequences is a key component of successfully managing change in organizations. He contends that because organizations are increasingly expected to be more agile and flexible, understanding the interactions that happen during the change process can provide clarity around how and why changes in organization lead to unintended
Jian (2007) claims that unintended consequences happen when the policymakers and the policy recipients interact and integrate. He sees the policymaker roles as those of initiating change, creating excitement around new policies, deciding how to promote and sell them, creating timelines and plans for implementation, and constructing a reality that validates the need for the change in policy.

Jian (2007) sees the role of the recipients of policy changes as translating the texts they receive from senior leadership into social practices and acting collectively to make sense of the policy changes. He asserts that policy recipients develop their own political realities and use their own interpretive schemes to make sense of the policy promotions they received from the policymakers. Feenberg (as cited in Jian, 2007) theorizes that employees use their “margin of maneuver”—the independence possessed by policy recipients to “refine and modify” the texts and promotional materials they received from the policymakers (p. 14).

Economic and social science scholars have a history of acknowledging the dominance of unintended consequences; the same is not true for politicians. Many government programs are criticized because of the unintended consequences (Norton, 2008; Roots, 2004). For example, social security contributes to a greater degree of economic prosperity for senior citizens, but has resulted in less investing and saving. Similarly, quotas on steel import protect American steel mills from inexpensive competition, but American automakers pay more for their steel than their foreign competitors, resulting in higher prices for American automobiles (Norton, 2008).
Roots (2004) observes “many laws perpetually fall short of their intended goals” (p. 1376). He argues that policy-making organizations—particularly governments—have histories of poor performance. Roots says that the human tendency to turn to government to pass more laws and policies in the hopes of a resolution to a human problem is fundamentally flawed. His assertions that policies and laws initiated and implemented by governments are destined to be unsuccessful are captured in the words of former Libertarian Party Presidential Candidate Harry Browne: “Each government program carries within it the seed of future programs that will be needed to clean up the mess the first program creates” (as cited in Roots, 2004, p. 1380). As an example, Roots (2004) offers the American public education system, a system viewed by economists as the answer to the wage and income disparity that has existed for over 100 years. In the eyes of social engineers, public education was the method economists viewed as the answer to a more democratic wage system, and sociologists viewed compulsory attendance as the mechanism for increased social mobility.

Roots (2004) asserts that the U.S. public education system has been the recipient of policies aimed at improving the earning gap between social classes. As evidence of the social mobility agenda behind education reform, he offers the financial investment into the American public education system—at 7.5% of the American gross domestic product—and regulations for compulsory attendance. Although mandatory attendance has resulted in increased attendance rates across grade levels, wage and income inequalities have increased in the past 50 years. In fact, he contends that the increased access to higher education that exists in Western nations, coupled with the increased
wage disparities that exist in the same nations, the U.S. educational experiment is “one of the biggest sociological flops of the 20th century” (Roots, 2004, p. 1383).

Roots (2004) also argues that the American public education system was seen as the answer to the problem of unequal education opportunities and outcomes for white and black students. One of the most well known examples of a policy that was ordered upon the public education system is that of desegregation. Through the Brown v. Board of Education case in 1954, desegregation of American public education was supposed to provide equal educational opportunities and improved academic achievement for black children (Roots, 2004; Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004; Ladsdon-Billings, 2004). Ladsdon-Billings, (2004) asserts that while the intentions were “honorable” and “its fight was just” (p.1), some of the actual, realized consequences of the decision have been detrimental.

Yosso et al. (2004) argue that Brown was a lost opportunity for the Supreme Court to increase the quality of the black school systems that existed in the South. Instead of an equal education for both black and white students, the result of Brown was a one-way desegregation plan; they maintain that Brown chose to prioritize desegregation—but only in the form of black students enrolling in all white schools—over equality of the educational experience of black and white students. The unintended consequences of the Brown decision were felt immediately following the decision and are still evident today.

The Importance of Thoughtful Decision-Making by the Superintendent

Policymaking and implementation in K-12 public schools require decision-making on the part of the school superintendent. For any decision maker,
superintendents included, the most important step in decision-making is determining the type of problem that needs to be solved. According to Ron Heifetz, co-director of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy’s School of Government, when leaders in organizations are faced with a dilemma, it is one of two types of challenges: a technical challenge or an adaptive challenge (Heifetz, 2006; Heifetz, Grashow, & Linksy, 2009; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Heifetz & Linksy, 2004).

Superintendents facing technical challenges have an easier task to accomplish. Technical challenges are those that are similar to other challenges the organization has already solved (Heifetz, 2006; Heifetz, Grashow, & Linksy, 2009; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Heifetz & Linksy, 2004). These solutions are quick and easy to implement and can be solved though wielding authority or expertise on the subject matter. Solving a technical challenge requires minimal (if any) changes.

On the other hand, when superintendents face adaptive challenges, there is rarely a quick and easy solution. Adaptive challenges are those that require the recipients of the solution to change their beliefs and their approach to their work and to work differently within their organization. Solutions to adaptive challenges do not yet exist and are not implemented solely through expertise or authority. Adaptive challenges can be so sensitive that it is not uncommon for people to resist identifying root causes (Heifetz, 2006; Heifetz, Grashow, & Linksy, 2009; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Heifetz & Linksy, 2004).

Heifetz (2006) sees superintendents frequently struggling to manage adaptive challenges. He asserts that while superintendents may come to the position with vast
technical leadership skill, they often lack the political wherewithal to plan for and manage the change of hearts and minds that comes with solving adaptive problems. He encourages superintendents who face adaptive challenges to identify, plan for, and evaluate the political climate in which they work.

Heifetz (2006) specifies that as decision makers, school superintendents must mobilize the teachers, parents, community leaders, legislators, and state education officials of their local context. As a resource for superintendents working through adaptive challenges, he suggests they draw on a peer network of like-minded superintendents. Although it will require trust and risk-taking on the part of superintendents, Heifetz argues that one of the most valuable learning experiences for superintendents is to share the real technical and adaptive challenges they are working through and to scrutinize the resulting failures and successes.

Leadership versus Authority

As superintendents navigate political situations and policy decisions, they must be aware of how much influence they actually assert. Being appointed to a superintendency alone does not guarantee that the superintendent is leading the district. Heifetz and Linsky (2004) explain that simply having authority (i.e. a title or credential) does not necessarily mean that a superintendent is actually exercising leadership. They maintain that actual leadership involves leveraging one’s authority to cause changes in behavior, facilitating difficult conversations among constituents, and confronting resistance to initiatives or reform efforts that cause disequilibrium in the local context.
Acknowledging that exerting leadership is a difficult task, Heifetz and Linksy (2004) offer five “tactics for survival and success” (p. 35). The tactics are:

- Don’t do it alone
- Keep the opposition close
- Acknowledge their loss
- Accept causalities
- Accept responsibility for your piece of the mess

Finally, Heifetz and Linksy (2004) recommend that superintendents willingly acknowledge their own decisions and actions that have led to the current state of affairs. Modeling adaptive change is one of the most powerful techniques for persuading others to undergo their own personal adaptive changes.

Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky (2009) conclude that the new norms for successful leaders of the future include not only leading organizations to function at high levels in the contemporary context, but also preparing for a future context in which adaptation and agility are key characteristics of success. Leaders must make decisions that simultaneously “foster adaptation” and develop “next practices” at the same time that they are executing the current “best practices” (p. 2).

Summary

This chapter describes the difficulties that can exist when policymakers attempt to make and implement a new policy—or a revision to an existing policy, and this chapter also describes strategies to mitigate those difficulties. As evidenced in previous pages,
policymaking and implementation is complex. There is no roadmap for policymakers to 
follow to ensure the most effective policies are crafted and implemented.

However, there is a body of research that provides opportunities for policymakers 
to learn what worked and what did not work in multiple examples of policymaking and 
policy implementation. The exploration of multiple policy implementation examples 
gives policymakers a chance to learn the lessons of others in an efficient way. A 
policymaker could analyze many more case studies in the literature than he or she could 
find time. The analysis of the case studies will help policymakers negotiate their own 
environments with lessons learned from access to real world examples of policy 
implementation.

Public school districts in Ohio are policy rich environments. Policies are 
implemented and revised in public school districts frequently. Often Superintendents are 
the policymakers in a school district. Superintendents must comply with state level 
policies that are established by state departments of education, and they must 
simultaneously successfully navigate the local school district’s policy environment.

Studies that examine the interpretation and implementation of state level policies 
in the local public school district will provide insight for superintendents and state-level 
policymakers about effective policy implementation pathways. The insights that 
policymakers could gain from such a study include lessons learned about how much and 
what type of guidance should be included with state level policies. Additional insights 
that can be gained are what systems and structures help ensure effective policy 
implementation in school buildings. Finally, a study that examines the trade offs made by
street level bureaucrats as they manage policy implementation efforts with limited time and resources will provoke the thinking of policymakers as they develop new and refined policy initiatives.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This Study

This study examined the question of how Ohio’s credit flexibility policy was implemented in the field. The policy, when it was crafted at the Ohio Department of Education in 2009, came with very little guidance about how it was to be implemented.

The aim of this study was to answer the question, “How does policy interpretation between local schools and the state department of education happen, and what are the factors that influence the degree of fidelity to the policy as it is implemented?”

In order to examine how the credit flexibility policy was interpreted and implemented in the field, this study had three phases. The first phase of the study was an investigation into and an analysis of the original aims of the policy. In order to complete that phase, I interviewed three members of the original credit flexibility policy design team, and I analyzed documents from the early planning and implementation of the Credit Flex Policy.

Phases 2 and 3 of this study were analyses of the implementation of the credit flexibility policy in a large public school district. Phase 2 of this study was centered on the perspective of the superintendent, who, as the chief policy executive of a school district, is tasked with interpreting policy created by the Department of
Education. The superintendent not only interprets, but also crafts a plan for implementation, which complies with state policy and works well in the local context of their school district. Through interviews with the individual who was superintendent of an Ohio school district in 2009 when the Credit Flex Policy was first enacted as well as interviews with the current superintendent, I was able to trace the interpretation and implementation of credit flexibility over the course of two superintendent tenures that spanned 4 years.

In Phase 3 of this study, I interviewed each of the district’s four high-school principals and school counselors. Through initial interviews with the superintendents and the school leaders, the school counselors at the each of the academies were identified as key personnel involved in the implementation of the district’s credit flexibility policy. The design of this study allowed me to compare perspectives across the academies and within each academy. By interviewing each principal and each school counselor, I was able to establish cohorts of participants in similar roles (i.e. principal and school counselor) across four different academies.

Research Paradigm

Given that the goal of the study was to understand the ways the target groups constructed their understanding of the policy and implemented their perceptions in their specific contexts, a qualitative study was the research paradigm determined to be most appropriate. Glesne (2006) offers that a qualitative study is one that “seeks to understand and interpret” how the research participants constructed their reality (p. 4). She says that if the purpose of the research is to develop understanding, contextualization, and
interpretation, then a qualitative study is the appropriate choice. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) offer that qualitative research is a “situated activity that locates the observer in the world,” where the researcher engages in research practices that “make the world visible” and “transform the world” (p. 3). In contrast, according to Glesne (2006), a quantitative study seeks to generalize, predict, and provide causal correlations.

Since the goal of this study was to understand how the policy actors at the school-building level interpreted the policies for credit flexibility that were determined at their district level, a deep understanding of the local context was critical to developing a thorough analysis of the path of the Credit Flex policy from the state level to the building level. Qualitative methods provided the opportunity to develop a robust understanding of each participant’s construction of reality and how the circumstances of each research site contributed to the local policies regarding credit flexibility.

To study policy interpretation and implementation differences within high schools, the research needed to be situated in high schools. Specifically, research was conducted in the central office of the school district, where the credit flexibility policy language for the district was crafted and disseminated from, and was conducted at the high school buildings, where the Credit Flex policy was deployed with and for students, teachers, and families. By studying the policy recipients and policy creators in each of their constructed realities, I was able to effectively make each of those worlds visible to the broader audience of school district policy makers.
Methodology

The appropriate methodology for this study was a case study method. Case studies are commonly found in disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and education to name a few (Gilson, 2012; Yin, 2009). Case studies are a methodology that permits researchers to study real life, complex situations, and preserve the unique characteristics of the research participants in the data analysis and findings (Gilson, 2012; Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2009).

“Case studies are best suited for studies that meet three criteria:

1. “how or why” questions are being posed
2. the investigator has little control over the events, and
3. the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 2009 p.2).”

Case study was a suitable methodology for this study because it meets all three of the criteria proposed by Yin (2009). For example, this study was designed to answer “how” and “why” questions about the original credit flexibility policy design at the state level, and was also designed to answer “how” and “why” questions about the interpretation and implementation of credit flex policy in four different high schools in a school district. Additionally, in this study I as the researcher had little control over the events of the research participants. Unlike an experiment that allows the researcher to “manipulate behavior directly, precisely, and systematically “ (Yin 2009, p. 12), in this study the research was focused on describing and analyzing behavior that happened in the
recent past, and behavior that was happening in the present. Finally, this study was focused on current implementation of policy that could be observed.

In addition to the three characteristics of case studies mentioned above, another key component of a case study methodology is that the researcher uses a variety of data sources to support her findings (Gilson, 2012; Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2009). In this study, interviews and document analysis served as the two techniques of data collection. By using more than one data-gathering technique, and by exploring multiple perspectives (i.e. local school district superintendents, building principals, school counselors, and members of the original policy making committee) I was able to triangulate the data. Securing more than one perspective from within a group of individuals who have experienced the policy implementation of a singular policy as well as perspectives from other groups involved with different aspects of the policy planning and implementation is a way to provide a high degree of trustworthiness in the assertions and interpretations of the study findings (Glesne, 2006; Gilson, 2012; Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2009).

There are multiple types of case studies, Yin (2009) identifies two categories of case studies: single and multiple case designs. Within single and multiple case designs, researchers could focus on holistic (one unit of analysis) or embedded/nested (multiple units of analysis) cases (Gilson, 2012; Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2009). Yin (2009) asserts that the determining factors that differentiate case methodologies from each other are the number of contexts, cases, and units of analysis for each. Multiple case designs include a “number of individual cases of the same type” (Gilson, 2012, p. 161), and embedded cases are those that “give attention to a subunit or subunits” (Yin, 2009, p. 50).
This study is an *embedded case study* because there are multiple units of analysis within each case. For each phase of the study, there are multiple units of analysis. Two prominent units of analysis are interpretation and implementation. For each group, there was data collection designed to capture what individuals understood about the policy aims, and what they understood about how the policy should be implemented.

**Population and Sample Size**

The selection of research subjects for a qualitative study is different from the selection of research subjects for a quantitative study. Instead of selecting a large random sample to make generalizations, qualitative studies demand that the researcher choose research subjects thoughtfully. Patton (2002) asserts that researchers should focus on a sample that is purposefully chosen so that each research site will be one that is information-rich. Using a purposeful sampling method provides researchers with “information-rich cases” whose examination will “illuminate the questions under study” (Patton, 2002, p. 273). Information-rich sites are those that provide the researcher with an opportunity to deeply explore and document issues that are relevant to the study.

In a case study methodology, the selection of research subjects is done with the awareness that the goal of a case study is “not to enumerate frequencies,” but to “expand and generalize theories” (Yin, 2009, p.15) through careful data collection and analysis. According to Yin (2009), an important factor for determining the sample for a case study is access. He counsels researchers that they “need sufficient access to the potential data” (Yin, 2009, p. 26). According to Yin (2009), access is so critical that if researchers cannot secure access for their study, they would be well served by “changing their
research questions, hopefully leading to new candidates to which you [researchers] do have access” (p. 26).

**Recruitment of policy designers**

For all three phases of this study, I recruited participants with an aim to collect data for an analysis that was information-rich. For Phase 1 of this study (the study of the state-level policy aims), I set out to interview three members of the policy design team. I was aware of the state-level design team through my professional experiences as a former high-school teacher and administrator. Several years ago, at the request of the design team, I attended one of their meetings. At that meeting, I gave a presentation about some of the credit earning opportunities that I had organized for students at the school where I was working at the time. During that presentation, I met all the members of the design team.

For this study, I chose as participants three members of the design team based on the unique perspective of the credit flexibility policy in Ohio that each could offer: one a policy scholar, another a high school principal, and the third a former central-office administrator (prior to his appointment as a senior-level member of the Ohio Department of Education).

I gained access to these members through the professional networks that I built during my years as an educator. I established contact with each of the recruits prior to conducting the research and explained to each that I was considering research into Ohio’s credit flexibility policy as the subject of my dissertation. I also explained that I
would like to approach them to ask them to participate when conducting the study. Each of these individuals expressed interest in participating in the study.

When it was time to actually conduct the interviews, I emailed each recruit. Using the approved email solicitation form from Ohio State’s IRB office, I explained the study and asked if they would be willing to participate by being interviewed. Each member agreed. Each of the three interviews took place in a different location: two at the workplace of the respective participant and one interview at a neutral location upon which the participant and I agreed. After obtaining consent, I interviewed each of the policy design-team members for about an hour. I recorded the interviews and sent the recordings to a transcriptionist. The transcriptionist returned typed transcripts to me, which I used for data analysis.

Choosing a School District Site

To study how the Credit Flex Policy was being interpreted and implemented in a local district context, it was critical for me to gain access to a school district to study the implementation process, which is the focus of Phases 2 and 3 of this study. When selecting research sites for these phases, I chose not to conduct this study in the school of my previous employment. Instead of researching “in my backyard” (Glesne, 2006, p. 31), I selected the Norman City School District a public school district with four high school academies that operate autonomously. A single superintendent, who reports to a board of education, governs the schools. However, each principal in the district has authority to make personnel, curriculum, and budgetary decisions for their own school.
According to the district's website, the district enrolls 7,000 students. Of those students, 46% are White, 37% are Black, 10% are multi-racial, 5% are Hispanic, and 2% are Asian. A little over half of the student body is classified as economically disadvantaged; 12% of the students in Norman City School District are identified with a special need, and almost 7% are limited English proficient.

The sampling of four high school buildings in the same district provided an opportunity for a deep examination of the interpretation and implementation of credit flexibility policies that were developed at the central-office level of the district. By studying four different sites in the same district, I had the opportunity to search for differences in discretion and implementation by the street-level bureaucrats who make policy decisions at the ground level. The study of existing differences and similarities at the building level in schools that received the same guidance from the district’s board of education and central office provided opportunities for study in an information-rich environment.

School District Participants

Similar to Phase 1 during which I recruited members of the Credit Flex design team, I had an easy recruitment process for Phase 2 of the study. Recruiting the superintendent who was leading the district when the Credit Flex Policy was adopted and the superintendent who succeeded him to participate in the study was fairly straightforward. After receiving an email from me, each of the superintendents agreed to participate in the study. To conduct the interviews with the superintendents, I met with the former superintendent at my work location (at his suggestion) and the current
superintendent at the district office (at his suggestion). After obtaining consent, I proceeded to interview each of the superintendents. Each of those interviews lasted approximately an hour, and upon completion, I sent the interviews to a transcriptionist. The transcriptionist returned typed transcripts to me, and I used those transcripts for data analysis.

Recruiting the school leaders in the district for my study was the most challenging recruitment. There are four high school principals in the Norman City School District, and aside from one school leader, I did not know them personally. I started by emailing the principal that I knew, asking for his participation, and for him to connect me with the other school leaders.

That principal (coded in this study as Principal 1) did agree to participate in the study. I interviewed him in his office; that interview lasted about 30 minutes and was audio recorded. The audio recording was sent to a transcriptionist who returned a typed transcript of the interview to me.

Principal 1 also forwarded the email I sent to him to the other school leaders, and he copied me on the email. None of the recipients responded. I sent a follow-up email that included the semi-structured protocol I was planning to use, but did not receive a response.

Since these attempts were unsuccessful, I sought the help of a colleague who worked for the Norman City School District as a curriculum specialist, requesting for contact to be made with the principals to surface any concerns or questions about
participation in my study. These efforts resulted in an agreement from two of the three recruits (coded in this study as Principal 2 and Principal 3 respectively) to participate.

The fourth principal (Principal 4) replied to an email that he would be unavailable for an interview on the days that I was conducting the other interviews. I emailed to him that I would make myself available to him at anytime that he was free, and that I would also be willing to conduct the interview by phone, to which he did not respond. At close of the interview with Principal 2, I asked the participant if he had spoken to Principal 4 about participation in this study. In response, he explained that Principal 4 was reluctant to participate because “he didn't know anything more than what the district policy was,” and felt that he “didn’t have anything to add to the study.” Principal 2 mentioned to me that Principal 4 should recognize that even his reluctance to participate was data that would be fruitful in my study, since Principal 4 conducted his own research when he was completing his doctorate degree. I told Principal 2 that if Principal 4 had any questions or would be willing to talk with me, please let me know and I would make myself available.

After the interview with Principal 2, I received an email from Principal 4 asking if I would promise that his responses to my questions would be completely confidential, and no one would know what he said or did not say. I confirmed with Principal 4 that I would indeed keep his responses completely confidential. At the point, Principal 4 acquiesced, and agreed to participate in the study by providing written responses to the questions from the semi-structured interview protocol.
I set the stage for the last participant recruitment phase (that of the school counselors) during the emails and interviews with the school principals. I met Counselor 1 when I was interviewing Principal 1, and he expressed an interest in my study, and a willingness to participate. When I was ready to interview the school counselors, I emailed Counselor 1 to officially recruit his participation in the study, and asked him to email the other counselors to introduce me. Counselor 1 did email the other three school counselors, and copied me on the email.

All of the counselors agreed to participate in the study, and scheduled phone interviews with me. It turns out that I did know Counselor 4 from my previous work teaching and leading a school in the region. So, although Principal 4 was unwilling to speak with me, his school counselor was willing to participate.

Data Collection and Analysis

The research collection began with a review of the documents I collected from Ohio’s Department of Education. After I read over the documents from the Department of Education, I scheduled and conducted interviews with three members of Ohio’s credit-flexibility design team. These three interviews were semi-structured interviews and each one was audio recorded and transcribed by a hired transcriptionist. Once the interviews were transcribed, the transcripts of the interviews were coded.

Coding is a “progressive process” of classifying and describing themes from collected data (Glesne, 2006, p. 152). For this study, I started with open coding. In open coding, researchers examine data collected and chunk that data by labeling recurring topics, concepts, and ideas. Those steps allow for themes to surface across the pieces of
data that have been collected. Those codes were used to analyze and compare the data collected for this research project (Glesne, 2006).

After the interviews with the design team members were coded, I went back to the Credit Flex documents from the state of Ohio and coded them using the open-coding method described above. In addition to open coding, I examined Ohio’s Credit Flex documents for similarities and differences in the themes that emerged from the design team members’ interviews (see Appendix C for state policy maker codes).

The themes that emerged and abbreviations for those themes were collected in the MAXQDA database and formed a codebook. As more artifacts were collected, they were added to the MAXQDA database (see Appendix B for the complete codebook).

The coding of new data artifacts was chunked into groups. In other words, just as I had chunked the design team members’ interviews into a data set and examined the transcripts for emerging themes, I followed the same process for Phase 2 and Phase 3 data collection.

The interviews of the two superintendents (coded as Original Superintendent and New Superintendent respectively) were analyzed and coded individually, followed by a comparison of the themes that emerged during the two interviews (see Appendix D for superintendent codes). The same protocol was followed for the principals’ interviews; independent analysis and coding, followed by a process of looking for recurring themes in each transcript and in the written responses of Principal 4. Some of these themes were evident across all of the principal transcripts, while others were not (see Appendix E for principal codes).
I followed a similar process when analyzing the data from the interviews with the school counselors. I read each of the transcripts and coded each one, looking for recurring themes. Some of these themes were evident in all of the transcripts; some were not (see Appendix F for counselor codes).

It is worth noting that in my original study design, I proposed a more detailed comparison of the original policymakers’ aims with how those aims were being implemented in the local school context. I thought that the themes that would emerge from the design team interviews would also surface throughout the interviews at the schools and that I would use the same codes throughout the remaining interviews. That turned out to be a flawed plan.

After my interview with Principal 2, it became evident that a comparison of that nature would be fruitless since the implementation of credit flexibility at the schools appeared to be far removed from the original policy aims of the members of the Credit Flex design team. Upon completion of the interviews with the principals and the school counselors, I understood that the implementation of Credit Flex at the school level was not what the members of the design team intended. A comparison of codes from the interviews indicated that the themes of the interviews were not similar.

Interviews

As a methodology, interviews are a hallmark of qualitative research, and they are a preferred technique for case study methodology (Yazan, 2015). Negotiating confidentiality in advance of the interviews is a critical component of successful interviewing. Neither the researcher nor the research participant can positively predict
how the interview will affect the interviewer or the interviewee. In an interview, the participants find themselves faced with the opportunity to reflect on his or her ideas, practices, and beliefs. Therefore, interviews can serve as both a tool for gathering information and a form of an intervention. Sometimes upon reflection during the interview, participants can realize things they have never realized before. This reflection could yield a change in behavior (Patton, 2002). This study did yield moments in interviews that surfaced emotions on the part of interviewees. In one instance, a participant cried when describing the potential for Credit Flex. In another instance, a participant reflected that perhaps he should be communicating more with others in his professional circle about the implementation of credit flexibility.

Using interviews as a methodology for this study was a great way to gather the perspective of both the individuals who planned for Credit Flex implementation and the individuals who were actually implementing the policy in their district. Without speaking to the individual participants in this study directly, I would not have been able to collect their perspectives and experiences. Those perspectives and experiences and the differences between them were rich data sets.

For this study, I originally planned to conduct at least 12 interviews. The original study plan was to interview three members of the Credit Flex policy design team, the superintendent of Norman City schools, and the district’s four school leaders and four school counselors.

I also planned to use the snowball approach to include other participants in the interviews. Glesne (2006) describes the snowball or network sampling strategy as one
that provides the opportunity for researchers to learn about new potential participants through the original research participants. For example, before conducting the interviews for this study, I anticipated that existing participants might direct me to other potential participants who were also instrumental in the design or the implementation of credit flexibility.

Ultimately, the interview total for this study was 13 (see Appendix G for interview schedule). Only 12 of the participants agreed to a one-to-one interview; one of high school principals would only agree to participate by providing an email response to questions. The research collection began with the interviews conducted with members of the State of Ohio Credit Flex Design Team. These semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A) were recorded and transcribed. Upon the completion of the transcription and coding of each interview, I assigned a pseudonym for each participant. A transcriptionist was hired to transfer the interviews from audio recording to typed transcripts.

The snowball approach verified for me that I had identified the appropriate participants for this study. For example, when I asked the three Credit Flex design-team members whom else I should talk to, each identified other design team members who had already been selected as participants. Two of these participants also identified a fourth person from the original Credit Flex design team that they believed helpful for the study. That person was a practitioner from an alternative school in Ohio, whom I did not recruit for this study. After the three interviews, I felt that I had captured representative perspectives of the design team (i.e. those of a state-level policy maker, active
practitioners, and state-level administrators). The three participants who were interviewed for this study gave similar answers about the reasons for and the intent of the policy. I was satisfied that I had reached data saturation from the state-policy design team.

The remaining 10 interviewees came from the Norman City School District. Between the time that I started the IRB application process and when I actually began collecting data for this study, the superintendent of Norman City schools retired. After confirming with the new superintendent that Norman City schools would still participate in this study, I decided to interview both the recently retired superintendent and the current superintendent. My rationale for interviewing the recently retired superintendent was that he was the acting superintendent when the credit flexibility policy was initiated at the state level and subsequently implemented in the district. However, I also included the acting superintendent because the study is concerned with the current state of relationships and opportunities as they relate to the implementation of the policy. If this study did not include the perspective of the chief policy maker in the district (i.e. the superintendent), then the findings would not present the most accurate representation.

After interviewing the former and current superintendent, I recruited the school leader from each of the four high school academies in the Norman City School District. I wanted to speak to each of the principals because I was eager to search for similarities and differences in implementation of the district’s Credit Flex Policy. I visited three of the four school district principals in their offices to conduct their interviews. Each interview lasted for about 45 minutes and was recorded. Those recordings were sent to a
transcriptionist who provided me with a typed transcript of the interviews that I used for data analysis.

During the interviews, each principal indicated that the person responsible for implementing the district’s Credit Flex Policy in their academy was the school counselor. Each school counselor was willing to participate, and during my interviews with them, they indicated that no teachers or other school personnel were involved in the implementation of credit flexibility; thus, I decided that interviewing teachers about credit flex would not be contributive to the study.

Document Analysis

Another data collection tool used in this study was document analysis. “Documents corroborate observations and interviews and thus make your findings more trustworthy” (Glesne, 2006, p. 65). Analyzing documents also creates the possibility of adding a new dimension to the research, which can help shape the direction for interviews. Additionally, documents can provide historical and demographic data. Both historic and current documents can provide rich information for researchers and a nonintrusive method for data collection (Glesne, 2006). Wolcott (as cited in Glesne, 2006, p. 164) offers three steps for making connection in the data. The three steps, description, analysis, and interpretation, were applied to this data analysis. The documents were analyzed for content (i.e. description), for themes (i.e. analysis), and for interpretation.

There are multiple methods for choosing which documents to analyze for a study. By using a combination of the “anything you can get your hands on” approach and a
“targeted sampling” approach (Linders, 2008, p. 17-18), I treated each document as a truth in itself, using the research question to inform the decision of which documents to use. I was able to gather several types of documents (i.e. board policies, state policies, building-level communication, credit flexibility applications) and multiple examples of similar types of documents (e.g. credit flex application forms, communication to parents from building-level leadership regarding credit flex, etc.) from each research site in the study.

For this study, I gathered documents from the Ohio Department of Education and Norman City schools. I was able to gather 17 documents from Ohio’s Department of Education that were used as resources and guidance for the implementation of Credit Flex. These were helpful documents, because they illuminated the policy aims of the policy design team. The documents from Norman City Schools included guidance about credit flexibility in the student handbook, and the form used by school counselors to document credits earned through credit flexibility.

An important thing for researchers to remember when using documents is that documents themselves are created with a purpose. It is the responsibility of the researcher to examine and document the meaning of the documents, and to provide context for the meaning of the documents (Linders, 2008). Not all documents sources should be given equal importance nor should they be viewed as documentation of a situation’s absolute reality.

The number of documents I was able to collect from the Ohio’s state education agency about the implementation of Credit Flex indicated that the department of
education considered the perspective of several different stakeholders when they were crafting policy-implementation guidance. For example, the state agency issued guidance for special interest groups such as special education, career and technical education, gifted education advocates, and athletes.

A limitation of relying on documents as a method of data collection is the information gap that exists either in existing documents or the absence of documents that the researcher is searching for. The researcher must contend with what is available (Linders, 2008). For example, in this study, I was unable to gain access to every document that was created about credit flexibility in Ohio. For example, there were almost certainly email communications between policymakers at the Department of Education during the time of credit flex implementation. Those emails may have included details about the original policy aims, conversations about unintended consequences, and different versions of the credit flexibility policy.

Other potentially valuable documents at the state-agency level that I did not have access to are the original draft versions of policy guidance. Those original policy documents would have been valuable to this study, as they would have provided detail about guidance that was or was not originally included in the final policy guidance documents.

There were also documents from the Norman City School District that I did not have access to for this study. For example, email communication between school officials and email communication between school officials and students and parents detailing the district’s credit flexibility implementation would have been valuable to this
study since they would have provided written records of correspondence regarding credit flexibility in the district.

Management of Data

Preserving confidentiality for research participants was important in this study. Study participants shared sensitive information such as their opinions of the state-level policy and details of their personal experiences with policy implementation in the K-12 school setting. Some participants shared anecdotes of students and friends overcoming barriers to earning credits and graduating from high school. Some shared stories of colleagues implementing alternative plans for students to earn credits before such plans were the norm in Ohio high schools. Another reason to maintain confidentiality is because many of the participants shared information that detailed how they were implementing their school district’s policy. If confidentiality was not preserved, participants that were still employees of the school district could potentially suffer negative consequences for not implementing the policy as the district policymakers intended.

In order to preserve confidentiality, personally identifiable information has been replaced with codes or pseudonyms. During data collection and analysis, data was secured on a password-protected computer and/or a locked cabinet that was only accessible to the researcher. The data from this study will be maintained for 5 years, after which it will be destroyed according to departmental policy.

In order to manage the artifacts collected in this study, I purchased a license for access to MAXQDA research software. MAXQDA is a database product, originally
released in 1989, that allows researchers to upload and categorize data artifacts. In MAXQDA there is functionality to support coding data, to organize research materials into folders, and to retrieve data in multiple combinations of artifacts and codes.

Reliability and Validity

When using a case study methodology, transparency about the entire process of data collection methods and analysis provides rigor for the research process, and lends credibility to the findings (Gilson, 2012). This transparency reflects reflexivity in the researcher. A critical component in qualitative studies, regardless of the methodology, is the reflexivity of the researcher. Reflexivity requires the researcher to go beyond simple reflection to provide a “road map” (Glesne, 2006, p. 127) of the decisions the researcher makes. A high degree of reflexivity can provide the reader of the study an enhanced sense of confidence in the interpretations asserted in the study. In order to clearly display reflexivity, a researcher must demonstrate that he or she is aware of how his or her perspectives shape the study and the conclusions that are drawn (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Reflexivity in a study is evidenced by analysis and discussion of the biases and perceptions the researcher brings to the research, why and how research sites were chosen, and why and how the methods were chosen. Another part of reflexivity is a frank discussion of how access and entrée to the research site(s) was navigated by the researcher. Additionally, Potter (as cited in Glesne, 2006) asserts that a study with a high degree of reflexivity will acknowledge the construction and subjectivity of each research participant’s reality and the construction and subjectivity of the researcher’s own reality.
Reflections about reflexivity

My own experience as an educator and as a leader in the educational non-profit sector was undoubtedly a benefit to my ability to secure access and entrée for this study. It is likely that I could have conducted this study in a number of districts in the region where I work. I have built and maintained professional networks with superintendents over the course of the decade of educational experience I have in the region. The majority of the superintendents in the area where I live and work were aware of my pursuit of a doctorate degree. Over the course of several years, I had conversations with most of the superintendents about their own ideas about the importance of a PhD as part of a resume of a superintendent.

I settled on the Norman City School District as my district of choice through earlier conversations with my advisor and candidacy exam committee. Earlier versions of this study considered a study across school districts. However, when I considered what questions I was really trying to answer, and what was a reasonable scope for a dissertation study, it became clear that a single district with multiple implementations of Credit Flex would be ideal. Norman City schools, with their four high school academies, individual principals, and staff for each school was a great candidate for studying multiple implementations of the policy in the district.

It was easy for me to secure the Norman City School District as the site for this study. In addition to the relationships with area superintendents that I described earlier, the district had already served as a site for me to complete class assignments throughout my superintendent licensure program. Additionally, I have provided consultation for the
Norman City School District in the form of feedback about possible building designs, development of a high-school internship program, and training teachers to implement a literacy program.

My previous relationship with the Norman City School District affected the research process in ways that I did not foresee. I found myself uncomfortable and disappointed when I interviewed the principals and school counselors. Their comments and perceptions about the implementation and potential of Credit Flex were far from the ideal state that the policy design team hoped for. I was uncomfortable when they would tell me things that were in conflict with what their superintendent had told me about how Credit Flex was supposed to be implemented in their district.

I have come to regard that discomfort as a trade-off for gaining access to the principals and school counselors for the study, as I am unsure that I would have had success getting such open-door access at a district where I had no prior relationships. If I had not had a relationship with the school personnel in advance of the study, I suspect that the high-profile nature of my current employment would have made district personnel uncomfortable with my research for fear that I may uncover information that would shed a negative light on their district.

It is also likely that my personal and professional relationships with the members of the policy design team played a role in their willingness to participate in this study. They are each busy people with senior jobs in high-profile institutions with a national footprint. If I had not known them prior to this study, it is unlikely I would have even been able to recruit them for this study.
The relationships that helped garner access to participants also created a space where they felt comfortable speaking to me for at least an hour. During those conversations, they shared personal stories about their own aspirations for Ohio’s Credit Flex Policy. Some of them shared deeply personal stories, and one was even moved to tears when recalling a story about the importance of sending the right messages to students. I do not think I would have been able to get such rich data if I had not known the participants on a personal and professional level before the research started.

Beyond reflexivity

Beyond the broad concept of reflexivity, there are specific criteria that should be embedded in a study that uses a case study methodology. The four constructs of validity in case study research are construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability (Gilson, 2012; Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2009).

Construct validity is a measure of goodness of fit of the measures of the study and the concepts being studied. Given that qualitative researchers use personal judgment (instead of a controlled experiment) to identify and analyze findings, construct validity in a qualitative study is achieved through the triangulation of multiple data sources, establishing chains of evidence, and checking preliminary findings with participants (Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2009). This study demonstrates construct validity through triangulation of data from multiple people in the same role (i.e. principals, counselors), and through triangulation of different types of sources (i.e. the district’s credit flex form). Additionally, as an attempt to verify preliminary findings, I asked interview participants for their reactions to my preliminary findings. Finally, as a mechanism for
proving a chain of evidence, I maintained a comprehensive collection of evidence and data, and reference transcripts and documents for each finding that I present.

Internal validity is a defense of the inferences that researchers make in their findings (Yin, 2009). Internal validity is demonstrated through pattern matching, explanation building, and use of logic models (Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2009). In this study, I paid particular attention to patterns that emerged in interviews, and documented those patterns in the description of findings. Additionally, I was careful to provide evidence from the interviews and documents to support the inferences that were asserted in the findings. I did not use a logic model approach in this study.

External validity is the definition of the “domain to which a study’s findings can be generalized” (Yin, 2009, p. 40). Applying findings from a case study to another organization can be a challenge in case study research, given that the aim of qualitative case study research is about understanding the how and why of a situation (Gilson, 2012; Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2009). However, qualitative researchers can enhance the external validity of their findings by drawing on theory and replication logic (Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2009). In this study, external validity was demonstrated through application of findings to literature, and through replication of methodology across different site in the school district.

Finally, reliability is a concept that should be evident in case study research. Reliability is the idea that another researcher could replicate the study, and would find similar results. Reliability in case study research is achieved through thorough documentation of research procedures, using protocols like semi-structured interviews,
and developing a database of evidence from the research (Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2009). In order to demonstrate reliability in this study, I collected a data corpus and I documented my research practices.

Complimentary to Yin’s (2009) concepts, Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide recommendations to inspire a high degree of trustworthiness in the findings of the study. The four cornerstones of Lincoln and Guba’s trustworthiness are credibility (i.e. confidence that the conclusions of the study are true), transferability (i.e. relevance of the findings of the study in other situations), dependability (i.e. evidence that the conclusions of the study are reliable and could be repeated), and confirmability (i.e. the degree to which a study’s findings have been influenced by the researcher’s personal preconceptions and agendas).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide specific strategies for achieving each of the four components of trustworthiness. To establish credibility, Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend that a researcher should triangulate the sources of data and the methods for collecting data and search the findings for and analyzing instances of disconfirming data (i.e. negative case analyses). Furthermore, including a well-developed data corpus for referential adequacy and including member checks that happen both in process and terminally will increase the credibility of a study.

In this research, the analysis of documents from multiple sources and analysis of data gleaned from interviews with multiple sources were used to triangulate findings. As the researcher, I sought to triangulate findings to document and share “multiple perspectives—not a single truth” (Patton, 2002, p. 267).
As another method for increasing the credibility of the findings of the study, the research process included a close analysis and documentation of disconfirming data. In this study, I found disconfirming data between the superintendent and principal data sets as well as within the principal data set about how Credit Flex was being implemented. These findings are described in detail in Chapter 4.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that member checks are a viable method for increasing the credibility of a study. The advantages to member checks include the opportunity for participants to respond to the interpretations of the researcher. However, after careful consideration, I did not include member checks as part of this study. This was rooted in a concern that school-district-level participants would attempt to change their responses to reflect a different implementation of the Credit Flex Policy than what they had originally described. I was also concerned that members of the Credit Flex Policy design team would be hesitant to include aspects of their interviews in the study.

Scholars such as Angen (2000), Morse (1994), and Sandelowski (1993) argue that member checks are not as valuable a component of a credible qualitative study as once thought. They assert that asking participants to confirm interpretations by the researcher is antithetical to the notion that at the heart of qualitative research is a co-created truth that is not an absolute standard against which we should measure how others interpret and experience the world. Additionally, Angen (2000), Morse (1994), and Sandelowski (1993) offer that a participant may have changed his or her mind post-original interview.
and may wish to present a different portrayal of their work than the one that was originally captured by the researcher.

In order to invoke a sense of transferability, the study should include a thick description of the findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that a thick description is one that contains deep, rich detail so that the reader can develop ideas about how the study’s findings could be relevant to other people, settings, and times. The detailed findings in Chapter 4 of this study are designed to provide a sense of transferability.

In order to achieve dependability, researchers must include an inquiry audit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In an inquiry audit, the researcher shares his or her findings with another researcher who is not involved in the study to examine the data collected and the findings asserted by the researcher. The external researcher provides his or her perspective about whether the data support the findings of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through meetings with my advisor, I have embedded an inquiry audit into the research design so that the reader has a sense that there is a consistency and repeatability to the findings of the study.

The final element of a study that enhances the trustworthiness of a researcher’s findings is confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to provide a sense that the findings of a study are not overly influenced by the researcher’s personal biases (i.e. confirmability), the research practices in the study must include an external audit, triangulation, reflexivity, and an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Many of the strategies that increase the reader’s sense of confirmability are strategies that serve a dual purpose. Tactics like triangulation, which is necessary for credibility, and an
external audit, which is necessary for dependability, are both procedures that are already embedded into the research design. Triangulation in included in the study when different sources and types of data are compared to each other. By using multiple data gathering techniques and by exploring multiple perspectives (i.e. local school district superintendents, building principals, and members of the original policymaking committee), this study includes triangulation of data in order to provide a high degree of trustworthiness in the assertions and interpretations of the study findings (Glesne, 2006).

The final two strategies for lending a sense of confirmability to the study are an audit trail and reflexivity. An audit trail is a clear documentation of a researcher’s findings from data collection through analysis and publication (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As an audit trail, this study includes documentation of the steps of the research project. Additionally, this study includes visuals from the MAXQDA database as evidence of the rich nature of the data and the organized and thoughtful approach to the data analysis.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that I have brought my own biases and perceptions to the research that I conduct. By acting as a research instrument, instead of using a survey or controlled experimental design, I have interpreted the data I collected through my own lens of experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Glesne, 2006). A bias that I brought to this study that influenced the study was my perception that the Credit Flexibility Policy was a good policy. Based on my own experience as a former practitioners, and my beliefs that school systems should personalize educational experiences for students I
approached this study from a belief that Credit Flexibility Policy could be a good tool for increasing equity in education.

Additionally, given the qualitative research techniques that were used for this study, there are other limitations. This study is an example of one school district among Ohio’s more than 600 public school districts. Since qualitative methods are used to develop a deep understanding of a specific setting, there will not be a correlational generalization that would be possible from a quantitative study with a large sample size (Glesne, 2006).

This study is an isolated study of one single policy implementation in the district. It does not examine the fidelity of policy implementations of other district policies; nor does it investigate current events in the district that may influence how school leaders and school counselors think about Credit Flex. This study aims to provide an analysis of the situation in the district concerning Credit Flex implementation, rather than a checklist for superintendents to use in their own district during policy implementation.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

The Genesis of Ohio’s Credit Flexibility Policy

In 2006, Ohio’s General Assembly adopted the Ohio Core Curriculum. This curriculum change, known as Senate Bill 311 (SB 311), changed the graduation requirements for Ohio’s high school students so that they needed an additional math credit to graduate. This additional math credit requirement brought the required math credit number to four and included a stipulation that students were mandated to successfully complete Algebra II or an equivalent. The Ohio Core Curriculum also included an adjustment to the science credit requirement for Ohio’s high school diploma bringing the total number of science credits to three and requiring that at least one of those science classes be a lab-based science (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009).

The Ohio Core also included a requirement that, by March 31, 2009, Ohio’s State Board of Education should adopt a policy that allowed for “students to earn units of high school credit based on a demonstration of subject area competency, instead of or in combination with completing hours of classroom instruction” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009 p. 4). In SB 311, after the State Board of Education adopted the
policy allowing students to earn credits in alternative ways, there was a requirement for
local school districts to comply with the policy. SB 311 stated, “school districts,
community schools, and chartered nonpublic schools shall comply with the provisions of
the plan, phasing them in during the 2009-10 school year” (Ohio Credit Flexibility
Design Team, 2009, p. 4).

In 2008, in preparation for the State Board of Education’s adoption of a plan to
allow students to earn high school credits by demonstrating mastery of content
knowledge, the Ohio Department of Education formed a design team to present a plan to
the State Board of Education that would provide a roadmap for compliance with SB 311.
To inform their work designing the solution to the competency based credit-earning
policy for Ohio, the design team investigated the current state of flexibility of time, and
flexibility of credit earning opportunities that were in play in Ohio’s schools. The design
team also studied how other states provided for alternative methods for earning high
school credits and examined existing policies and programs in Ohio that provided
alternative pathways for students to earn high school credits (Ohio Credit Flexibility
Design Team, 2009).

The Credit Flexibility Design Team was made up of 12 individuals from different
stakeholder groups in Ohio. The groups represented included higher education
institutions, career and technical education centers, superintendents, teachers, principals,
the Ohio Department of Education, and the teachers’ union. At the conclusion of their
study of alternative methods for earning high school credit, the design team submitted a
report to the State Board of Education detailing a plan for Ohio to implement credit
flexibility. This plan was called “New Emphasis on Learning: Ohio’s credit flexibility plan shifts the focus from ‘seat time to performance’” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009).

To investigate the perspective of the policy makers of Ohio’s Credit Flexibility Policy, I analyzed documents from the Ohio Department of Education, relying heavily on the report issued by the design team. Additionally, I interviewed three individuals, pseudonyms follow, who were involved in the design team work and in writing the policy.

One of the participants in this study, Nick, had 15 years of experience in one of Ohio’s urban districts; during his time in the urban district, he was a teacher and a senior-level central-office administrator. During the credit flexibility policy design work, Nick was a senior staff member at Ohio’s Department of Education. He reported directly to the state superintendent.

Another of the study participants from the credit flexibility policy design team was Adam. During the credit flexibility policy design work, Adam was the building principal of a large suburban high school. Over the course of his career, he was a teacher, assistant principal, and athletic coach. According to the State of Ohio school report card (2009), during the 2009 school year (when Adam was participating in the credit flexibility design effort) his school enrolled more than 2,000 students. The students at the school were 82% white, with 25% of students economically disadvantaged, and 17% were students with disabilities.
The final state-level research participant for this study was Jill. Jill was not a former educator; she was a policy scholar. In her own words, her job at the Ohio Department of Education during the credit flexibility design process was to “facilitate the process to the point of getting a vision policy document.”

None of these research participants holds the same job they held at the time of the design team work. Each of the three is now a senior-level executive employed by three separate non-profit education organizations with national footprints, and all three have jobs that are focused on bringing change to education systems across the nation.

What is Credit Flexibility, and why was it started

Ohio’s Credit Flexibility Policy requires that local boards provide the following:

- Students may earn credits through any of the following or a combination thereof:
  a) The completion of courses;
  b) Testing out or otherwise demonstrating mastery of the course content; or
  c) Pursuit of one or more “educational options” (e.g., distance learning, educational travel, independent study, an internship, music, arts, after-school program, community service or engagement project and sports).
- Issuance of credit will be determined locally by teachers or through the use of:
  a) a multi-disciplinary team;
  b) a professional panel from the community; or
  c) a state performance-based assessment.
• Courses and educational options may be counted for full or partial credit and/or credit in more than one area, such as multiple academic areas or academic and career-technical credit, if partial mastery is demonstrated.

• Students who test out of coursework can use one or more mechanisms from the state’s pre-approved list, including various commercial assessments generated in accordance with quality guidelines and/or through peer reviewed processes (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 14).

According to three of the state-level policy designers, prior to Credit Flexibility, the Carnegie Unit was the foundation for Ohio’s high-school system for earning credits and progressing toward graduation. The Carnegie Unit is a measure of the amount of time needed to earn a credit in the State of Ohio. As described in the Ohio Revised Code 3313.603, for a typical class, students needed to be enrolled in a class for 120 hours to receive credit. For a lab-based science class, 170 hours of credit were required.

No member of the design team with whom I spoke found inherent value in the Carnegie Unit; some called it an arbitrary measure. Nick and Adam asserted that the Carnegie Unit originated as a tool for tracking the time of teachers and translating that time into a year’s worth of experience and corresponding pay for that experience. This assertion, that the Carnegie Unit was originated as a mechanism for counting teachers’ experience, is supported in the design-team report to the State Board of Education. The report states, “historically, Carnegie Units were used to account for teachers’ time and in determining pay and retirement” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 23).
In the report to the State Board of Education, the design team argued “Carnegie structures as currently designed do not guarantee learning for each and every student” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 6). The design team went on to highlight the problems that existed with the Carnegie Unit mechanism by writing that “the Carnegie Unit isn't a reliable measure of learning. It focused on inputs (i.e., seat time) as opposed to the actual results of learning” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 23).

Nick recalls discussions at the state level about putting the Carnegie Unit to the side, and “not worrying” about time, but Nick also recalls that no one really knew how to operationalize an alternative to the Carnegie Unit. Nick surmised that the Carnegie Unit was such a fundamental element of the organizational structure that “not worrying about it” was not an option. The new Credit Flex policy was supposed to be an additional option for students; it was designed to be an alternative to the Carnegie Unit—not a replacement. This idea is supported in the report to the State Board of Education. Early in the report, the design team states,

The design team is not recommending the elimination of Carnegie units or “seat time” requirements altogether. Rather, this report and plan retains seat time as one option and expands the total number of options for earning credit by adding demonstration of subject area competency and strictures that support it irrespective of any time requirements (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 5).
The Crusade for a Better Way

The first theme that was evident in each of the interviews was that each of the policy designers anticipated that Ohio’s Credit Flex policy was going to be an improvement over what was already happening in schools across Ohio. Each member of the policy design team with whom I spoke talked about the Credit Flex policy as a mechanism for change in Ohio’s education system that would yield something better for students.

The design team’s report to the State Board of Education supports the recollection of the study participants’ perception that the credit flexibility policy was going to be an improvement over the current circumstances of earning credits in Ohio high schools. The six design principles that drove the work of the design team were (emphasis included in original text):

- Principle 1: The plan must address the unique needs of each student and therefore all students and the key elements of the plan should be designed to personalize learning in ways that make it more relevant to students’ academic needs and non-academic barriers to learning, particularly mental and physical health disparities.

- Principle 2: All credit must have equitable value regardless of how it is earned and student records and other documentation should not differentiate credit based on how it is earned.
• Principle 3: The plan must be focused on **supporting and accelerating student learning**, and should reflect the need for students’ readiness for careers and college without remediation.

• Principle 4: The plan’s implementation should be **driven by incentives** designed to change behaviors and improve results.

• Principle 5: The plan must **value the expertise and experience of education professionals** by allowing them to put what they know into practice and it should value instruction provided by teachers and school leaders who are well-trained, adequately supported and provided with ongoing professional development.

• Principle 6: The plan should build on the education system’s capacity to **support the academic achievement and personal development of all students** by (a) providing educators and students with more options and greater flexibility, and (b) improving the ability of educators and school leaders to meet growing performance expectations.

**Credit flex to address inequities in the current system**

One particular improvement hoped for by this study’s participants was a more equitable learning experience for all kids. In their interviews, each expressed perceptions that the current high school experience for students in Ohio’s schools was not an equitable one. The idea of Ohio’s Credit Flex Policy as an attempt to address an equity issue was mentioned in each of the interviews with the state policy design team.
Adam’s rationale for supporting Credit Flex as a welcome change to the Carnegie Unit system for earning high school credits was the ability for the new system to provide a personalized approach to education. Based on his years of experience as the principal of a large high school in Ohio, his opinion was that graduation from high school “is like running a race—for some people the race is a marathon and for others, the race is a hundred-yard dash.” Adam thought Credit Flex would allow educators to personalize education for those who were running the marathon and for those who were running the hundred-yard dash.

According to Jill, there was widespread understanding in the field that the needs of all students were not being met as well as they should have been in the Carnegie unit system of education. She said it was “never hard” to get an educator to think about a student that wasn't being served well by the system in place in high schools where students earned credit based on the amount of time they spent in a classroom.

Both Adam and Nick (also both former practitioners in the education field) supported Jill's assertion that the Carnegie Unit system for earning credit was a one-size-fits-all approach to education that, in reality, fits only some of the students. Adam characterized earning credit in Ohio's high schools as "the credit game." He asserted that there are students who "struggle as they start to play the credit game," and even mentioned "students of poverty have a different game."

Adam had no difficulty remembering specific examples of students who struggled to play the credit game at his high school. Many of the students who were easy for him to recall quickly were students of poverty. He remembered students who were consistently
late for their first-period class because they had to help get younger siblings to school. Adam characterized those students as those "whose first job was to take care of younger siblings." He recalled that his school had no plan to meet the needs of students who had such significant responsibilities outside of earning credits in high school.

In Adam’s experience, students who took care of their siblings were caught in a cycle of punishment for tardiness and inability to serve the punishment; “so the idea that we have policies for kids of poverty that, once you’re truant so many times you are assigned a Saturday school, and then it’s two Saturday schools, and before you know it the kid’s suspended because their job is to get their younger siblings on the bus.”

Adam saw credit flexibility as a way to personalize the high school experience for students in poverty and help them maximize their credit earning experiences based on what they were doing outside of school.

Look at the courses that we teach in school. You know. You teach hospitality. You teach home ec. You teach skills for living. You know? I’ve got news for you: Some of these kids growing up in poverty and raising their younger siblings by themselves? Those are real-life skills for life. So how do you find a way to allow students to reflect, talk about the experiences, figure out what they need supplemented on, because maybe they’re not doing a good job with helping their younger siblings play and exercise an hour a day and so on so forth. And how do you help them do that so they can gain a credit, so they can be credit rich.

Adam remembered similar challenges for kids who worked after-school jobs. They could not attend after-school detentions or tutoring, so they were at a disadvantage. Adam argued that with a credit flexibility policy, it was possible for schools to think of time differently and to meet the needs of kids who had greater responsibilities than earning credits. He believed that "even a kid in a fast food restaurant needed to know
something about handling food and food safety." Adam wondered why schools resisted wide-scale offering of a home economics credit for that kind of experience.

So what Credit Flex does is it allows you to provide flexibility within a schedule. So I’m just going to suggest, even a kid working in a fast food restaurant needs to know something about handling food and food safety and so on and so forth, so what kind of home ec credit could you structure with that for them? Not to say that they wouldn’t have to take assessments or do some papers or have people go out and see what they have to do and do that on-site validation of what they know and don’t know. But a kid could get credit for that, where they just don’t have time to get all the credits out of the way that they need to in high school.

In addition to a "credit game," Adam also saw the Carnegie Unit system of earning high school credit as "collecting 21 gold coins." He said, "as I tell people, it's about collecting your 21 gold coins. You need 21 gold coins to get out." Adam was an advocate for Credit Flex because it allowed kids more opportunity to earn their 21 gold coins. Adam offered that Credit Flex would "help students that maybe didn't get all of their coins their freshmen year." He offered that sometimes kids "have that teacher who lights that fire, and they realize I can be more than I thought I could be, and now they want to do other things, but halfway through their sophomore year, they realize they only got three credits." Credit Flex would provide options for kids to catch up and earn those missing credits.

Nick became emotional to the point of tears as he shared a story of his best friend, “who is a guy who manages six multi-million dollar restaurants.” Nick asserted that his friend considers himself “a dumb hillbilly”; he thinks his friend is “convinced” of that because his school system told him “a thousand times, in every which way.” Nick says his friend is “probably the smartest person [he] know[s].” He recounted the skills and
habits his friend has that are not typically measured in school: “perseverance and a lot of
tenacity.” This friend reportedly had to fight his way through the school system to “make
something of himself,” and was, like many students in Nick’s experience, expected to
“run through walls in order to be successful.” Summing up his assessment on the matter,
he added, “I don't think life should be that hard.”

Credit Flex: A policy for the everyday kid

A second theme that emerged from the interviews with Nick, Jill, and Adam was
that credit flexibility was supposed to be a policy that addressed the needs of the average
kid. This policy was supposed to make high school a better experience for every kid.
Each of the participants expressed passionate beliefs that the needs of students were not
really being met in the current system that relied on Carnegie Units to earn a credit.
According to Jill, the “bottom line” about Credit Flex is that “it was just an opportunity to
do better.” According to Jill, high school education was “just lagging in meeting kids’
needs.” Jill likened it to a system of punishment and rewards in which educators had the
“responsibility to change elements of their system to improve the experience of learning
for their students.” In her opinion, students felt the brunt of the deficiencies in the
Carnegie Unit system; Jill stated:

So I think, in many ways, you know, I saw it as educators' responsibility to change
elements of their system to improve the experience of learning for their students. Getting
back to the who gets penalized here? Kids do. And it's because of the system design. Not
because any educator or leader is bad. The system is just lagging in meeting kids' needs.
We could do a heck of a lot better. This is really about, like, bottom line in this thing. It
was just an opportunity to do better.
Other members of the state’s policy design team offered similar perspectives about the new Credit Flex policy as an attempt to address an equity problem. The idea that Credit Flex was for every student and not a specific group of students was identified as a theme of the design team policy design group. Nick explained that the new Credit Flex policy was designed as a way to provide flexibility to meet the needs of all kids—whether those kids were on the “gifted spectrum or the high remediation spectrum.” Jill said simply, “Credit Flex was supposed to address, ‘What about everybody else?’” She felt that the differentiator for the Credit Flex policy was that it was not just for a certain group of students.

Adam remembered, “one of the things that we kept charging ourselves as a group is this: “Credit Flex is for kids. It’s not just for the athletically gifted or brilliant. It’s got to be for all kids.” Nick echoed that comment with his own recollection: Credit Flex “was always presented as ‘we’ve got a problem for kids, and we need flexibility to fix it, whether they be on the gifted spectrum or the high remediation spectrum.’ The newness of this is that it was for all.”

The idea that credit flexibility was an option for every student was articulated in the recommendations to the State Board of Education as: “Any student is eligible to be considered for alternative ways for earning credits” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 14). The recommendations go on to state: “The state’s policy is intended for any student. Accordingly local boards are prohibited from restrictive language such as eligible students ‘must have a B average’ to participate” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 14).
The Promise of Credit Flex as a Solution—Hopes and Dreams

The design team’s report to the State Board of Education projected benefits that various stakeholder groups would yield as a result of the adoption of a statewide credit flexibility policy. For students and families, the report promised increased autonomy, choice, course options and better preparation for the future. For educators, the report identified benefits like more flexibility and autonomy to meet student needs, more opportunities to work in teams and across disciplines, and shared accountability for student achievement. For schools and districts, the report suggested benefits such as increased capacity to offer varied electives for students, the ability to share costs and benefits of student learning, and flexibility to meet the needs of students, thereby increasing ratings on the Local Report Card (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009).

The design team recommendations went beyond benefits to the local schools and projected benefits to the greater educational ecosystem. For example, the design team report offered that business and community will benefit from credit flexibility through relationships with students and educators that will illuminate the state of industry, the opportunity to add value to the local educational system, and the ability to recruit Ohio’s top talent into the workplace and into the local communities. The report also detailed benefits to the state of Ohio. According to the design team’s findings, Ohio would benefit from credit flexibility by yielding reduction in dropout numbers; this would signify a better return on investment of Ohio tax dollars. Additionally, the report offered increased efficiencies in the Kindergarten-to college- to career pipeline, more workers who are
better prepared, and benefits to the well-being of communities (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009).

While all study participants were eager to move beyond the Carnegie Unit as the primary method for earning high school credit, Nick was particularly excited at the prospect of eliminating dependence on the Carnegie Unit. He saw the Credit Flex policy as a “huge opportunity to transform what education looked like in the State of Ohio.” He asserted, “we always test kids to find out if they are smart instead of finding out how they are smart.” Nick also asserted that the intent of Credit Flex was to provide more opportunity for students to earn high school credits in the areas where they were smart. He believes “there’s a whole group of kids who don’t think they’re smart. And I think it’s criminal. And I think all kids are smart, just differently.”

This participant was particularly passionate about the role that educators should play in public education. He said, “we are the caretakers; we do not own the education system. The people, the community actually owns the system. So, when they ask for more we should be able to deliver more.” He saw educators as part of “a democratic system” in which educators were “responsible to the community” to produce an “excellent school.”

Nick held negative feelings about accountability systems that existed during the time of the Credit Flex design work, and those that still exist today. He felt such accountability systems were and are misleading and inadequate: “I think our current system of accountability is almost criminal in terms of what an excellent school is.” His perception that even “excellent schools” are not meeting the needs of all students was a
common thread throughout the conversation. He felt that districts too often approached students with a “one-size-fits-all model” in which “all kids should take this class at this time because we have a teacher here at this time.”

Nick felt that school districts needed to regard students as “customers” with specific and distinct needs. According to Nick, the ideal state would be one in which districts “look at the education process differently and realign the resources to meet the needs of kids instead of driving the kids into what they already have.” He felt that too often districts spent time thinking about “how to impose rules” on kids instead of approaching students with a perspective of “let’s get them what they need and then figure out the rules afterwards.”

In their report, the design team included a section that echoed Nick’s passion for reaching students where they were and meeting their needs. In the section titled “What if…we designed high school around students’ needs?” The design team offered several scenarios that they predict would occur if high schools in Ohio were designed to meet the needs of students. The scenarios they offered are “What if…”

- Flexible schedules were offered to accommodate more working students and to acknowledge brain research that says that teenage brains are wired for late nights and late mornings?
- Students could test out or graduate early instead of sitting in class bored?
- Students could earn credit simultaneously in more than one content area through real world projects and problems that they select based on their interests?
• Students could earn credit for learning experiences that included postsecondary, internships, educational travel, online learning, and community/social service?

• Learning experiences nurtured students’ skills in understanding their own strengths, their local and global communities, and their goals and aspirations?

(Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 7).

Credit Flex was already happening—just not for every kid

The fact that Credit Flex was happening in the State of Ohio before there was an official policy for it was noted by each of the policy design members. Some members that were interviewed for this study offered multiple specific examples of Credit Flex-like plans they had personally designed and implemented for students who needed something more personalized for students to earn credit. The design team report stated they “heard presentations on practices, whole school models, and state models. It learned that there is evidence that credit flexibility in some form already occurs in Ohio and that the state is not always privy to this information” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 7).

In their report to the state board, the group noted, “alternative education, credit recovery, dropout prevention/intervention, enrichment/acceleration, independent study, early college and dual credit are all largely seen as outside the regular system. Yet, all these strategies work to address individual student needs and typically do not always adhere to seat time requirements to award credit” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 7). The report goes on to assert that in many traditional school settings, there is
an “over reliance on inside-school operations” the report argues that this over reliance on operations acts as a “barrier to more innovative notions of crediting proof of learning whether or not it occurred in school” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 7).

Adam recalled an instance in which he personally implemented a credit flexibility plan for a student before Credit Flex was adopted as a board policy in his district. As Adam recalled it, the recession of 2007 affected the community where his school was located, and the effects lasted very long. He said the county was “first in and last out of the recession.” As a result of the recession, the residential housing market struggled to thrive. Adam remembers the “very best kid in the construction trades” class came into school one day to drop out of school. The student was going to work with his father in the family construction business.

When asked why he was dropping out of school, Adam remembers the student saying, “Well, my dad’s going to lose his business. He can’t pay the people, and we’ve got three houses that are under roof; that we’ve got to get done and get to market. We’re going to lose everything we have. I don’t want to drop out of school, but I just have to.” That student was three credits shy of graduating from high school. Adam wanted that student to be able to graduate, so he developed a special plan for him. He worked with the local community college to have the student enrolled to complete an English class to count as his final English credit, and he worked with the construction trades teachers to make visits to the job sites and inspect the work to provide credit through independent study.
Although seemingly logical and sensible, that kind of individual plan for students was out of the norm prior to the credit flexibility policy. When asked how widely he shared that plan, Adam said, “I shared it with my boss, obviously. I wasn’t sharing with everybody.”

Jill and Nick expressed that, prior to the adoption of Credit Flex, it was commonplace for schools to make provisions to accommodate the needs of some but not all students. In the design team report, the team noted, “at least five provisions in the Ohio Revised Code already allow some flexibility, but operate as exemptions to standard procedures and practices” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 6). The design team found that Ohio had several options for “meeting individual learning needs of students, yet these are treated as exemptions to the regular education system” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 6).

Nick articulated that the design team tried to repackage the provisions that already existed for credit flexibility into one statewide policy:

We were trying to purposefully give more power and authority to the parents and to the student, which when you give more power to something, you’re taking power away from somebody else. So, we were taking power away. And actually, through our research with, like, New Hampshire and other people who had explored the Credit Flexibility policy, they felt that superintendents would be the biggest barrier for implementation. The irony is, there were four other policies and probably still are in state code that permit Credit Flexibility. Our policy was no different than the four ones that were already enacted. We just wanted to market and brand it differently.

According to Jill, students whose parents were effective advocates for their children often received alternative arrangements for their education. Often such parents were from families with higher income and political savvy about the best ways to
advocate for their children. Additionally, Jill pointed to the provisions that educators make for students on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) as examples to support the idea that some students were already receiving personalized learning experiences.

Students who qualify for an IEP are guaranteed, under federal law, a certain quality of education. It is not uncommon for schools to go to great lengths to personalize a student’s educational experience to meet the goals of an IEP. For example, provisions for students with an IEP could include, but are not limited to, an extended school year, transportation to and from school, a personal aide to accompany the student throughout the school day, and specific curriculum resources.

Jill’s discussion of such provisions was juxtaposed against the lack of personalization options for all students. She thought Ohio’s Credit Flex policy was an attempt to address the system design that made it difficult to personalize for the needs of every student. Credit Flex was supposed to address the question, “what about everybody else?”

Permissive Policy Because the Department of Education Has No Real Power

According to Nick, the State Department of Education “knew a lot of things were going on that we have no control over” when educators (e.g., Adam) were offering flexible-credit earning opportunities for students. He said the state board is a “political entity that needed to pick its fights carefully.” He also offered that the perception at the Department of Education was that the programs that were offering credit flexibility before it was an official policy “were trying to do it with the best intent for kids.”
The idea driving the Department of Education’s implementation plan was to find great examples of innovative implementation of credit flexibility and highlight those examples across the state. Jill’s perspective was that the flexibility aspect of implementation was critical to its success. She characterized the relationship between the Department of Education and local districts as one of “inherent resistance if you're in a local district to anything coming from the state.” She said, “There is a parent-child level of resistance” when districts perceived over-reaching from the Department of Education. According to Jill, when they tried to implement policy, the department faced criticism from school districts about lack of flexibility to adapt policy to the local context. School district leaders would say, “you don’t know what we need, you don’t know our kids, you don’t trust our leaders.”

Her recollection was that the design team understood that the local-control nature of Ohio’s education system would make a “thou shall” approach to policymaking, one that was met with resistance. The flexibility in the policy implementation plan was to build in agency and provide choice among the school districts so that they could be partners in the work, not recipients of the work.

The design team report echoes these sentiments; the report states, “local board of education will establish policy to guide implementation at the local level” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 11). The document goes on to stipulate that local boards may not establish policy that minimizes access or contradicts the policy, but they may “establish additional provisions as necessary” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 11).
Nick asserted that without cooperation and buy in from the educators at the local level, the policy would not succeed. According to Nick, although the Department of Education acts like it has power, “the only thing they can do is revoke a license.” His characterization of the implementation plan was:

There’s a real interesting notion of what the State Department of Education actually does. So, to some very small districts, and throughout the state of Ohio, they’re treated with royal reverence. And everything that comes out and every little blurb is read 10 times. And so, those people take it. Larger districts like Cleveland, Canton, Cincinnati and Columbus, you know, don’t even read the emails. And I’m also not sure that the Department of Education is the right people to lead reform. I think the department did everything possible within its realm. I think our policy strategy here was sneak it in the door, let it go out into the field, and hopefully somebody will pick it up. And when they do, you should shine a light on that.

The example of shining a light is articulated in the design team report as a recommendation the “Design Team recommends a strategy for harnessing the collective wisdom, energy, and leadership of ‘early adopters’ and using their experience to inform areas identified as in need of change” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 12). The report continues with a theory that early adoption of the credit flexibility policy will positively impact student achievement measures as reported on state and local accountability reports, and also includes a recommendation to develop a network of early adopters.

Fears About and Foes of Credit Flex

Although each member of the state-level policy design team discussed the potential for unintended consequences as a result of Ohio’s Credit Flex policy, the design team’s report made no note of these. The design team document does mention the role
teachers could play in Ohio’s credit flexibility plan, as well as the potential benefits teachers could enjoy as a result of implementation.

As a consideration of benefits for teachers, the design team document offers that teachers and counselors will experience at least four benefits. These benefits include greater flexibility and decision-making power in their work, opportunities for collaboration across disciplines, and a broader portfolio of professional experiences. The report also recommends that the state align policies surrounding teacher evaluations to make credit flexibility a more appealing option for teachers. The report allows that teachers should be looked upon favorably for participating in credit flexibility options by seeking support from external experts. The report states “experts in the community… provide an additional resource—an opportunity for specialized content, relevance and mentoring connections. Teachers should not be expected to know what these experts know and do” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 12).

Additionally, the design team report notes that issuing credit for learning that occurs outside of the classroom is a new skill for teachers, but the vision is for a partnership between teachers, schools, and external parties such that each sector operates from a position of strength. In their discussion of teachers, the design offers that “they [teachers] have a passion for students and their learning; they understand the expectation for learning outlined in the state’s academic and technical content standards” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 12).

The design team’s report to the State Board of Education charges the implementers of Ohio’s Credit Flex policy to honor the role of teachers. The design team
adopted a principle that the credit flexibility plan “must value the expertise and experience of education professionals by allowing them to put what they know into practice” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 9). The report offers, “credit will be a local decision. Teachers will make determinations about learning that influence the awarding of credit (as they do now)” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 10).

Among the interview participants, Jill spoke the most about the possibility of negative unintended consequences. She noted that policies “always create unintended consequences,” and characterized them as a “problem.” She also noted that as a policy design team, the members’ “responsibility, hope, and dream” was to try to control for unintended consequences that could unfold as a result of poor system design. She was careful to point out that unintended consequences could occur because of poor system design rather than malice:

What I'm saying is, people do the best they can within the system that's designed for them. And our responsibility — or at least our hope and dream — was to try to change up the design of the system to be more responsive both to students and to educators, embracing the spirit of the policy, which was well intended, but trying to control for unintended consequences which we could see unfolding without any malice, just because the system is poorly designed.

Nick conceded that in the design phase of the Credit Flex policy, the design team was aware that the policy could be seen as permission to “get rid of” art, physical education, and other subject areas that could be considered nonessential. He said the team knew “the notion of a well-rounded education was at risk.” Nick stated that he did not know of any examples of districts actually cutting “nonessential” classes.
Adam discussed another side of unintended consequences that could have come as a result of the Credit Flex policy. He asserted that students learn more in classes than just academic content standards and that if students were able to earn credits based solely on their content knowledge, there may be potential for them to miss out on the socialization aspects of high school—the “things you learn in class that go beyond the assessment” and make students “better adults.”

All three participants acknowledged anxiety regarding how teachers would be affected by Credit Flex. Nick offered that the ability to issue a credit has been a “sacred right” of a teacher—even a principal cannot override a teacher’s decision about issuing a credit, and credit flexibility would change the credit-issuing dynamic. Jill characterized the conversation about teachers and Credit Flex as “pools of anxiety” about job loss.

Adam also remembered fears among the teacher community of impending job loss, but reconciled those fears for himself by remembering that it was his duty to provide the best learning experiences for kids. His philosophy was “let’s do what’s best for kids, and hope it’s best for adults too, but if it comes to a choice I’m picking the kids.” Adam acknowledged the difficulties in maintaining a viewpoint like his. He said leadership in education is a tough job—it’s political—and if leaders are creating disruptions among the staff, it can make things uncomfortable for the board of education and superintendent in the district.

All three participants offered that, to the best of their knowledge, fears of the widespread firing of teachers as a result of Credit Flex never came to fruition.
Local Implementation of Credit Flexibility

To study how the Credit Flex policy was being interpreted and implemented in a local district context, I studied an Ohio school district where there were four high school academies. I selected the Norman City School District, a public school district with four high school academies that operate autonomously of each other. Each high school academy had a principal, and each principal was charged with leading his/her high school academy in the way that was best for the students enrolled in that academy.

According to the district’s website, the district enrolls 7,000 students. Of those students, 46% are White, 37% are Black, 10% are multi-racial, 5% are Hispanic, and 2% are Asian. A little over half of the student body is classified as economically disadvantaged; 12% of the students in Norman City School District are identified with a special need, and almost 7% are limited English proficient.

Implementation of Credit Flex in Norman

Worthy of note in the district’s application of Credit Flex are three things. First, the guidelines for students to earn their physical education and health credits through Credit Flex tie the credit with how much time a student spends working to earn the credit. The form clearly states, “60 hours for one .25 PE credit OR 120 hours for two .25 PE credits.” The form has no indication of the level of performance expected for students, and aside from logging their time and writing a two-page reflection, there is no indication of what successful completion of the Credit Flex physical education credit looks like. For example, successful completion could include factors like lower body mass index, improvements in strength or speed, or learning a new sport or exercise routine; instead,
students are reminded “if you need .25 credits of PE, then you must account for 60 hours of activity. If you need .50 credit of PE, then you must account for 120 hours of activity.”

The second noteworthy aspect of the fact that Norman City Schools use credit flexibility as the only option for earning physical education and health credit is that the district no longer hires physical education and health teachers. Although the original credit flexibility plan called for credit to be issued “by teachers or through the use of: a) a multi-disciplinary team; b) a professional panel from the community; or c) a state performance-based assessment” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009 p. 14), that was not possible in Norman City Schools because there were no physical education teachers and health teachers to award the credits. The original plan also called for the Carnegie Unit to “be retained, while students will have options for demonstrating subject areas competency and for earning credit” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 10). That is not happening in Norman either; there is not an option for students to take traditional physical education and health courses.

Finally, Credit Flex opportunities to fulfill physical education courses that principals in Norman could recall were all opportunities that required families to invest in out of school activities. Activities that were promoted during the interviews as examples of students earning their physical education and health credits through Credit Flex included figure skating, karate, horse back riding, swimming, participating in a Norman City Schools extra-curricular sport, gymnastics, and club sports.

The first interview from the Norman City School District was with the now-retired superintendent who was the district leader when Ohio passed the Credit Flex
policy. The second interview was with the current superintendent of the district. In this study, these participants are referred to as the original superintendent and new superintendent.

Both superintendents spoke of Credit Flex as a way to help the district achieve its goals of meeting the needs of individual students; they both thought it was a great opportunity for students and discussed credit flexibility as a positive part of the district course offerings. Both superintendents characterized principals at Norman City Schools as having significant autonomy.

Credit Flex—Good for Norman City School Students

Both superintendents identified the Credit Flex policy as something that would help the district better meet the needs of students. They spoke of the credit flexibility policy with enthusiasm for the potential it provided for their district. The original superintendent said, “If Credit Flex is an opportunity for you to demonstrate competencies that accelerate your opportunity to move forward, then it’s an alternative. It’s another tool, and that’s how we saw it.” He also remarked that initially Credit Flex was something that came up when students had unique situations in which they were engaged in special extra curricular experiences, like when “a student had a unique opportunity that they had through the summer or after school.”

One of the reasons the original superintendent was excited about credit flexibility was because “it opens up the doors to all learning. It’s not confined to a classroom. It’s not confined to a particular interaction between particular adult and a particular student.”
The new superintendent echoed the ideas expressed by the original superintendent. When recalling the impact of credit flexibility on the district, he said, “We immediately saw Credit Flex as an opportunity for us to accelerate some of our students who we thought were prepared.” He saw credit flexibility as a mechanism for meeting the individual needs of students. According to the new superintendent, the notion of meeting the needs of students in the district was fundamental to the way the district viewed its core business. He said, “All kids are different, and they come to us with different experiences and different abilities, and we recognize that, and we want to honor that. So we do everything we can in this district to try to provide, allow for flexibilities, allow for the differences in those experiences.”

Both superintendents saw credit flexibility as a way to broaden the high school experience of students in the district. The new superintendent offered that Credit Flex allowed for students to use their time in a better way, and simultaneously have more robust experiences during their high school career. The new superintendent said Credit Flex offered “efficiency in time, opportunity to… open up doors for kids to have greater and more potentially enriching opportunities in other things that they may be more interested in.” The new superintendent continued with an articulation of those enriching opportunities: “We can expedite students and their opportunities to engage in internships, to take dual enrollment courses, to for example, explore careers.”

According to the original superintendent, credit flexibility in the district quickly evolved from a happenstance occurrence to a more systematic opportunity to build unique partnerships, stating, “as we got more sophisticated around it, we saw this as a
natural mechanism to develop our partnerships with other entities He recalled “a number of things that [the school] did on the partnership front that allowed kids to acquire credit, and… really created it around internships at the time.” He remembered specific partnership with local dance and music performing arts organizations that would also benefit from a partnership because the district let them use their space, and the organizations, in turn, offered programming that allowed the students to earn fine arts credits. He asserted, “We can expedite students and their opportunities to engage in internships, to take dual enrollment courses, to for example, explore careers.”

Autonomy for Principals in Norman City Schools

When asked about the role of the high school principal in Norman City Schools, both superintendents agreed that they had a high degree of autonomy. The original superintendent characterized the role of the high school principal in Norman City Schools as “all things to all people all the time.” He continued to say

The role of the principal in Norman is you’re the CEO of the building. I mean, that’s your role. So, you are charged with all facets of the building. So everything from how clean the building is to heating and cooling to, obviously, curriculum instruction — anything that’s in your purview in that building, you are the authority in that building.

Now, we had central office people who were charged to work in support of our building principal to ensure heating and cooling wasn’t always something the principal had to deal with. But it was the principal that was the decision maker, in terms of how those resources would be allocated.

So think about it this way: I used to say to my principals — and this is more conceptual than it is practical, but the concept is real — so you’re going to educate four hundred kids next year in your building, and those kids are going to be generally arranged in age from five to 12. OK? So, with 400 kids in that age range, I’m going to write you a check for X number of dollars. So, you’ve got three million dollars to educate 400 kids. You determine how you spend that three
million dollars. I don’t. We’re not going to throw ratios at you; we’re not going to throw requirements at you. The only thing you have to follow is you have to follow state and federal law, and you have to follow board policy, and you have to follow the collective bargaining agreement.

The new superintendent said that academy leaders have “a lot of autonomy about things.” He continued to characterize principal autonomy in Norman City Schools as “there is a host, a wealth of autonomy and individualization, depending on the kids that they serve in their academies.” He went on to say:

There’s an abundance of autonomy, anywhere from coursework and delivery of coursework to the people who teach it. They have complete control over the hiring of their own staff and the building of the master schedule, the spending of the resources, and the allocation of the resources. Complete autonomy.

Both the new and original superintendents provided a caveat about autonomy in the Norman City District: Principals were expected to follow board policy. The new superintendent was quick to clarify that principals did not have autonomy about enforcing district policy (e.g., credit flexibility). According to him, enforcing board policies “was not a decision that our principals can make.” When describing autonomy around Credit Flex, he characterized the expectation was that principals would be using it in their schools. He said, “Now district policies they do not have [autonomy]-for example, the Credit Flex policy and the utilization, allowing kids to utilize Credit flex in whatever course they can successfully do so. That is not a decision that our principals make. That’s a board policy, and an expectation that all four of our academies utilize [credit flexibility].”

The original superintendent expressed a passion for the model of autonomous academies that was not evident in the conversation with the new superintendent. The
original superintendent felt that supporting autonomy at the individual building level created a sense of ownership and “efficacy that is developed by both the principal and the staff” when they felt as though they were the ones “in charge.” He went on to say that “if principals and teachers believe that they control the destiny of their kids, and that they have full control and responsibility for it,” then it was appropriate to hold them accountable for their student-achievement results. He went on to say that principals in the Norman City School District needed to be “superstars.” During his tenure in Norman, he “removed six principals in eight years.” He characterized those principals as “good people, but not good enough.” When reflecting about those dismissals, he said “but the role of the superintendent is you can’t wait.”

Role of the Superintendent in Norman City Schools

The two superintendents differed in their perspectives of what the role of the superintendents of Norman City Schools was. The original superintendent said that as superintendent, his primary responsibility was “making sure all kids’ learning needs are being met.” In his experience, the most effective way to do that was to implement “policy around how to create conditions in our district to optimize the learning of every child.” He characterized that policy work as “paramount in my superintendency.” He offered that he “structured his day-to-day activities” and allocated the use of his personal and the board of education’s time “to ensure that [optimizing the learning of every child] was going to be at the forefront of everything [they] did.” He noted that, during his tenure as superintendent, he structured each board meeting so that they had “an hour set aside to hear from principals directly about their school improvement plans and the progress they
were making against their stated goals.” He articulated that he organized the board time this way because “it was symbolic for me to make sure that [how kids were performing] was always at the forefront of our board meetings.”

Specifically, the original superintendent said:

I spent a fairly substantial part of that time with state lawmakers and board of education members. Just, you know, doing your traditional kind of pick up the phone and say, “Hey, I know you’ve considered this policy. I want to tell you why I think this is a really good opportunity for kids and families,” and do that kind of a thing. And fortunately, a lot of folks listened. And I’m not saying I’m the one who influenced the decision. But I think that’s the proper role of a superintendent, is to engage policy makers on significant policy opportunities that are available in the state. The role of the state in policy making is hugely important, and people lose site of that sometimes. You know, they bemoan policy makers, but they can create the conditions in the state for really exciting things to happen, much like a superintendent can use local policy to create conditions in their district to accentuate and accelerate student performance. You know, so you can’t lose site of that. That’s really, really important.

In somewhat stark contrast, the new superintendent offered a more tactical response when asked about the role of the Superintendent in Norman City Schools; he said:

As superintendent I oversee—my main responsibility is working in supporting the board, implementing policy, insuring financial prudence, and allocating resources appropriately to programs and personnel.

The original superintendent remembered that in the months leading up to the passage of credit flexibility, he “lobbied hard for the state board to adopt the Flex Credit option.” He said he spent a “fairly substantial part of that time with state lawmakers and state board of education members.” His recollection is that he has several conversations with stakeholders where he expressed his support for credit flexibility by saying things
like “I know you’ve considered this policy. I want to tell you why I think this is a really good opportunity for kids and families.” From his perspective, this was a completely appropriate thing to do, as he considers “the proper role of the superintendent is to engage policy makers on significant policy opportunities that are available in the state.” He went on to say that “the role of the state in policy making is hugely important, and people lose site of that sometimes.” He said that it is tempting to blame policy makers for existing conditions, “but they can create the conditions in the state for really exciting things to happen, much like a superintendent can use local policy to create conditions in their district to accentuate and accelerate student performance.”

How the credit flexibility policy was enacted in Norman

According to the original superintendent, when the district adopted the credit flexibility policy, there was no “big announcement on high that we’re doing Credit Flex.” He felt that making grand announcements about new initiatives often backfired because sometimes “drawing a bunch of attention” to something could be a “distractor from the real purpose of what were doing.” He wanted people to think that using tools like credit flexibility were “just the way we do school.”

The original superintendent offered that sometimes when districts “make big deals about things” then suddenly parents could be upset because they would perceive that the school district was “experimenting on your kid.” To help with the implementation, he said his conversations “started with principals, because in our district, that’s the person you start with.” He followed on with a recollection that he quickly engaged the teachers union and found himself having to “educate my board members on what it was and, more
importantly, what it was not.” He remembered that there was “some noise out there about, Credit Flex is not authentic; you’re cheating kids that are not being exposed to a quality teacher, blah, blah, blah.” He characterized those comments as “that kind of noise that sometimes goes around.”

The original superintendent surmised that the “noise” about Credit Flex was coming from the teachers unions. He said, “in many districts, Credit Flex became a political football between the union and management;” he added, “to this day, I think Credit Flex is holistically underutilized in the state because most folks have capitulated to their unions.” The original superintendent offered that the way Norman City Schools worked to avoid that issue was to frame Credit Flex as “another alternative, another tool.” In his opinion, this model was in line with other policy implementations in the district that led with choice; he asserted “choice was always at the forefront of our district; not choice for choice sake, but around quality opportunities for kids.” He went on to specify that choice should be “customized to meet the particular need” of each kid. He capsulized his thinking by saying, “If Credit Flex is an opportunity for you to demonstrate competencies that accelerate your opportunity to move forward in a credentialing process, whether it’s a high school diploma or some other form of credential that’s going to get you from point A to point B, then it’s [an] alternative. It's another tool. And that’s how we saw it.”

The new superintendent was working in Norman City Schools as a school principal during the policy’s adoption, and his recollection was that the district leaders, including the school principals at the time saw Credit Flex as an opportunity to
personalize and accelerate the education of students “who we thought were prepared, particularly in some of the not core courses.” He went on to say that they (i.e., the building principals) wanted to “start with kind of ancillary courses or support courses for kids.” He recalled that their first attempt at Credit Flex was with Physical Education (PE).

The new superintendent clarified that given his role in the district at the time, he was not “involved in crafting the policy,” but did perceive that his role was “helping to interpret the policy and implement a plan around the policy for kids, in particular PE.” He remembered “a lot of resistance from the union around using credit flex for kids, because they saw it as a threat to their positions and their job security.” He contrasted the union perspective with that of the school leader, which he characterized as “an opportunity for kids to get some things done by utilizing some of the experiences that they already were engaged in around PE and physical fitness.”

The notion of PE as a key example of Credit Flex implementation was mentioned frequently in conversation with the new superintendent. He mentioned PE or physical education almost 30 times during our conversation and described the current state of the policy’s implementation as one that is primarily used for PE and health credits. He said, “There might be some individuals who are flexing some credits, but not wholesale across the district.” He continued to say, “PE and, I’d say health, is a secondary course that we predominantly use Credit Flex for.”

This notion was in direct conflict with his answer to the question “what evidence would you look for to see if the policy’s being implemented as you intend?” to which he responded:
I would be looking for indicators of success, just as we spoke. You know, different kids are utilizing their different strengths to fulfill whatever courses they can using Credit Flex. So I would hope that I’d be able to go down the list and see, you know, just a hodgepodge of things and courses that were fulfilled via Credit Flex for kids — not a classroom of 30, necessarily, but there might be four or five in this area or another. So, I’d be looking to make sure that we’re taking advantage of that, we’re truly implementing the policy in the spirit that we have accepted the policy in this district. I would expect kids to have fulfilled all kinds of state requirements using Credit Flex.

The new superintendent did offer that he was not aware of any unintended consequences in the district because they were not “overusing it.” For clarification, he said that “overusing it would look like trying to fulfill Credit Flex for every kid for a core course, trying to use Credit Flex to shave down your staff roster. We’re not interested in having kids go off and learn everything on their own.” He stated that in Norman City Schools, they were using the Credit Flex policy “sparingly.”

The new superintendent’s characterization of implementation of Credit Flex in the district seems to be in conflict with his characterization of his understanding of the policy. His characterization of the district’s implementation described situations where students would earn credit through credit flexibility based on their individual experiences and strengths. When asked directly about his understanding of the policy, he said his understanding was that “Ohio’s credit flex policy is a policy intended to, one, recognize the differences for our students and support their varying needs, and to provide flexibility to districts to allow for certain provisions for students who may not necessarily need a certain amount of seat time in a course and can demonstrate mastery of the content of the course.” This interpretation is aligned with the policymakers’ aspirations for the policy.
However, that alignment is not present in the new superintendent’s characterization of specific examples of credit flexibility in the district under his tenure. He characterized that implementation as heavily focused on PE and health as Credit Flex options for every student. He said “there really is no traditional PE course in high school” in the district. He affirmed that in order for students to earn PE credit, they needed to use Credit Flex. Even though he also stated that a sign of “overusing” Credit Flex would be “trying to use Credit Flex to shave down your staff roster.” The new superintendent articulated that “kids are required to take physical education” before they graduate from high school in Ohio, but no academy leader, even though they “have complete control over the hiring of their own staff and the building of the master schedule,” would be permitted to hire a physical education teacher and offer a traditional physical education course because the decision to flex the physical education credits is a district decision.

The perspective of how the decision to offer physical education through Credit Flex was received by teachers differs between the two superintendents. The original superintendent said that there were ways to avoid firing teachers because of a district decision to implement Credit Flex and that he leveraged different options to keep teachers supportive of his plans to implement the policy. His philosophy was that he hired the adults in the district “to take care of the kids,” so he was going to try his best to “take care of the adults.” His plan was to “remove the threat that this change is going to result in job loss” and to “not let the policy take the hit.”

His first plan to mitigate potential job loss was to use attrition to “re-assign” and “re-calibrate people and move them in other positions.” A second strategy he would use
to mitigate possible job loss issues was to speak with the teachers and say, “We may be going in a different direction. I want to give you an opportunity to retool yourself.” He said the district would still have the same number of kids, “but they need something different.” He recalled a specific example of this that was not tied to Credit Flex directly, but was a situation in which the he asked teachers to shift their responsibilities to support a new district-wide internship program. He spoke with his home economics teachers and said, “Would you be willing, would you consider doing this over here?” He told them if they needed to take classes to sharpen their skills, he would fund it. He said, “I did everything I could do say, I will help you recalibrate your skills, because we have a new need.” He acknowledged that “there are challenges, but it’s not impossible if you think that way; the problem is, most people don’t think that way.”

The new superintendent, who was a building leader tasked with implementing the policy when it was first introduced, recalled, “The implementation of credit flex was a little more bumpy and probably a little more controversial and a little slower than some of the other policies.” He thought this could have been because “even though it’s a provision by law and districts are certainly welcome to use it, our educators still see it as a choice.” He continued to add, “We’re more successful, and have a lot less resistance on policies that are mandated as opposed to policies that we see as opportunities but are really optional.” He said that at the time of implementation “[The school] had a lot of resistance from the union around implementing Credit Flex for kids, because they saw it as a threat to their positions and their job security.”
As a way to check some of my earlier findings, I asked both the original and the new superintendent their thoughts about three findings. The first finding from the interviews I had with the policy design team was that all credits were not created equal. I was exploring the argument against Credit Flex, that it was some sort of compromise of integrity. Both superintendents disagreed with the premise that the policy was faulty because traditionally earned credits were somehow better. The original superintendent said, “Until you can tell me that every teacher is highly effective, by definition you have disparity; so whether it’s credit earned through Credit Flex or credit earned in a classroom by an ineffective teacher, it's the same thing isn’t it?" The new superintendent agreed, offering, “I would push back and say, depending on what the experience was for students and how they can document those experiences, it could very well be the reverse. It could have been a way more engaging and robust and enriched experience that happened not inside the walls of K-12.” To sum up his thoughts, the original superintendent said, “If you’ve got somebody who’s effective, whether they possess a credential or not, if you can year after year document improved student performance, does it matter the mechanism by which we attached credit?”

A second finding I checked with both superintendents was that Credit Flex had technically already existed before the actual policy was adopted; it was somewhat hidden in a few different places in the Ohio Revised Code. The original superintendent found that to be “absolutely true,” and said that the passage of the Credit Flex policy “pulled the curtain back and put the focus on outcomes and not inputs, but like [he] said before, we had all those options available before for Credit Flex.” When the new superintendent
reflected on the question, he initially said, “If that were the case, I was not aware of it. It was a well-kept secret from me.” Then in the next breath he said, “maybe not; you know, I guess you could call it independent study. We’ve done that. I remember back in the 90s, we used to try to help kids get through high school.” Upon further reflection he said, “Yes, we have kind of loosely been implementing the policy, but that was done very, very selectively and only in extreme necessity.”

The third and final finding that I checked with the superintendents was the idea that Ohio’s Credit Flexibility Policy was born out of a deep desire to provide an option for students to earn credits outside the classrooms and that a critical component of that option was that it was applied equitably—that it was for every kid. The new superintendent verified this finding by saying, “I agree, we use Credit Flex for all kids, the everyday kid. I think, depending on who you are, not necessarily what your abilities are, just what your experiences are. Some kids are able to utilize it more than others but yes it should be intended for all kids.” The original superintendent concurred, saying “it was always about all kids. I mean, this is absolutely a mechanism, a tool that we can use for all kids.”

The Principal Perspective in Norman City Schools

At the high-school level, the Norman City School District has four schools. They call the schools academies, and each academy has a leader that functions as the high school principal for that building. For this study, I attempted to interview each principal. I was successful in gathering feedback from each principal, but I only interviewed three of
the four. The fourth principal agreed to provide written feedback to the semi-structured interview questions, but was not willing to participate in an interview or phone call.

After gathering feedback from each of the principals, three themes emerged. These themes were a surprise to my preconceived ideas about Credit Flex implementation in Norman City Schools. Based on my conversations with the original and new superintendents, I anticipated that I would find academy leaders implementing credit flex in different ways. That was not the case. The first theme that emerged from principal interviews was a desire for different academies to follow similar procedures. In Norman I found an outlier, a somewhat rogue academy leader, and three academy leaders that all followed similar procedures. The second theme that emerged was a deep appreciation for the “Credit Flex form.” The third theme was a narrow focus on physical education as the primary example of credit flexibility in their academies. Interestingly, there were fewer mentions of physical education than in the interview with the new superintendent. Whereas the new superintendent mentioned physical education as credit flex 29 times, all four principals mentioned physical education 25 times collectively. This number might seem low given that the data was collected over three interviews, and one written response, but it is noteworthy considering that, with few exceptions, physical education (and health) were the primary articulation of the Credit Flex model in Norman City Schools.

With respect to the role of the principal, my findings suggest that it evolved during the transition between the original and new superintendent. One principal in the participant pool (i.e. Principal 1) was a principal under the original superintendent; the
others were hired by the new superintendent and shared an understanding of their role that was different from Principal 1.

One Autonomous Outlier

When asked about their own perceptions of their role in the district, two of the four principals (i.e. Principal 1 and Principal 2) detailed roles that were more than simply building principals. Principal 1 detailed his role as follows: “I have a couple different roles… Some of them are more centrally located here with just what I do; some of them are more district wide.” He continued to unpack his role in the district by saying, “I’m the principal of Academy 1; in addition, this year I have taken on working on partnerships for the district. I implement College Credit Plus throughout the district and I’ve designed the pathways for all four of the academies.” Principal 2 explained his role by saying, “I have two roles actually. So, my first role is that I am the principal of Academy 2. In Norman City, we have one high school, but it's divided into four smaller schools.” He went on to say, “One of those schools is Academy 2, and it has approximately 600 students. So I run my own building, but then I am also the lead high-school principal, which means I’m also in charge of all of the academies as far as curriculum, assessment, decisions.” He continued, “I’m kind of the liaison between the principals and central office, and then I also evaluate all of the other principals in the other buildings at the high-school level.”

The other two principals shared markedly different perspectives about their roles. Principal 3 said, “I do a little bit of everything. So, I’m the instructional leader of the building, but also have to be the visionary and manage a lot.” Principal 4 said, “I am the
principle of Academy 4. I manage a develop the staff while overseeing the educational progress of the students in my academy.”

Interestingly, Principals 1 and 2 were in the same building, and, five miles away, Principals 3 and 4 were in a shared building. Also of note was the concept of a “lead principal,” which never surfaced during my interviews with the superintendents.

**How the Principals Perceived Their Autonomy**

The contrast between the understandings of the role of the principals in relation to the amount of autonomy and flexibility they had when implementing was divided, with Principals 2, 3, and 4 reporting one view of autonomy, and Principal 1 reporting another. For example, when discussing principal autonomy in the district, Principal 1 said, “you kind of go out and you do your thing, and if somebody wants to yell at you later on, you make an apology, and that’s how it goes.” He also said, “I have a lot of autonomy, it’s one of the things I like best about where I’m at. I do these things and I think 90 percent of the time, our board office doesn’t even know what’s going on. We do them as long as we’re staying within the requirements of the law, no one’s going to hassle me about that.”

This comment is in sharp contrast with the thinking of Principal 2 who spoke in the plural voice, as if speaking for all of the principals in the district, when he said, “We have autonomy sometimes to interpret things, but we definitely check to make sure that district office is comfortable with the way we’re interpreting.” He continued to explain his understanding of principal autonomy by saying, “When I’m making a decision, I always check board policy first. I guess if we have questions, we ask for a better
interpretation, either from central office or from our attorneys.” He also characterized a split between the schools in their own operationalization of autonomy:

We have one academy who’s a little rogue compared to the rest of us, and they do things a little differently. And that’s OK. That’s what we do in this district. So, I would say that there are two principals who constantly ask me, as the lead principal, permission or ask what I think about something or come to me for an answer. And then there’s one principal who does whatever he wants.

The other principals offered perspectives that were different shades of Principal 2’s understanding of autonomy. Principal 4 said, “I carry out district policy in my academy on a daily basis according to my administrative level.” Principal 3 offered a critique of the notion of principal autonomy in Norman when he said:

I think we have a lot. We do. We have a lot. However, what we’ve found is that each academy, because we have four different academies, sometimes implement things a little bit differently. And what we’re finding is that over the years, this is causing problems. Sometimes you can’t have too much flexibility, because when somebody implements it so differently, then we’ll hear, well, this academy does it this way. And they know, boy, because they get on social media.

Oh, it’s a crazy hot mess sometimes. Well, at this school, they’re doing this, and at that school, they’re doing this. How come you don’t do it the same way? And so, what we have really been trying to do this last year is have consistency among the academies so that we’re all implementing the same way.

When the principals reflected on the similarities and differences in implementation in the academies, Principal 1 said, “I don’t think there’s necessarily a difference in implementation. I think we all four of us use the same forms.” Principal 4 said, “The policy does not differ; however, the experience differs based on the students’ needs.”

Principal 2 reflected more broadly on the differences in implementation by offering a theory categorizing the implementation differences as something caused by
varying levels of rule-following behaviors and differing levels of loyalty to the new superintendent. His opinion was, “It's a personal attitude toward policy in general. There are three of us who are rule followers, and there are three of us who ask permission, and one who asks forgiveness.” He said, “The other principal did not work for our current superintendent, ever, before this. And he has always been in positions where he’s kind of done whatever he’s wanted.”

Forms

The rule-following, permission-asking temperament of Principal 2 was evident when he described how the Norman City Schools’ Credit Flex forms came to exist. When describing his first year in the district, he said he “spent all of July changing I’s (incompletes) to D’s and F’s. There were over 1,100.” He continued to add that “as I was doing that, many of them were online credits or gym credits or whatever, and when I would try to look in their file to find out what grade did they have, there was nothing that existed.” Instead of a grade, students had an “I” for incomplete. The lack of documentation of students’ credit flexibility plans led to consternation and concern on the part of Principal 2. He recalled:

When I came in, there were no forms. It was like, oh, you want to do Credit Flex? That’s awesome. So let’s do it, and then you give us your stuff and then we’ll put the credit in. And that made me very nervous. And so there was no paper trail. I can’t tell you how many students I had that claimed they had gym credit but we had no documentation of that. That kind of thing. And that was making me very nervous.

So what we implemented then was a whole set of protocols and procedures that are outlined in a packet that every student gets. They have to sign. It’s documented. It’s put in their file. And then they have certain things that they have to complete as a part of it. And they have to submit to us. And we check those
things over before we would ever give them a credit. And none of that was in place before. It was just kind of not documented.

The Credit Flex form was less important in the interviews with other principals. Principal 4 did not mention the form in his written responses to the question, and Principal 1 said, “We all four of us use the same form.” Principal 3 discussed the form a few times in his interview, seeming to rely on the form to provide structure to the Credit Flex process. He said his school counselor talks to students about what their responsibilities will be under a credit flex option and the students “sign the initial form to say that they are participating in Credit Flex. A parent signs off on it so that everybody has communicated that they understand what the student is doing and the requirements.” Principal 3 also said that his counselor uses the forms to keep track of student progress, and said, “Usually the kids come to her with their form and get everything turned in.”

Physical Education and Electives (and One Exception)

When discussing how the policy was used in their academies, the “three rule-follower principals” had similar answers while Principal 1 (whom Principal 2 characterized as an “ask for forgiveness instead of permission” person) had a different answer. With the exception of physical education and health, which the district only offered through Credit Flex and not in a traditional classroom setting, the three principals characterized their implementation of the policy as fairly straightforward opportunities that were arranged by the principal or a teacher. They all said they use Credit Flex to supplement the elective offerings in their academies.
For example, Principal 3 described his academy’s use of credit flexibility by saying, “We use it mostly for electives.” He gave an example of a group of students who were planning a trip to Europe. “[For that trip], they’ll get a quarter elective credit in social studies.” He went on to say, “It would be really difficult if we were giving Credit Flex for core content classes,” adding, “I don’t see us giving Credit Flex for math; I don't see us giving Credit Flex for English. Unless they were with an outside source that could verify the curriculum they were using, I don’t ever see using Credit Flex in that way.”

Principal 2 said that he uses credit flexibility to offer “pathway-specific electives and academy-specific electives.” He stated that in order to fulfill their physical education requirement, students in his academy could take classes like yoga and jazz from a local performing arts organization that partnered with the district. He continued offering examples of students in his academy using Credit Flex to earn physical education credit through athletics or marching band. He also offered that if a student took a trip to Spain, the academy would “partner them with our Spanish teacher” in order to earn some type of credit through Credit Flex.

Principal 4 said, “Credit Flex in my academy has a focus on business, leadership, and lab courses.”

Principal 1 shared a model for implementation of Credit Flex that has since changed over time, but initially was personalized for students and included the ability to earn core credit. He said,

So you know, Credit Flex has kind of changed for us over the last couple of years. You know. When Credit Flex first came in, we were using it a lot of P.E. waivers, and that’s kind of where we got started with it at. We’ve done some Credit Flex with some other courses. One of the things that we really like doing here,
especially at my school, is if we had a student that we knew was accelerated or advanced, we were giving them the ACT and a course exam. If they scored college ready on that, we were then granting college — granting high school credit and moving them on to the next course in the sequence.

That strategy for accelerating students based on their individual academic strengths was implemented in part because Principal 1 was excited about “taking advantage of new rules that were passed and making sure we used them to the fullest.” He shared a story of a time in his previous role at a middle school in the district where he used Credit Flex to award Algebra II credit to a student in the building. He said they used an online math software program and the student “did the course there; he finished it in like two months. We gave him the ACT End of Course Exam for Algebra II. He scored college ready and we granted him the credit.”

Principal 1 “was excited” about the possibilities that Credit Flex offered his school. He said, “One of the hallmarks of good school is being able to be responsive to student need and be flexible in what we do to get students whatever it is that is going to be best for them.” In his opinion, “Credit Flex was an opportunity to do unique things for kids in unique situations.”

Principal 1 felt that Credit Flex implementation in the district was tempered by a combination of new state policies that required students to take end-of-course exams and district merit pay for teachers. He said:

I think that’s been one of the things I was the most disappointed to see. With the new testing requirements, you know, each of those students were still going to need to sit to take the exam at the end of that course. As we talked with teachers about, you know, testing kids out, yeah we could test them out and not have them take that course, but then the concern was, well, if they haven’t sat through the
course, are they going to show growth or are they just going to test at, you know, the year’s worth of growth that we would normally expect?

And they really wanted them in the classes then, because the data has become so important to keeping your job, pay in Norman is centered around that data, and they really wanted to have them in class so they could stretch those kids and make sure they scored even higher, which has really, I think, defeated the purpose of what the new state tests were supposed to do. I feel like we’ve slowed kids down now instead of accelerating them. And I’m not a big fan of it.

Physical education in Norman City Schools.

In Norman City Schools, there are no traditional health and physical education courses where a student meets in a face-to-face class with a licensed teacher. Instead, the district uses Credit Flex as a way for students to earn those credits. There is a special credit flexibility documentation form that explains the district’s practice around using credit flexibility to earn physical education credits. The form states:

“Two PE classes are required for graduation. Want to take care of your Physical Education requirements this year on your own? You can… through Credit Flex. Follow these simple steps:”

- Take home the credit flex packet of information.
- Make a plan and write a proposal using the attached worksheets
  - 60 hours of activity for one .25 PE credit OR
  - 120 hours of activity for two .25 PE credits.
- Sign the proposal form and have a parent/guardian sign your form as well.
• Turn in the completed proposal with the proposal page to your counselor. Proposals must be approved before you begin to log your hours of activity.

• Complete your project. Log your hours.

• Write a 2-page reflection summary of your project.

• Email your counselor if you have any questions!

The Norman City School policy of using credit flexibility as the method for students to earn their physical education credit was mentioned 25 times in my interviews with the principals. All of the principals except Principal 4, who would only provide written responses to the questions, said that physical education Credit Flex made up the majority of credit flexibility situations in the each of the academies. Principal 2 said, “You know, graduation requirement, they have to have PE; they have to have health, their have to have their five electives. So most of ours [credit flexibility] is that PE and health piece.” Principal 3 said, “I would say the majority of our Credit Flex is for music and PE, because we have kids that take outside lessons for music; for PE, same thing. Like we have kids that take horseback riding or martial arts or whatever.” Principal 1 said, “we, at the high-school level in Norman, we don’t have any PE or health teachers. So they either do it through athletics or through Credit Flex.” He went on to say that, in the past, there were occasions where they used Credit Flex differently, “sometimes it’s about the course, but we’re seeing less of that now with the new testing.
School Counselors in Norman City Schools

Each of the principals of the high school academies in Norman identified their school counselor as the person responsible for implementing the policy. I interviewed each of the four school counselors about their roles in the district and their experiences with the Credit Flex implementation.

One surprising finding from the interviews was that two of the four counselors studied the district’s Credit Flex policy and forms in order to prepare for our interview. Given that the counselors were identified as the primary Credit Flex implementers in their building, I was not expecting Counselor 1 to respond to the question “talk to me a little bit about Norman’s Credit Flex policy, and what your general understanding is” by saying, “Before our discussion here, I had to kind of, like brush up on some of the—‘cause I haven’t read through it specifically in a while.” In response to the same question, Counselor 3 replied, “I was looking through our Credit Flex stuff this morning before this phone call,” and “I’ve been studying” the district Credit Flex forms.

Validity of Credit Earned Through Credit Flex

Another finding that was evident in the interviews was that the counselors often found themselves uncertain about the validity of the credits students in the district were earning through Credit Flex. Speaking of a previous school district where he had worked, he added, “I think, honestly it was more legitimate, and I feel like this is sketchy.”

Counselor 3 mentioned that he felt unqualified to judge the work of the students in Credit Flex plans. He said:

And so I think we want to be all about this, but like a lot of things around here
that I — there's just not a lot of... not follow through. But there's not a lot of other accountability or — like, it's such a vague thing. And I feel like I don't know why I'm qualified to be the person to monitor this. And I'm not a teacher. And I was not previously teacher.

Counselor 4 found the Credit Flex process in the district “embarrassing.” He said:

Even for Credit Flex for P.E. You know? The kids, you know, they’ll look at me and I’ll tell them what they need to do, and they’ll be like, that’s it? And I’m like, uh, yeah. You know? Like, I don’t – you know, like, how long does it take to get my credit? Mmm, long enough for me to look at your form and enter a “P.” It’s just, that’s embarrassing. You know? And I can’t imagine the state, who wants kids to be physically active, you know, is really, or whoever...

Counselor 4 also recalled a story about a girl who was exploring a modern dance credit flexibility option. He couldn’t get that option to come together, but he remembered saying to himself, “Why the heck not; nobody’s going to tell me no. They probably wouldn’t have ever known that I would have done it.”

In response to a question about the presence of quality control about the credit students were earning through Credit Flex, said there was no quality control “that he knows of.” He said that he has all of the responsibility for controlling the quality of the process, and his approach to managing Credit Flex in his building is:

Hmm. I mean, to be completely honest, I just do what I know. So I have these forms, I read them, and I give them to the kids. And then input them. I honestly don’t know if it’s checked up on. I don’t know, I mean — I will usually, I will go through my administrator and say, hey, this is what’s going on. Are you cool with this? Do you approve it? And she’ll say yeah.

Counselor 2 said that he perceives the PE credits that kids in his academy earn through credit flex to be “pretty good,” because “[he] ask[s] for the same things from all the kids, which is right on the from, the proposal, the hours that are logged, and signed
off on, and then your two page reflection afterwards.” He continued to say that he does not have the same kind of confidence in the credits that students earn through online courses; he said, “The only ones I might question is the online learning, just because, you know, the student’s going to go out on their own online. They could look the answers up if they want. You know, some kids fly through those courses pretty quickly. So…”

Counselor 1 offered a different perspective on the validity of Credit Flex in his academy; he said, “I did have kids try to submit really stupid stuff in my previous position, trying to get credit for things they had done, when really it wasn’t really aligned to standards, and they really just kind of B.S.’d their way through the paperwork piece of it to try and earn credit for something that probably wasn’t really aligned to any kind of standards.” He continued to add that although he experiences low degrees of rigor around credit flexibility at his previous school, he had not had that experience at Academy 1, saying, “I haven’t seen it specifically here though.”

Training and oversight

According to the counselors, they did not receive official training about the district’s Credit Flex policy. Counselor 4, who was with the district when the policy was adopted, answered the question about official guidance or training by saying, “No, no, no. We don’t get—anyway, no.” Counselor 2 said that he learned about the Credit Flex process when he learned of the district’s partnership with a performing arts organization. “That’s probably when I first became aware of it, knowing that they [students] had to fill those [forms] out in order to get the credit for the course.” He continued, “other than having someone just explain to me what it was used for,” he did not receive training or
guidance about Credit Flex. Counselor 3 said that he learned about Credit Flex “a week or two into the job. I had kids coming to me, like still summertime or maybe very beginning of the school year and being like here you go, this is my gym credit.”

Counselor 1 said that when he was hired in Norman City Schools:

> I’ve been familiar with Credit Flex since my last position. This is my first job — first year in Norman City Schools. And when I came here, I was already aware of what Credit Flexibility was. And here it was more of the principal saying, OK, you know, we award these types of credits to students. Here’s the requirements, here’s the paperwork. Familiarize yourself with it. If you have questions, come find me.

In their interviews, each counselor admitted that, aside from PE and a few district-organized credit flex opportunities (like credit for a district field trip overseas), there was not much implementation of Credit Flex in their academies. When asked about individual students using the policy to earn credit, Counselor 1 said “I haven’t had any this year at all.” Counselor 2 said, “I don’t have a lot of kids who, actually, I have never had any kids who create their own course and do Credit Flex that way.” Counselor 3 said, “I think the only other situations I’ve encountered besides gym is that I’ve had kids work with a world language teacher who they know the language and they have worked with them to test out of that class.” Counselor 4 said, “besides my two vague experiences with it, the only one I really deal with is PE.”

Counselor 4 offered his perspective on the one-off credit flex opportunity by saying, “It’s a nice option, but again, it comes back to that whole accountability piece, where you know, there should be a committee or there should be somebody who’s reviewing this, and none of that’s in place.” That theme was echoed throughout the
counselor interviews; Credit Flex is a good idea, but there needs to be more oversight to really optimize the potential.

Counselor 4 thought that success in optimizing Credit Flex relied on “having a district that is invested in it, but you talk about getting a committee together, and I think that’s great. But you know, who’s the committee? And where does their time come from?” Counselor 3 said, “We’ve got great people here, but it feels like everyone’s already got so much going on; that’s not something I’m fighting for.” However, Counselor 3 had feelings about the need for a committee to provide oversight: “I just feel like if there was an actual—like if the kid knew they were submitting something to a group of is that we’re going to approve or deny them, and if there was an actual dialogue about what they were doing, and you know, more than just one person, I think there’s more accountability and legitimacy.

Counselor 1 said he thought more oversight from the district would yield greater participation and more consistent results: “If more people were more aware of it, there would be more participation. But I also think, in many ways, not having a specific person just to oversee all of it and giving us all kind of our own oversight, I think that there’s probably a lot of variation in the way that people chose to do things or allow things.”

Closing

In 2006, the Ohio General Assembly adopted Ohio’s Core Curriculum, which led to the adoption of Ohio’s Credit Flexibility Policy in 2009. The policy design team for Ohio’s Credit Flexibility Policy hoped that the policy would provide for a personalized and meaningful education for Ohio’s high school students. This study of one school
district in Ohio found that the senior leaders of the district shared in the vision of the policy makers: that the policy would allow for student needs to be met on an individual basis. A closer look at that district’s implementation showed that the district’s credit flexibility forms are focused on time spent completing the out of classroom activities instead of demonstration of mastery of content. Additionally, the district primarily uses credit flexibility for the benefit of the district by using it as the method for earning physical education and health credit. Finally, the district has very few examples of individual credit flexibility plans being developed and executed for individual students—so few, in fact, that aside from a vague reference to a foreign language credit here and there, not a single counselor could point to an individual credit flexibility plan in their academy.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

This qualitative study was designed to answer the question, “How does policy interpretation between local schools and the state department of education happen, and what are the factors that influence in degree of fidelity to the policy as it is implemented?”

In order to answer that question, this study examined the aim of Ohio’s credit flexibility policy, and investigated a large school district’s implementation of the policy in its high schools. This policy was appealing to study because it was flexible, and it allowed for a variety of implementation models. Specifically, the Ohio Department of Education stated, “There is no one way to develop a credit flexibility plan. So, the Ohio Department of Education does not provide a model plan. The student, school and family create the plan together” (Ohio Department of Education, n.d.-a).

The specific language that Ohio adopted was that local school boards must provide students an opportunity to earn credits through a variety of options. At the time the policy was introduced to school districts, the plan at the Department of Education was to allow different iterations of the policy to be implemented around the state, and then the Department would highlight excellent examples of Credit Flex implementation for other
school districts to learn from. According to interviews with members of the state policy design team, the rationale for this approach was based on the feedback they received during the design process. According a member of the design team, “in a local-control state, the lens of practitioners was ‘don’t tell me how to do it. Let me shape it.’” The perspective of the design team was that “there is an inherent resistance if you’re in a local district to anything coming from the state.” They perceived their best hope was to “sneak it in the door, let it go out into the field, and hopefully somebody will pick it up. And when they do, you should shine a light on that.”

Given that local superintendents and school boards were permitted to craft their own versions of the credit flexibility policy, there was a rich opportunity to study the interpretation process of a superintendent as he implemented a new policy. In addition to the policy interpretation of the superintendent, there was also a chance to explore his policy implementation processes. The notion that superintendents are expected to interpret and implement policies with competence and sophistication is reflected in Ohio’s superintendent evaluation system. Policy and Governance is listed as a “major responsibility,” and includes specific measurable:

- Review, develop, and recommend policies for the district.
- Implement and continuously assess policies and practices.
- Identify and respond to societal and educational trends that affect the district and community (Ohio Department of Education, n.d.-b, p. 12).

This study took place in Norman City Schools, a public-school district with four high-school academies that operate autonomously and took place over three phases.
Phase 1 was an investigation about the original policy aims of Ohio’s Credit Flexibility Policy. Phases 2 and 3 were investigations into the interpretation and implementation of credit flexibility in a Norman City Schools. In addition to interviews, this study included document analysis of state and district documents about credit flexibility.

Ineffective Policy Practices

In Norman City Schools, the new superintendent does not demonstrate savvy and skillful management of policy implementation, and is not influencing the policy cycle in the district in a way that helps him achieve his policy aims. The new superintendent perceives his role as “supporting the board” and “implementing policy.” This is in contrast with the original superintendent who felt that “the proper role of a superintendent is to engage policy makers on significant policy opportunities that are available in the state.” The perception of the new superintendent as someone who receives policy and implements it instead of as someone who leads, influences, and manages policy is a disadvantage for the new superintendent. Since educational policy environments are growing more complex, and are becoming more difficult to navigate (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Honig, 2006a; Odden, 1991; Young & Lewis, 2015), educational leaders need to be better managers of their policy environments.

In today’s educational policy environment, it is no longer sufficient to simply be aware of policy demands; instead, superintendents need a higher level of sophistication so that they can direct and influence the policy cycle in their own districts (Heifetz, 2006; Honig, 2006b; Odden, 1991). The new superintendent does not demonstrate that kind of policy savvy, noting that “most of our internal folks, and folks in general, are less
resistant to policies that are mandated. We’re a lot more successful, have a lot less resistance on policies that are mandated as opposed to policies that are really optional.” That kind of top-down, mandatory policy implementation approach does not lead to implementation with a high degree of fidelity (Elmore, 1979; Maupin, 1993). Instead, the focus on mandated policies and resulting sanctions creates a culture of compliance, not a culture of competence (Elmore, 1979).

As the district’s chief policy maker, the superintendent is charged with crafting policy that is easy to interpret so that policy aims are clear. Clarity about a policy’s intent is the first step in implementation that has high fidelity to the original policy aims (Coburn, 2005a; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Weick, 1995).

The new superintendent is also missing an opportunity to lead the policy environment in his school. Kingdon (1985, 1985) asserts that policy actors have an opportunity to influence the policy agenda in meaningful ways. He offers the analogy of a policy stream. In his policy stream, policy, politics, and problems are each present; some rise to prominence, and some do not (Kingdon, 1984, 1995; Lewis & Young, 2013; Lieberman, 2002). Kingdon (1984, 1995) argues that policy entrepreneurs can influence the policy stream.

Policy entrepreneurs use their personal influence and access to couple problems with policy solutions, and guide those policy solutions through the policy stream until they are adopted (Kingdon, 1984, 1995; Lieberman, 2002; Lewis & Young, 2013). Policy entrepreneurs are aware of the concerns of policymakers and public officials, and are
effective at framing their policy solutions as solutions to the issues that policymakers
deem important (Kingdon, 1984, 1995; Lieberman, 2002; Lewis & Young, 2013). These
connection opportunities, or policy windows, are often only available for a short period
of time, and influential policy entrepreneurs are skilled at recognizing these windows and
leveraging them to maximize their own policy agendas (Lieberman, 2002).

In Norman City Schools, the new superintendent did not display behaviors that
are associated with policy entrepreneurs; he did not demonstrate the capacity to influence
policy decisions inside or outside of his school district. In contrast, the original
superintendent offered perspective that indicated that his firm belief was that a successful
superintendent was also a successful policy entrepreneur. He conceptualized his role as
“making sure all kids learning needs are being met. So, in that respect, policy around how
to create conditions in our district to optimize the learning for every child was, first and
foremost, paramount in my superintendency.” He managed the policy streams in his
district to his advantage by revising board agendas to include “an hour set aside in each
meeting to hear from principals directly about their school improvement plans.” He was
proud of this adjustment to the board agendas, noting “not many boards do that, but it
was symbolic for me to make sure that [how our kids were performing] was always at the
forefront of our board meetings.” He characterized that shift in a board agenda as an
“orchestration of time”; driving home the idea that he set the agenda for the board, and
subsequently for the district.
Troublesome Implementation of Physical Education Credit Flex

This study uncovered issues with the district’s use of Credit Flex for physical education. One overarching issue is that the basic premise of the district’s implementation is fundamentally flawed. Instead of the district working with students to personalize their educational experience by awarding them high-school credit for the unique talents and skills that they can demonstrate, the district has refused to offer a course that is required by Ohio law in order to graduate from high school. Students need physical education to graduate from high school; as the district does not offer that course, students are forced to provide their own physical education. One could argue that the district’s physical education credit flexibility plan placed an undue burden on the students who were not from households where horseback riding and overseas travel were options.

If one accepts the premise of the district’s implementation of physical education as a Credit Flex option, then there are flaws in that implementation that are worth discussing. First, the form that student and counselors use indicates that the amount of time a student spends working towards their physical education credit is the most important factor in the decision to award credit or not. The form clearly states, “60 hours for one .25 PE credit OR 120 hours for two .25 PE credits.” There is no indicator that learning a new sport or demonstrating physical fitness is required in order to earn credit.

This preoccupation with time is really no different from the method that has always existed in Ohio for students to earn high-school credits—the Carnegie Unit. The Carnegie Unit is a measure of the amount of time needed to earn a credit in the State of Ohio. As described in the Ohio Revised Code 3313.603, for a typical class, students
needed to be enrolled for 120 hours to receive credit. For a lab-based science class, the hour required to earn credit was 170 hours. The state design team regarded the Carnegie Unit with derision and thought it was fairly useless. In their report, they argue that “the Carnegie Unit measures seat time, not proficiency, so it does not reflect results that matter” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 28). The fact that the Norman City School District Credit Flex forms are in conflict with the policy suggests that the district actors who made the form (i.e., one of the principals) and those who use it are not clear about Ohio’s Credit Flex Policy. Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002) assert that clarity of understanding of the policy is absolutely critical and is commonly overlooked in policy implementation. A lack of understanding of the policy will cause implementation failure. It is unreasonable to expect people to implement policy with high fidelity if they do not understand the policy.

A second problem with the district’s implementation of Credit Flex is that the examples provided by the counselors of the students and families who were pleased with the opportunity to earn their physical education credit on their own time and by performing activities that they were already involved in outside of school is examples were examples that are only possible for students of privilege. Counselors offered that students and families who were happy to earn physical education through Credit Flex participated in activities like figure skating, horseback riding, and karate. Those are not the activities of students that live in poverty. Many families struggle to pay for any extracurricular activities, so traditionally expensive activities such as horse back riding
and figure skating remain inaccessible to a group of students in Norman (and in most other school districts in Ohio).

This inequitable access to high-quality physical education options is an unintended consequence of the state policy maker’s decision to permit high degrees of flexibility to districts to determine how they wished to leverage the policy. There is no mandate in the policy that requires districts to offer traditional versions of high school graduation requirements, so districts are free implement the policy as they like. Merton (1936) distinguished two types of unintended consequences: those that are consequences for the actors, and those that are consequences for the people affected by implementation. In this situation, the students without the means to access a high-quality physical education experience are the ones who are impacted by the unintended consequences of not offering physical education in high school.

A third problem with Norman’s implementation of Credit Flex as the primary way for students to earn physical education credit is that they are not using physical education teachers to assess the validity of the work the students completed through Credit Flex. The counselors in the district felt this issue acutely, saying, “I feel like I don’t know why I’m qualified to be the person to monitor this. And I’m not a teacher. And I was not previously a teacher.” The Credit Flex design team was clear in their recommendation that content area teachers should make the decision about awarding credit. The report says, “Credit will be determined locally, by teachers or through the use of:

a) a multi-disciplinary team;

b) a professional panel from the community; or
c) a state performance-based assessment” (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p.14).

When discussing the quality control of the PE credits earned through Credit Flex, counselors said, “It’s embarrassing, and I can’t imagine the state, who wants kids to be physically active, you know, is really, or whoever….” They also said that the Credit Flex situation in other districts where they were previously employed was better than that in Norman, sharing: “I think, honestly it was more legitimate, and I feel like this is sketchy.”

Another unintended consequence (Merton, 1936) of the district’s credit flex implementation plan was that counselors did not use the policy to its fullest potential. As a result of their discomfort with the Credit Flex implementation, counselors reported that they tend to shy away from advertising the policy option, and they do not leverage the policy as much as they could. Counselors said, “The idea was really great, but it was just the implementation. How are we supposed to man all of this? I think that’s why it fell off, is because it just sort of hangs out there, and nobody really know what to do about it.”

Jian (2007) asserts that the study of unintended consequences should include a close look at the tensions that exist between senior level leaders and implementers; he argues that the realities of senior level leaders is usually different from the reality of the employees who are working to implement policy. As a result of this difference, Jian (2007) says that policy recipients use their own political realities to make sense of the policy. They refine and modify policies so that they fit in the realities of the implementer.
This interpretation and maneuvering by the implementers results in unintended consequences to the original policy makers’ goals for their policy.

Examination of the interpretation and implementation of Ohio’s Credit Flexibility Policy in Norman yields multiple examples of policy recipients using their own political realities to interpret and maneuver policy. At a high level of implementation, the district is using the policy in ways that do not meet the original policy aims set forth by the design team. The use of credit flexibility to award credits for an entire graduation requirement was not part of the implementation plan for credit flexibility. This use of credit flexibility in Norman demonstrates that the policy makers had a different reality than the policy recipients (in this case, Norman City Schools Superintendent and Board).

Inside the district, there are example of policy recipients interpreting and modifying the credit flexibility policy. The superintendent has a perception that the principals and counselors are implementing the district’s credit flexibility policy:

You know, different kids are utilizing their different strengths to fulfill whatever courses they can using Credit Flex. So I would hope that I’d be able to go down the list and see, you know, just a hodgepodge of things and courses that were fulfilled via Credit Flex for kids.

That perception is not being realized in the high schools in Norman. Instead of students utilizing credit flexibility to earn a variety of credits based on their individual strengths, physical education was the only example of credit flexibility that school counselors could provide. Additionally, school counselors shared that they do not advertise the credit flexibility policy, and they do not feel comfortable acting as the arbitrators of the policy. As a result of these political realities at the school counselor
level, implementation of district’s credit flexibility policy leads to unintended consequences

Aspirational Implementation versus Actual Implementation

According to the original designers of Ohio’s credit flexibility policy, the aspiration for the credit flex policy was that it would make the high-school educational experience better for every kid. In their report to the State Board of Education, the Credit Flex design team articulated that the adoption of a credit flexibility policy allowed for the needs of all students to be met in a better way. The team identified six principles to drive their work, and the first principle stated that the needs of all students should be considered in credit flexibility plan implementations:

- Principle 1: The plan must address the unique needs of each student and therefore all students and the key elements of the plan should be designed to personalize learning in ways that make it more relevant to students’ academic needs and non-academic barriers to learning, particularly mental and physical health disparities (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 9).

The members of the design team included a series of “what if” questions in their report. These questions offered a view into the aspirations of the policy makers as they were creating this policy. In the section titled, “What if…we designed high school around students’ needs?” the design team offers several scenarios that they predict would occur if high schools in Ohio were designed to meet the needs of students. The scenarios they offered are “What if…”
• Flexible schedules were offered to accommodate more working students and to acknowledge brain research that says that teenage brains are wired for late nights and late mornings?

• Students could test out or graduate early instead of sitting in class bored?

• Students could earn credit simultaneously in more than one content area through real world projects and problems that they select based on their interests?

• Students could earn credit for learning experiences that included postsecondary, internships, educational travel, on-line learning, and community/social service?

• Learning experiences nurtured students’ skills in understanding their own strengths, their local and global communities, and their goals and aspirations? (Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team, 2009, p. 7).

Lack of Implementation Guidance

Although the flexibility in the policy provided opportunities for school districts to craft policies that they felt would work well in their local contexts, that same flexibility led to a situation in Norman City Schools that did not yield implementation practices that met the policy aims of the policy design team. Although they framed the policy as one that provided freedom and creativity for local implementation, the policy design team actually adopted a top-down approach to this policy implementation. A top-down approach relies on policy, policy reports, and policy documents to guide implementation.
(Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer, 2002). In the case of credit flexibility, the design team constructed a policy, wrote a policy report about it, and required school boards to adopt a policy about credit flexibility.

Elmore (1979) offered a better option than a top-down approach; his version of a top-down approach was called a forward mapping approach. Forward mapping promotes a noble lie that making a policy and adopting it will make it work. Elmore (1979) says that a better approach to policy implementation is backwards mapping. Backwards mapping requires policy makers to spend time with the people who will actually implement the policy to determine what kind of assistance the implementers need to appropriately implement the policy. In the case of credit flexibility policy, the state policy makers should have considered a strategy of backwards mapping. This could have occurred by asking superintendents who in their districts was responsible for implementing credit flexibility, and holding meetings with those implementers. These meetings could have provided state policy makers with the feedback from the field about what kind of barriers implementers were facing, and what kind of supports they needed to more successfully implement the policy.

Another aspect of policy implementation that the state policy team missed when they declined to provide a policy implementation plan is the importance of clarity on the part of policy implementers. If the design team had chosen to include a few sample credit flexibility implementation plans, there would have been more clarity on the part of the implementers about what the design team intended with the Credit Flexibility Policy. Clarity of intent and consistent messaging around that intent is critical for policy
implementation; implementers do not effectively engage with policies that they do not understand (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002).

**Implementation in Norman**

In Norman City Schools, this aspirational implementation of credit flexibility is vastly different from the actual implementation of the policy. The promise of credit flexibility is not recognized in Norman City School District, and there are multiple reasons for that. In the district, there are both policy interpretation issues and policy implementation issues. This study revealed that the closer one policy actor is to the actual implementation of the Credit Flex policy in the school district, the farther away from the original policy aims their approach to implementation is. This phenomenon in Norman is an example of the complexity of policy implementation.

Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, (2002) argue that policy implementation is complex, and that leaders must work consistently to build consensus, compromise when appropriate, and be clear about their policy aims. Misunderstanding of the policy aims will result in misapplication of the policy (Coburn, 2005a; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Weick, 1995). Those closest to implementation are most vulnerable to making trade-offs in the implementation process (Brodkin, 2012; Elmore, 1979; Maupin, 1993; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). These street-level bureaucrats are often over burdened, under resourced, and feel compelled to adjust policy implementation so that they can complete their work (Brodkin, 2012; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). Elmore (1979) and Fiorino (1997) offer backwards mapping as a solution to policy implementation issues.


**Disconnect Between Policy Aim and Policy Implementation in Norman**

In the context of credit flexibility, there was a large gap between the policy aims of the superintendents of the district and the implementation practices of the counselors.

The original superintendent of Norman who was leading the district when the credit flexibility policy was adopted supported the policy adoption in Norman. His perspective was that credit flexibility could help meet the needs of all kids, and he supported that policy during his tenure because he characterized his approach to his work as “making sure all kids learning needs are being met.” According to him, he “championed and lobbied hard for the state board to adopt Credit Flex, because [he] just saw it as a great opportunity.” He thought Credit Flex would be good for the students and families of Norman “because it opens up the doors to all learning. It’s not confined to a classroom.” The new superintendent characterized his thinking about credit flexibility as an opportunity to “recognize the differences for our students and support their varying needs.” He said that in Norman City Schools, “[they] embraced this opportunity and saw it as a good thing for kids.”

In contrast, in interviews with the school counselors, they characterized their perceptions of Credit Flex in the district by saying things like, “I feel like this is a little sketchy,” and that their approach to credit flexibility was “don’t advertise this, because we’re not sure how this is all going to go.” They continued expressing unease and confusion about the policy by saying, “to be completely honest, I just do what I know. I honestly don’t know if it’s checked up on.” Counselors in the district also said, “it’s too unstructured,” and “there’s not a lot of accountability—it’s a vague thing.” One of the
counselors remembered that when the district was implementing the policy, he was
“sitting meetings where [they] all thought it was a great idea, but it was like, ‘who’s
going to monitor this?’”

This disconnect between the policy aims and policy implementation points to lack
of awareness and attention to ongoing policy evaluation. Simply adopting a policy does
not guarantee implementation with a high degree of fidelity. In Norman City Schools, the
leaders chose a top-down approach to Credit Flex implementation. This approach is
characterized by a reliance on documents that are distributed by the policy makers
(Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Elmore (1979) characterized the traditional, top-
down policy approach used by Norman City Schools as forward mapping. In a forward-
mapping approach, policymakers list the objective, list strategies to achieve it, and name
outcomes that could be used a measurement of success. According to Elmore (1979), this
approach promotes the noble lie that policymakers control the implementation process,
and it rewards compliance instead of rewarding competence and good decision-making.

The credit flexibility situation in Ohio and in Norman is a textbook case of top-
down, forward-mapped, policy implementation. The policymakers at the state level
provided the objective that school districts would offer credit flexibility; they listed
several strategies for how schools could implement it (i.e., testing out, demonstrating
mastery of content, and others). Finally, state policy makers named an outcome measure
of success as the number and type of Credit Flex offerings that schools would employ for
students. State policy makers knew that they were taking a chance that policy
implementation with fidelity would vary with that strategy, reporting that they made that
choice because, in a “culture of thou shall, there is no agency. There’s no choice; there’s no ownership. So we did actively resist and intentionally chose not to say here’s what it should look like or ‘here's what you have to do.’”

That strategy did not help the policy implementation in Norman City Schools. Although the new superintendent’s statements about his understanding of credit flexibility in the district were aligned with the original policy makers’ aims (i.e., that the policy “is intended to recognize the differences for our students and support their varying needs and to provide flexibility for districts, and to provide various ways for students to demonstrate mastery”) that idea is not aligned with what the district is actually doing with credit flexibility. In interviews with the district’s four high-school principals and four high-school counselors, the overwhelming example they each provided for the district’s use of Credit Flex was physical education. The district’s physical education plan was cited in participant interviews 47 times as an example of Credit Flex implementation in the district.

The Climate and Culture in Norman City Schools

The climate and culture in Norman City Schools does not appear to be one that supports the school leaders or the school counselors. Since one of the school leaders was hesitant to participate in the study, and only agreed to do so in writing and with additional guarantees that the information provided would be absolutely confidential, it seems likely that the school leader was afraid of reporting information about credit flexibility in the district that would not be looked upon favorably by the district leaders. This fear of non-compliance is counter to the reports by the new superintendent that school leaders have
autonomy in their building. Elmore (1979) argues that a focus on compliance instead of discretion is an indicator of a focus on a forward mapping approach to policy implementation instead of a backwards-mapping approach.

A healthy culture and climate that is open and supportive of policy implementers is an important component of a policy environment. Ganon-Shilon & Schechter (2016) asserts that school leaders are the key component of the interpretation and implementation of new initiatives in a school district. They affirm that school leaders are the key personnel in bringing meaning to unclear situations, and helping to decode new initiatives. Coburn (2005a) argues that educational leaders are critical components of the policy implementation process, and that educational leaders need room to grow as professionals as they work through the sense-making process. In Norman, there is no evidence that opportunities exist for school leaders to grow as policy implementers. Instead, one school leader was wary of participating in this study, and two of the other three self report that they prefer to check with the new superintendent, or with the school attorneys, before they make an interpretation or implementation decision.

Other scholars declare that leaders are important in the climate setting process. Heifetz, Grashow, & Linksy, (2009), assert that leaders play a key role in climate setting; as part of being adaptive, they encourage leaders to recognize and regulate the distress that the team members feel during change. They also suggest that involving people in the organization in the change process will help create a culture where distress is managed and worked through, not paralyzing. Additionally, Heifetz & Laurie (1997) offer that leaders who are implementing new initiatives should work to “foster adaptive behavior”
in their team members, and should encourage others in the organization to “embrace disequilibrium” (p. 3)

It does not appear that the new superintendent in Norman employees practices like those noted above in order to help the leaders in the district interpret and implement policy. Instead of an environment where thinking in creative ways, and using adaptive leadership to solve problems, Norman City Schools is an environment with a divided culture. Some of the school leaders describe that the differences between high schools is something that they are working to eliminate so that the school leaders think and act in similar ways. The rationale school leaders provided for this line of thinking is that the school leaders have trouble rationalizing the differences between academies, not because they think a more similar experience across the high schools is better for students, teachers, or the community.

Missed Opportunity to Leverage Policy Network

One missed opportunity on the part of the Norman City District was to help the fidelity of implementation by being aware of and leveraging the policy environment in the district. The new superintendent should consider creating an informal network for the school counselors in the district. Informal networks are characterized in literature as organizational fields (Roach, Smith, & Boutin, 2011) or policy ecologies (Weaver-Hightower, 2008).

Roach, Smith, and Boutin (2011) assert that organizational fields play a large role in successful policy implementation. They say that institutions are part of a larger organizational field, a group of similar institutions that share ideas, norms, and values.
Organizational fields can have high degrees of influence on the members of the network. Weaver-Hightower (2008) has a similar concept to organizational fields called policy ecology. He describes ecologies as complex systems where relationships are interconnected. Like ecologies found in nature, policy ecologies have similar situations of interconnectedness in the implementation environment.

The counselors are ripe for being organized into an informal network; they are similarly positioned in the district, and they each have a desire for more oversight of the process. A counselor said, “I need a committee to help me with this, and if they want to implement this on a grand scale, it needs to have more; somebody that’s watching over it and looking at everything.”

The counselors reported that they do not interact with each other in meaningful ways. They each interact with one other counselor regularly, because there are two counselors in each of the high-school buildings, but they do not gather as a team of four and work on issues. The counselors reported, “We have a hard enough time getting done what we need to get done; we don’t really talk about how we implement things and sort of discuss across all four academies.” Counselors said they “have no idea” if policies are implemented differently at other academies. They said that two students with similar profiles who went to different academies could have high-school experiences that “look completely different.” They say that across the academies “there’s a lot of discrepancies” in implementation of district policy and that they “just don’t get together all that often.”

The counselors are the primary implementers of the Credit Flex policy, but they are not comfortable in that role. The role and responsibility of counselors is unique to
their position. They are the primary interface with students and their progress towards graduation, and they serve as the primary connector for students to college and career opportunities. They report that their roles include responsibility to “Advise students on their high school courses, give them direction as far as what they should take based on their test scores and their progress in courses.” The counselors also characterize their job as one that is compromised of “a lot of different things—credit checks for seniors, graduations, meeting with individual students to talk about their plans when they graduate.” They think more oversight in the form of a committee structure would add authority and authenticity to the Credit Flex award process.

It does seem as though the opportunity to tune their practice would be beneficial, and it does not seem that they are implementing district policies with equal levels of fidelity. If the literature on policy ecologies and organizational fields can be applied to informal networks (Roach, Smith, & Boutin, 2011; Weaver-Hightower, 2008), then the district leader would be well served to use those concepts to their advantage by strategically incenting communication and collaboration between certain groups of individuals so that they form a network.

The superintendent in Norman could create a committee (informal network) to validate the credit flexibility submissions of students. This committee could consist of the school counselors and content experts (as needed) to judge the validity of an application. With a bit of personal attention from the superintendent, the committee could galvanize the superintendent’s vision of Credit Flex implementation. Such a committee could have
been an opportunity for the superintendent to manage and influence the organizational field and the policy ecology of the district.

Norman City Schools already has an example of an informal policy network that formed on its own and was effective in reinforcing expected behavior and group norms. An informal policy network formed between the high schools. Three of the four high schools have similar philosophies about the implementation of Credit Flex in Norman City Schools. They are self described “rule followers” who prefer to “ask permission instead of forgiveness” The principals say that the 3:1 split at the high-school level is a reflection of their “personal attitudes towards policy in general.” The principals offer that the outlier principal “did not work for our current superintendent, ever” before he became the superintendent.

Interpretation of District Credit Flex Policy in Norman

Street Level Bureaucracy in Norman

The counselors, as the implementers in Norman City Schools, were acting as street-level bureaucrats—the people who actually carry out the policies that are crafted at upper-management levels in an organization. Since street-level bureaucrats are the ones that actually implement the policy, they have the opportunity to make or break a policy implementation plan. By engaging in non-compliance, partial compliance, avoidance, and rationing, street-level bureaucrats influence policy implementation (Brodkin, 2012; Elmore, 1979; Maupin, 1993; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). Sometimes, in policy implementation analysis, it can look as though street-level bureaucrats are refusing to
engage in policy implementation because they do not like the policy, but in actuality, street-level bureaucrats are forced to make tough choices with their time and other limited resources in consideration. This phenomenon is often present in public-sector jobs (Brodkin, 2012; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977).

In Norman City Schools, even though counselors are keeping the implementation of Credit Flex to a small slice of the potential options, it is evident that counselors are not against Credit Flex as a district policy. Their street-level bureaucracy can be attributed to not perceiving that they are resourced appropriately to successfully and fully implement the Credit Flex policy. They want more guidance and oversight, and they would like more support. Counselors said, “It's the Wild West around here; you kind of go and do whatever you think is right at the time,” and “I think it [credit flexibility] needs to have somebody that’s watching over it and looking at everything.”

They also reported that if the district were interested in implementing Credit Flex more broadly, they would “need to have somebody that’s really watching over it and looking at everything, because it would become a lot on [their] plates if it became a really big thing in the district.” As was described earlier in this discussion, counselors said, “Who’s the committee, and where does their time come from.” Also, “We've got great people here, but it feels like everyone’s already got to much going on that I’m not trying to be like, hey, I need a committee to help me with this.”

In addition to encouraging a small school-counselor network to form in the district, another way that district officials in Norman could effectively surface these concerns and manage them appropriately is through a backwards-mapping policy-
implementation approach. A backwards-mapping approach is the opposite of a top-down policy-implementation approach (Elmore, 1979; Fiorino, 1997).

Instead of simply declaring that a policy will happen and inducing and incenting compliance behaviors with a series of rewards and punishments, backwards mapping directs policy makers to start with the implementers, and work backwards through the organization assessing the ability of each group to perform the behaviors that will result in high degrees of fidelity. In backwards mapping, policy makers also ask if each level of the organization is appropriately resourced to effectively implement the policy (Elmore, 1979; Fiorino, 1997).

Drawing on the research of Elmore (1979) and Fiorino (1997), the new superintendent could practice a backwards mapping approach to credit flexibility implementation in his district, by meeting with counselors, to review the current state of implementation of credit flexibility policy in the district. By asking the counselors (the primary implementers of the credit flexibility policy) if they were resourced appropriately to implement the policy, he would realize that the counselors think credit flexibility is a good idea, but they do not perceive that they have the time or expertise to implement the policy effectively. This perception about the credit flex policy held by the counselors was reflected when they said “it’s too unstructured,” and, “If the kids knew they were submitting something to a group of us, that we’re going to approve or deny them, and if there was an actual dialogue about what they were doing, more then just one person, I think there’s more accountability and legitimacy.”
**Sense-making in Norman**

The issue of the implementer not implementing the policy in lockstep with the aspirational aspect of the policy is not a new issue. Policy implementation failures are often blamed on the implementing agents. Sometimes these implementation lapses are judged as rebellion against the policy aims, unwillingness to conform to policy aims, and lack of ability to conform to policy aims. Those views are limited and do not take into consideration that perhaps the failure is not deliberate, but is instead the result of a breakdown in the implementers’ sense-making process. Sense-making is the concept that describes how policy implementers interpret policies (Coburn, 2005a; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Weick, 1995). Sense-making is how an individual crafts a framework for understanding the current situation. In order to do this, individuals consider prior knowledge, past experiences, and personal beliefs (Coburn, 2005a; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Weick, 1995).

As a supporting argument for the idea that leaders should consider developing and managing informal networks within their organizations, the research suggests that policy implementers make sense of policies both individually and collectively; they situate their sense making in thought communities (Coburn, 2005a; Gawlick, 2015; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Issues in interpretation and sense-making can often be attributed to difficulties in sense-making (Coburn, 2005a, Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Policy makers at all levels need to be aware that sense-making will happen and that it will happen beyond awareness; they should consider how to
manage the process so that the appropriate policy aims are expressed clearly and articulately.

Opportunities for future study

When considering opportunities for future study, a compelling possibility is how the perception of the appropriate role of the superintendent by the superintendent affects the school district. In this study, the two superintendents interviewed both offered vastly different definitions of their roles. The original superintendent asserted that his role was “to engage policy makers on significant policy opportunities that are available in the state.” He said that he spent his time “with parents and students and with state lawmakers and board of education members.” He said the he would “trade economic inefficiencies for efficacy,” and that superintendents have to “hit the ground running.” Under his leadership, the concept of full principal autonomy at the high-school level was introduced, and he was proud of the work that his principals performed as autonomous leaders, saying, “You’ve got to be a rockstar in Norman.”

The original superintendent is a classic example of a policy entrepreneur. Policy entrepreneurs are individuals who are skilled at navigating policy environments (Kingdon, 1984; 1995). They use their personal and political influence to advocate for their preferred solutions (Kingdon, 1984, 1995; Lieberman, 2002; Lewis & Young, 2013). The original superintendent said that he “championed it [credit flexibility] when the rules were first being promulgated and discussed and vetted.” He discussed his strategies for implementing new policy as just adding a tool to the toolbox of his principals. He said that in his district, they “purposely did not shout from on top of the
mountaintop” that they were doing something new. He said that they wanted people to think that new policies in the district were “just the way we do school,” and not “experimenting on the kids.”

That conceptualization is in sharp contrast to how the new superintendent thought of his role. He said that his “main responsibility is working in supporting the board, implementing policy, insuring financial prudence, and allocating resources appropriately to programs and personnel.” His reflection about the autonomy of principals in the district resulted in him saying, “Wow. Our academy leaders have a lot of autonomy about things. There is a host, a wealth of autonomy and individualization. There’s an abundance of autonomy anywhere from coursework and delivery of coursework, how it's delivered, to –wow, the people who teach it. Complete autonomy.” Instead of sounding proud of the autonomy, the new superintendent sounded frustrated. In the second year of his tenure, the new superintendent named a principal who used to teach for him as the lead principal in charge of evaluating all of the other high-school principals; this individual is a self-described “rule follower,” and someone who “prefers to ask for permission instead of forgiveness.”

The divide between the ways that the superintendents see their respective roles in the district is vast. The new superintendent sees his role as one that requires excellent technical leadership skills. Technical leadership skills are those that are transactional in nature and use solutions that have been used before (Heifetz, 2006; Heifetz, Grashow, & Linksy, 2009; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Heifetz & Linksy, 2004). In contrast, the original superintendent sees his role as adaptive in nature. Adaptive leadership requires leaders to
leverage political and personal cache to change the beliefs and behaviors of those around them (Heifetz, 2006; Heifetz, Grashow, & Linksy, 2009; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Heifetz & Linksy, 2004).

A second possibility for future study is how the role of the classroom teacher has changed over time in Ohio’s policy environment and the possible (or probable) implications for classroom teachers in the policy environments of the future. In the study, an obvious change in Norman City Schools is that the district no longer hires health and physical education teachers. Another way that teachers in the district have been impacted by policy changes is when the original superintendent asked his home economics teachers to be internship teachers.

There is a new policy in Ohio called College Credit Plus, and there are possible implications to classroom teachers as that policy is implemented in Ohio. College Credit Plus is a policy that mandates that students in grades 7-12 are provided opportunities to enroll to earn college credits, and the costs are absorbed by the school district. According to the Ohio Department of Education, “The purpose of this program is to promote rigorous academic pursuits and to provide a wide variety of options to college-ready students” (Ohio Department of Education, n.d.-a). The implementation of College Credit Plus was mentioned in my interviews with members of the state policy design team and was mentioned in my interview with the original superintendent. The original superintendent said, “The same thing that’s going on with College Credit Plus right now; it’s eerily similar to the Flex Credit conservation many years ago. A state policy design team member said, “The combination between Credit Flex and College Credit Plus—
that’s the real amplifying effect here.’’ The same policy design team members also said, “There’s always this fear, if I do this, then we’ll need fewer teachers in certain areas. So the same thing, I think, has been a limiting factor in College Credit Plus.”

A third possibility for future study is a study across districts that examines school districts across the state of Ohio interpret and implement the Credit Flexibility Policy. This look across districts has the potential to provide more insight into factors that influence the interpretations of the policy, and the implementation plans for the policy. A study that looks across district could surface similarities and differences in how superintendents’ conceptualize their role in the policy process, and how that influences the climate and culture of the district.

Limitations

Limitations are present in every study. Given that this study was a qualitative study, and given that qualitative methods are used to develop a deep understanding of a specific setting, no correlational generalizations would be possible from this study (Glesne, 2006). For example, Ohio has more than 600 public schools districts, and another 600 charter school districts. Given the number of local education agencies who are implanting credit flexibility policy, it is unreasonable to anticipate the possibility of broad generalizations applicable to those local education agencies.

Another limitation is that this study is the study of a single policy in the Norman City School District. It is possible that the Credit Flexibility Policy is anomaly of an example of the policy implementation practices in Norman City Schools.
Another limitation in this study is that as the researcher, I brought my own biases and perceptions to the study. By acting as the research instrument, instead of using a survey or controlled experimental design, I interpreted the data that I collected through my own lens of experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Glesne, 2006). As a former school leader, I brought my personal biases of what I perceive a good school leader to be, and I brought with me a perception that the Credit Flexibility Policy is a good policy, and is one that should be leveraged to the maximum extent possible so that students can benefit from a personalized educational experience during high school.

Conclusion

Honig (2006a) asserts that educational leaders can and do find value in learning about how others in similar situations worked through policy implementation issues. She argues that educational leaders have the capacity to review the literature, synthesize, and evaluate what they read so that they can answer the question for themselves: “What is relevant in this case for my own context, and how can I learn from these examples?”

In this case, educators can learn about issues that were demonstrated in the implementation of the district’s Credit Flex. These policy interpretation and implementation issues include a flawed top-down policy implementation plan, the formation of informal policy networks among the high schools, and street-level bureaucracy by the actual policy implementers. Educators can learn about the evolving role of the superintendent as a policy entrepreneur (Kingdon, 1984, 1995; Lewis & Young, 2013; Lieberman, 2002), and can learn about the importance of influencing the policy in the school district, and in the state.
This study examined the design and implementation of Ohio’s Credit Flexibility policy. Through interviews with members of the original design team and analysis of policy documents produced from that design group, findings emerged revealing that Ohio’s Credit Flexibility policy was intended to provide personalized, relevant educational experiences for students as they worked toward their high-school diploma. Credit flexibility was supposed to be for every student and was supposed to be applied equitably across a variety of circumstances. Credit flexibility options were intended to be validated by certified teachers, and they were supposed to provide opportunities for students to move beyond measuring how long students spent earning a credit and to embrace opportunities for students to demonstrate that they had mastered the content.

A second component of this study focused on the interpretation and implementation of credit flexibility in a large, suburban school district in Ohio. In the school district, it was clear that there were policy interpretation and implementation issues that kept Credit Flex implementation from meeting the original policy aims. In summary, the district personnel demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding of credit flexibility. Their primary use of credit flexibility was to stop offering required classes in health and physical education and to use credit flexibility as the way students would earn those credits. The forms that students were required to use to document their progress towards their physical education credits asked for more documentation about the time students spent than they asked for proof of outcome. Complicating this implementation is an equity issue; examples that school counselors provided for students and families who
were happy with the district’s implementation were examples of privilege (e.g., horseback riding, swimming, martial arts). The counselors at the school were uncomfortable with the authority they were given to award credit via Credit Flex, and as a result, they did not actively pursue Credit Flex options for their students.

The superintendent could have employed backwards mapping as a strategy to guide the implementation process. He could have also used the concept of informal policy networks to his advantage by forming a committee of school counselors and some other district representatives. That would have given him touch points with the counselors, it would have given counselors an opportunity to tune their work with each other, and it would have provided oversight and guidance for the credits that were issued.
References


Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Questions
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions for Credit Flex Policy Design Team</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Brief summary of my project; thank you for agreeing to participate. Review the consent form and sign it if you agree to participate in this study. If you wish to end this interview at any time, just let me know, and we will stop.</td>
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<td>2. I am recording the interview for transcription purposes and to make sure I am accurately capturing what you say. The tapes will be heard only by me and by the transcriptionist. Is that okay with you?</td>
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<td>3. Describe your current job and the work that you do.</td>
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<td>4. Describe your involvement with the implementation of Ohio’s credit flexibility policy.</td>
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<td>5. In your opinion, what was the impetus behind the switch from Carnegie Units to Credit Flex? And how do you see the differences between the two?</td>
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<td>6. What barriers to credit flexibility implementation did you anticipate? Why did you anticipate such barriers?</td>
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<td>7. What advocacy for or against the Credit Flex Policy did you see prior to or during implementation? What groups did these advocates represent? How did they achieve their advocacy and what was the result of their advocacy?</td>
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<td>8. What unintended consequences did you anticipate during the policy design phase of Credit Flex?</td>
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<td>9. What are the actual unintended consequences of the policy now that it has been implemented?</td>
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<td>10. What kind of guidance came from the State to the districts about Credit Flex? How was it communicated? How was the decision about guidance and communication made?</td>
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<td>11. What kind of reaction did superintendents have to the Credit Flex Policy? How did implementers interpret the Credit Flex policy? Based on your understanding of the policy, what interpretations aligned with the policy’s intent and what interpretations did not align with the policy’s intent?</td>
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<td>12. How was the policy communicated to implementers? What strategies were used to inform implementers and to support the implementation of the policy? What could have been done (or done better) to make for better implementation of the policy? What could have been done (or done better) to make for greater fidelity of policy implementation?</td>
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<td>13. Why did the Department of Education allow local school boards to make their own policies? How do these local policies align with the state framework? How much freedom did local boards have in creating and implementing credit flexibility policies?</td>
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### Interview Questions for School Leaders

1. Brief summary of my project; thank you for agreeing to participate. Review the consent form and sign it if you agree to participate in this study. If you wish to end this interview at any time, just let me know, and we will stop.

2. I am recording the interview for transcription purposes and to make sure I am accurately capturing what you say. The tapes will be heard only by me and by the transcriptionist. Is that okay with you?

3. Describe your current (or previous) role in Norman City Schools and the work that you do/did.

4. What is/was your understanding of Norman’s credit flexibility policy?

5. How did you first learn of Norman’s credit flexibility plan?

6. What kind of training or guidance was provided to academy leaders about Norman’s Credit Flex Policy?

7. What were your initial reactions to Norman’s Credit Flex Policy?

8. In Norman, how do students and families learn about the Credit Flex Policy? What kind of information is shared? Where is the information found?

9. How have families reacted to Norman’s Credit Flex Policy? Teachers? Students? Community members?

10. Which of your academy personnel is involved in Credit Flex implementation? What are their roles and responsibilities related to the policy?

11. How much autonomy do you have in implementing district policy?

12. How does policy implementation of Credit Flex differ across the academies in the district? Please explain.

13. If there are differences, in your opinion, what causes the differences in policy implementation?

18. What unintended consequences, positive or negative, have occurred as a result of implementing Credit Flex Policy?
**Interview Questions for Academy Counselors**

1. Brief summary of my project; thank you for agreeing to participate. Review the consent form and sign it if you agree to participate in this study. If you wish to end this interview at any time, just let me know, and we will stop.

2. I am recording the interview for transcription purposes and to make sure I am accurately capturing what you say. The tapes will be heard only by me and by the transcriptionist. Is that okay with you?

3. Describe your current role in Norman City Schools and the work that you do.

4. What is your understanding of Norman’s credit flexibility policy?

5. How did you first learn of Norman’s credit flexibility plan?

6. What were your initial reactions?

7. What kind of training or guidance was provided to academy counselors about Norman’s Credit Flex Policy?

8. What were your initial reactions?

9. In Norman, how do students and families learn about the Credit Flex Policy? What kind of information is shared? Where is the information found?

10. How have families reacted to Norman’s Credit Flex Policy? Teachers? Students? Community members?

11. Which of your academy personnel is involved in Credit Flex implementation? What are their roles and responsibilities related to the policy?

12. How much autonomy do you have in implementing district policy?

13. How does policy implementation of Credit Flex differ across the academies in the district? Please explain.

14. If there are differences, in your opinion, what causes the differences in policy implementation?
Appendix B: Complete Codebook
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Appendix G: Interview Schedule
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<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>Member of Ohio’s Credit Flex Design Team. Former high school teacher</td>
<td>Primary findings were that Adam considered Credit Flexibility a policy that would give educators tools to better meet the needs of their students. He provided examples of implementing Credit Flexibility for students before it was officially a policy in Ohio.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>Former employee of the state department of education during Credit</td>
<td>Primary findings were that Jill considered the Credit Flex Policy to be a solution to a problem of inequitable and inflexible approaches to the high school credit earning experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Flexibility planning and early implementation. Supported Ohio’s Credit</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Flex Design Team work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>Former senior level state department of education employee, former</td>
<td>Primary findings were that Adam had a deep passion for reforming the high school experience so that all students felt as though they belonged, and were capable of learning.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>teacher and central office administrator, and member of Ohio’s Credit</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Flex Design Team.</td>
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<tr>
<td>#4</td>
<td>Original Superintendent</td>
<td>Norman City School’s Superintendent who was in office during the</td>
<td>Primary findings were that he considered the role of the superintendent to be one of a policy entrepreneur, he was in favor of the Credit Flexibility Policy, and he thought it fit well with his district’s desire to personalize education and offer innovative educational opportunities to students in the district.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>initial credit flexibility policy implementation. This is the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>superintendent who originally agreed to participate (and to let Norman</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>City Schools participate) in this study.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>New Superintendent</td>
<td>Current Superintendent of Norman City Schools.</td>
<td>Primary findings were that he conceptualized the role of the superintendent differently that the original superintendent, and he expected to find different implementations of credit flexibility in each of the district high schools.</td>
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<tr>
<td>#6</td>
<td>Principal #1</td>
<td>Principal of career academy 1 in Norman City Schools. Works with</td>
<td>Primary findings were that he viewed credit flexibility as an opportunity to better meet the needs of students in his school, and he preferred to act in behalf of students, and worry about any negative consequences that might come when those consequences surfaced.</td>
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<td>Counselor #1.</td>
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<tr>
<td>#7</td>
<td>Principal #2</td>
<td>Principal of career academy 2 in Norman City Schools. Works with</td>
<td>Primary findings were that he created a district wide form that required students to document the number of hours they spent working towards completion of a credit flexibility plan, and this principal saw a division in rule following</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interview #8</td>
<td>Principal #3</td>
<td>Principal of career academy 3 in Norman City Schools. Works with Counselor #3.</td>
<td>Primary findings were that he felt the autonomy of implementation across the high schools created situations that required explanations to parents and other stakeholders.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interview #9</td>
<td>Principal #4</td>
<td>Principal of career academy 4 in Norman City Schools. Works with Counselor #4.</td>
<td>Would only participate in study via written responses to emailed questions; responses were 300 words in total. Primary finding was that the school counselor was the person responsible for implementing credit flex in his school, and he had serious concerns about the protection of his anonymity if he participated in this study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview #10</td>
<td>Counselor #1</td>
<td>School counselor at career academy #1 in Norman City Schools; works with Principal #1.</td>
<td>Primary findings was that Physical Education was the primary implementation of credit flexibility in his academy, and there was no opportunity to discuss implementation strategies with the other counselors in the district, and he was in favor of the district providing more oversight for the credit flexibility process in the district.</td>
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<td>Interview #11</td>
<td>Counselor #2</td>
<td>School counselor at career academy #2 in Norman City Schools; works with Principal #2.</td>
<td>Primary findings were that Physical Education was the primary implementation of the credit flexibility in his school, and he felt as though there was not any quality control check on the credits students were being awarded through credit flexibility.</td>
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<td>Counselor #4</td>
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<td>Primary findings were that Physical Education was the primary implementation of credit flexibility in his school, and he had concerns about the validity of the credit students were earning through credit flexibility.</td>
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