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LOCAL CONTROL AS RESISTANCE:

POLICY AND PRACTICE OF AUTONOMOUS SCHOOL BOARDS

A Dissertation in

Educational Leadership

by

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ABSTRACT

Local control is a defining feature of school governance in the U.S., and is typified by democratically elected school boards. Local control has been undermined by consolidation reforms, however, centralizing governance under professional superintendents. Yet local control not only persists, but is assertively protected by communities, particularly in rural regions of the country. This dissertation examines how school boards enact local control today. Using a three article format, I examine who has control, how local control is enacted, and what the limits are to local autonomy. The study contributes to the fields of district governance, local control, and intergovernmental policy implementation.

In the first article, I address the contradiction of how communities perceive locally controlled school boards versus policymakers and educational researchers. Using a case study, I investigate three district school boards in Vermont, which are part of a regional supervisory union overseen by a superintendent and a central school board. Employing the theory of policy co-construction, I investigate how the district boards subvert statutes delegating governance, what accounts for variations in their adaptations, and how they affect board-superintendent relations. I find the central board and superintendent have limited authority, enabling district boards to negotiate greater autonomy. Boards’ autonomy varies by their community capacity to take on additional responsibilities. Board-superintendent relationships, ranging from collaborative to contentious, also varied by community and board capacity. I explain how local capacity influences board autonomy and board-superintendent relations in locally controlled districts, which I illustrate in a typology.

In the second article, I build on my findings from Chapter 2 of empowered, autonomous school boards in Vermont to examine the relationship between schools and communities in locally controlled districts. Using a socio-cultural perspective, I assert that communities and
schools are sites of mutually influential interaction. However, schools have strong institutional norms, necessitating deliberate practices to influence the technical core of instruction. To analyze effective democratic practices of boards, I use two exemplary case studies where locally controlled boards ensure alignment between community values and educational practices. Both boards use the school budget process as the primary mechanism of local control. The boards develop community trust by maintaining transparent communication and providing opportunities for community participation. The study identifies strategies boards in more restrictive settings can employ to strengthen democratic participation.

In the third article, I examine how local districts interpret and implement external policies, specifically No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability mandates. While researchers know there is significant variability of state-level enactment of assessments mandates, less is known about local district interpretation and implementation. Using a case study of three locally controlled districts, I investigate how district leaders implement and interpret assessment mandates. I use policy co-construction and sense-making to interpret leaders’ decisions. I find districts had to comply with implementation, a clear limit to local control. Yet implementation was influenced by local capacity and will, creating variability of assessment procedures. District leaders’ interpreted high-stakes testing as a hortatory tool that protects local control, both within the district, and from external state oversight. These findings contribute to accountability research by explaining how local leaders make sense of accountability reforms can subvert their intended value, as local districts use them as a hortatory tool to promote local values and needs.

The dissertation explains why and how centralization of board governance is resisted by communities, and what steps practitioners, researchers, and policymakers can take to ensure communities retain democratic voice in their school governance. The study concludes with an agenda for continuing research on locally controlled school boards.
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DEDICATION

Dedicated in memory of my mother, Martha Hall, who taught me to be independent, tenacious, and brave.
Chapter 1

Introduction

When travelling along Vermont’s winding, mountainous roads, the small towns can begin to look deceptively similar. Miles of forests are strung with maple sap lines for sugaring season, following the slopes of mountains cut by glaciers. A general store, on the outskirts of town, will usually be the first signal that a town center is near. The store windows advertise crawlers, Green Mountain Coffee, maple syrup, and fresh baked bread, while pickup trucks and Subaru station wagons fill the parking lot. From there, the town will unfold into wooden houses, some white with green shutters that date back to the Federalist style. Sometimes the road opens onto a traditional town green, flanked by colonial-era Meeting Houses still in use today. Schools pop up along the periphery, their snow banks piled high with children in brightly winter clothes, some riding sleds into fields below. And then the town is gone, hidden behind the bend in a road, fading with the radio into silence.

It is therefore forgivable that to the casual observer, Vermont’s many small towns are interchangeable. Indeed, Vermont as a whole is perceived to be rustic, quaint, and homogenous, a perception that is supported by demographic data. Vermont is one of the least diverse states in the nation: 95% of the population identifies as white (U.S. Census, 2015). It also has one of the largest rural populations in the country (U.S. Census, 2015). Although Vermont has a history of conservative voters, the state’s political trends are consistently liberal (Cohen, 2012).

Vermont’s education system shows similar homogeneity. Over 73% of Vermont schools are located in rural areas (Johnson, Showalter, Klein & Lester, 2014). As the state does not allow charter schools, the school system is overwhelmingly comprised of community-based public schools (Vermont Agency of Education, 2015). Furthermore, Vermont implemented equity-based
school funding in 1997, which is perceived to be one of the most progressive educational funding systems in the country (Davis et al., 2013; Shlaes, 1999). The education funding system, known as Act 60, redistributes local property taxes per equalized pupil to districts statewide, ensuring a more equitable distribution of school funding between high and low resource towns (Picus et al., 2012; Shlaes, 1999). As school funding is one of the most significant variables influencing public education, Act 60 minimizes economic variability in Vermont’s districts (Picus et al., 2012). Thus, the homogeneity of Vermont’s educational landscape appears to be an outlier in comparison to the nation’s more urban, diverse states, raising questions about the value of conducting educational research in the state. To the casual observer, Vermont’s small, rural characteristics make it too anomalous to offer transferable contributions in educational research.

Where Vermont stands out, however, is that the state is a stronghold for educational local control: community-based governance of public schools. Vermont’s communities have retained participatory democracy over town and school governance for over two hundred years (Bryan, 2004). Local control is a foundational principal of U.S. public education (Cohen, 1982; Lutz & Iannaccone, 2008). In fact, New England states shaped the national belief that schools, as primary public institutions, should be governed by their local communities (Callahan, 1962; Cohen, 1982; Tyack, 1974). Yet as the country grew, local control became mired in controversy as school boards were accused of cronyism, mismanagement, corruption, and exacerbating educational inequities (Callahan, 1962; Chub & Moe, 1988; Tyack, 1974). Educational governance shifted to scientific management, also known as Taylorism, transitioning away from locally controlled boards to centralized school districts overseen by expertly trained educational administrators (Callahan, 1962; Shannon, 1990; Tyack, 1974). Locally elected school boards remain a central component of district governance today, yet many studies conclude the majority of these boards are disempowered, or so disconnected from their communities that democratic governance of public education is considered a myth (Danzberger et al., 1992; Wirt & Kirst, 1989; Zeigler et al.,
In areas where local control does persist, educational theorists caution that locally-enacted policy shaped by dominant community beliefs have potential to institutionalize oppressive and discriminatory values (Diem, Frankenberg, & Cleary, 2015; Gutmann, 1999; Hochschild, 2005; Trujillo, 2013; Young, 1989).

Concurrent with the decline of community-based school governance, the technical aspects of education – curriculum, instruction, and assessment – have become increasingly globalized (Apple, 2000, 2006; Corbett, 2007). As a result, neoliberal educational policies have become widespread, exemplifying individualism and economic efficiency in lieu of community-based collaborations (Apple, 2000, 2006; Schafft, 2010). Neoliberalism prioritizes school choice and privatization, standards-based testing and accountability, and global education to prepare for a rapidly changing technological world (Apple, 2000; Chubb & Moe, 1988; Edmonson & Butler, 2010). In contrast to progressive frameworks that promote collective social support for individuals, neoliberalism perpetuates a highly individualized, autonomous system where people are expected to be productive economic entrepreneurs of their own lives (Hursh, 2007). Furthermore, it undermines local control by perpetuating a globalized educational approach that is disconnected from community-specific values, knowledge, and outcomes (Howley & Howley, 2010; Schafft, 2010, 2015; Theobald, 1997). Howley & Howley write, “Globalization… undermines the local commons from which local community is developed, creating conditions that make the social exclusion of already marginalized groups just that much more likely, further abetting the destruction of community,” (2010, p. 35). In many rural areas, jobs are dependent on local and natural resources, such as fishing, timbering, or natural gas extraction. Neoliberal perspectives in schools, however, prioritize global career preparation that enables students to compete for jobs internationally (Corbett, 2007; Hursh, 2007). Ironically, by prioritizing the universal and global over the local, this educational perspective prepares students for jobs anywhere except their own communities (Corbett, 2007; Howley & Howley, 2010; Schafft, 2015;
Sherman & Sage, 2011). Thus while locally controlled educational governance declined through organizational reforms, it has been further undermined by the perpetuation of neoliberal educational values that privilege the global over the local.

Parents and community members, however, have not necessarily embraced their loss of participation in the governance and practices of public schools. Over the past five years, protests have engulfed many states as parents and communities use their collective voices to express the need for changes in public education (Jack & Sludden, 2013; Zernike, 2015). Community-based protests have erupted over issues including Common Core State Standards, standardized testing, educational equity, and school quality (Diem, Frankenberg, & Cleary, 2015; Jack & Sludden, 2013; Harris, 2015; Johns, 2013; Zernike, 2015). Furthermore, these protests have forced significant changes, from repealing the use of Common Core-aligned testing in Massachusetts (Zernike, 2015) to firing superintendents and reversing course on educational reforms (e.g., Diem et al., 2015). The depth and breadth of community resistance to the current educational system highlights the importance of improving democratic participation in education.

As policymakers and practitioners seek solutions that engender community voice in public schools, their work is undermined by the fact that the primary theories of local control examine the work of professional educators – superintendents, central office staff, principals, and teachers – rather than democratically elected school board members (e.g., Cohen, 1990; Darling-Hammond, 1990; Spillane, 1996, 1998, 1999; Spillane & Thompson, 1997). The role of school boards in local control is largely absent from major theories of local control; possibly due to the decline of school board autonomy in many regions of the country (Kirst, 2008; Lutz & Iannaccone, 2008). While communities actively seek greater voice in school oversight, there are few theories or models available to understand local control enacted by school boards today. Research on community-based control of education is therefore critical to support the work of policymakers, practitioners, and researchers.
Research on local control is particularly critical for policymakers, as they need current, high-quality research to inform their policymaking. District and school consolidation is a perennial reform proposed by legislators who believe centralized governance can reduce education costs and improve student outcomes (Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011; Tyack, 1974). In order for such policies to be effective, however, they must be based on understanding – and changing – ineffective governance practices. Given the dearth of research in the past twenty years on locally controlled districts, policymakers are trying to change educational systems without having the foundational understanding of how the systems work. Such changes can do more harm than good, a point illustrated by Vermont’s Secretary of Education Rebecca Holcombe. As the Vermont legislature debated consolidating district governance (which passed into law in 2015), Holcombe cautioned policymakers, “If we aren’t careful and if you don’t get it right, there’s a potential to do a tremendous amount of damage,” (Hirschfeld, 2015, p. 1). Research on local control is therefore of critical importance to ensure educational reforms not only are effective, but do not undermine current practices that work. Furthermore, by studying the politics of districts that effectively engender community participation in public school governance, policymakers can use these systems to support and increase community governance in public schools.

The need for research on locally controlled school governance is not limited to policymakers; educational leaders (e.g., superintendents, district officials, principals, instructional coaches) also need contemporary case studies of community-based governance. These administrators are on the front lines of school districts, and many work directly with school boards and the general public. For superintendents, their job tenure is dependent on their school boards. Effectively maintaining positive, collaborative relationships with school is therefore critical for the long-term tenure of district leaders (Alsbury, 2003; Björk & Lindle, 2001; Mountford, 2004). Yet much of the research on superintendent-board relations is based on a model where school boards are disempowered or confused about their work (e.g., Björk & Lindle,
2001; Land, 2002; McCarty & Ramsey, 1971; Mountford, 2004, 2008). Administrators need updated case studies and models that examine relationships with empowered and autonomous boards. In districts with limited local control, administrators would benefit from research explaining how to increase community participation and voice in educational governance. Such processes would enable district leaders to proactively develop community voice and support for educational practices, rather than reactively responding to public conflicts and protests.

Additionally, within educational research itself, the exclusion of school boards from theories of locally control creates an incomplete narrative on school board governance, power, and board-superintendent relations. Of particular concern is the lack of rural-specific research on local control, which is considered by some researchers to be more prevalent in rural regions and states (e.g., Boyd, 1976; Lutz & Iannaccone, 2008; Shelly, 2008, 2012). Rural theorists have made powerful arguments for the importance of community voice and participation in public schools (e.g., Corbett, 2007; Howley & Howley, 2014; Schafft, 2010, 2015). Yet much of the work on local control in rural communities is based on policy research conducted in the 1970s, pre-

A Nation at Risk. Since then, the educational landscape has changed dramatically, limiting the value and applicability of the rural case studies. Such research should therefore be a significant priority in the rural field to provide theoretical support to the dominant narrative that local control of public schools is necessary for rural communities.

Thus, there is a critical need for research on local control to inform policymakers, practitioners, and research in education. And here we return to Vermont, a state that has maintained local control of education since the 1700s (Bryan, 2004). The significance of local control is particularly evident in Vermont’s current education system. On the state level, Vermont’s Agency of Education (AOE) has resisted proscriptive federal education policies that curtail state and local educational autonomy. For example, Vermont was only of only three states to decline to apply for a waiver for No Child Left Behind (NCLB); doing so on the grounds that
the requirements undermined the state’s autonomy (Center on Education Policy, 2015; Morse & Mathis, 2014). Likewise, in 2014, Vermont’s Board of Education released a resolution asserting that NCLB mandates lacked scientific efficacy and degraded the quality of schools not only in Vermont, but nationwide (Vermont State Board of Education, 2014). The state’s resistance to federal reforms, while not immediately successful in changing legislation, demonstrate Vermont’s opposition to policies that undermine local control.

Within the state, “The schools are the heart of most communities and the notion of local control is close to a religion here,” (Bidgood, 2014, p. 1). Vermont’s residents are fiercely protective over their right to local control of their towns and schools. Their authority is maintained through the state’s decentralized educational system which engenders extensive control by community school boards. The majority of towns maintain their own school districts, which are overseen by locally-elected school boards. Providing some degree of centralized governance, school districts are loosely grouped into supervisory unions (SUs), which are overseen by a regional superintendent and central, composite board. These SUs are similar to regional school districts in states like New York, Pennsylvania, and Texas (ECS, 2015). However, they are considered multi-district sites, as each local district board retains autonomy within the overall SU. And Vermont residents are protective over retaining their school boards (Bidgood, 2014). In cases where multiple towns govern a single school, each individual town retains its own school board in addition to the centralized board. As a result, there are approximately 300 school boards operating within 255 towns, cities, and unincorporated areas (Vermont AOE, 2015; Vermont School Board Association, personal communication). This decentralized system favors local control enacted by community school boards, concentrates power on the local level.

Although Vermont’s towns appear to be externally similar, the practices of locally controlled schools reflect significant variability statewide. Local control has enabled flexibility
for towns to implement school programs and practices based on each community’s beliefs. In Vermont’s public schools, there are one-to-one laptop programs, portfolio-based assessments, place-based learning, student voice collaborations, behavior intervention programs, instrumental music, farm-school partnerships, and immigrant resettlement programs. Not all communities are actively involved in school governance, and not all schools produce meaningful outcomes for their students and families (Vermont AOE, 2015). However, the variability of Vermont’s locally controlled school districts reflect the diversity of educational practices that extend beyond the dominant neoliberal designs present nationwide. The diversity and variability of educational practices in locally controlled districts make Vermont particularly well suited for comparative case study research to investigate how autonomous governance shapes public schooling in an institutional environment that enhances local control.

Thus, Vermont is an exceptional site to conduct research on locally controlled school boards. While aspects of the state are homogenous, the practices in Vermont’s schools are not. And by researching local control in towns that have centuries of experience ensuring community participation in school governance, Vermont offers powerful examples to inform the work of policymakers, practitioners, and researchers in less autonomous regions.

Research Overview

The purpose of my dissertation is to examine the work of locally controlled school boards. The research is a case study of three neighboring school districts in Vermont that enable analysis of the practices of autonomous school boards, their schools and communities. My theoretical framework integrates literature on organizational theory, policy co-construction, school board role confusion, and policy instruments to understand how school boards interpret,
adapt, and implement reforms. Methodologically, I combine interviews, observations, documents, and policy analysis to provide a multifaceted examination of the case study districts.

The dissertation is structured as three separate articles that build on similar concepts of school board governance in locally controlled districts. Chapter 2 is a qualitative study that examines the extent of autonomy school boards have in practice in a decentralized, loosely-coupled state. Chapter 2 begins with the premise that local control is a defining feature of school governance in the U.S. (Cohen, 1982), and is typified by democratically elected school boards (Lutz & Iannaccone, 2008). Over the past century, local control has been undermined by reforms that consolidated and bureaucratized governance, centralizing authority under professional superintendents (Callahan, 1962; Tyack, 1974). Today, research finds superintendents and district professionals retain autonomy due to the loosely-coupled organizational structure of education (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990; Meyer & Rowan, 1978; Spillane, 1998), while disempowered school boards are confused over their responsibilities, generating conflict with superintendents (Danzberger et al., 1992; Land, 2002). Yet communities continue to resist legislation that curtails board governance on the grounds that they are critical for local control.

Chapter 2 therefore uses a case study to investigate three small district school boards in Vermont, which are part of a regional supervisory union overseen by a superintendent and a central school board. Employing the theory of policy co-construction (e.g., Datnow & Park, 2009; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993), I analyze how the district boards subvert Vermont Statutes delegating organizational governance, what accounts for variations in their adaptations, and how they relate to board-superintendent relations. I find the central board and superintendent have limited authority, enabling district boards to negotiate greater autonomy. Boards’ autonomy varies by their community capacity to take on additional responsibilities. Board-superintendent relationships, ranging from collaborative to contentious, also varied by community and board capacity. I find boards can retain more control than previously understood, explaining why some
communities resist consolidation. I explain how local capacity influences board autonomy and board-superintendent relations in locally controlled districts, which I illustrate in a typology. This chapter also provides insights as to why locally controlled school boards matter.

In Chapter 3, I build on my findings from Chapter 2 of empowered, autonomous school boards in Vermont to examine how locally controlled boards effectively ensure community values align with educational practices in their schools. I begin the article from the stance that democratically elected school boards play a crucial role in school governance, for they enable community voice in the practices and programs of school (Alsbury, 2008; Lutz & Iannaccone, 2008). Yet the majority of research on boards finds they are disempowered and unproductive, with limited research of how boards effectively enact local control (Land, 2002). School boards and communities seeking to expand voice in their schools have neither the models nor tools to inform their work, undermining their democratic participation.

Using a socio-cultural perspective, I assert that communities and schools are sites of mutually influential social interaction (Boyd, 1978; Oakes et al., 2005; Schafft, 2015). However, schools have strong institutional norms, necessitating deliberate practices by groups such as school boards to influence the technical core of instruction (Boyd, 1978; Cuban, 1993). To analyze effective democratic practices of boards, I use two exemplary case study districts where locally controlled boards ensure alignment between community values and educational practices. The neighboring districts share similar characteristics, but their communities have different pedagogical values which are reflected in their schools. To align community values with school practices, both boards use the school budget process as the primary mechanism of local control. The boards develop community participation and trust by maintaining transparent communication and providing regular opportunities for community participation. The study therefore addresses a key need in educational leadership by identifying strategies school boards in more restrictive governance settings can employ to strengthen democratic participation in school governance. The
findings also provide evidence that locally controlled school boards can ensure communities have a voice in their local school governance that can influence the technical core of instruction.

In Chapter 4, I examine how locally controlled school boards interpret and implement federal accountability mandates. The study begins with the premise that the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) started a new era high stakes accountability in education. NCLB was framed to promote equity while ensuring local accountability, and mandated states implement annual high-stakes testing. Researchers found significant variation in how states enacted the accountability mandates, creating uneven national implementation (McDermott & Jensen, 2005; Shelly, 2008; Vergari, 2012). Although previous research on Standards Based Reforms explained how districts adapt federal policies by local capacity, will, and sense-making, surprisingly little research examined how more restrictive NCLB accountability measures were interpreted and implemented by local districts. I ask, are there limits to local control, and if so, how do they affect the fidelity of federal policy implementation?

Chapter 4 is a multiple case study of three locally controlled districts that investigates how local educational leaders implement and interpret assessment mandates. Using policy co-construction and sense-making to interpret leaders’ decisions (Datnow & Park, 2009; Mehan et al., 2010; Spillane et al., 2002), I explain how local districts adapted accountability policies based on local context and will. I find all three districts were forced to comply with implementation, despite one district’s attempts to reject the mandate, demonstrating this federal policy created a clear limit to local control. Yet I also find district implementation was heavily influenced by local capacity and will, creating significant variability of assessment procedures and supports. Furthermore, district leaders’ interpretations of testing did not align with state messaging. Instead, local leaders interpreted high-stakes testing as a hortatory tool that protects local control, both within the district, and from external state oversight. These findings contribute to accountability
research by explaining how local leaders make sense of accountability reforms can subvert their intended value, as local districts use them as a hortatory tool to promote local values and needs.

Collectively, the three articles explain how local control is enacted today where school boards are empowered. The conclusion, chapter 5, identifies major themes and significance of the study. I discuss major implications for research, practitioners, and policymakers, and outline a research agenda to further extend the major contributions of the study. In the words of one school board member, “If you want to know how it’s going on the front lines, go ask the guy who’s up there with the rifle shooting people. Don’t sit back 200 miles away with some binoculars and try to guess. Get down in there and ask them!” For this dissertation, I followed his directives and went down to the front lines, learning from educational leaders, parents, school board members, and community residents what local control looks like in practice today. In presenting this research, it is my intention to significantly inform our understanding of locally controlled school boards today for the benefit of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.
References


Chapter 2

“Tell Them Local Control is Important” - School Board Capacity & Control

Abstract

The case study investigates three locally controlled district school boards in Vermont, which are part of a regional supervisory union overseen by a superintendent and a central school board. Employing the theory of policy co-construction, I investigate how the district boards subvert Vermont Statutes delegating organizational governance, what accounts for variations in their adaptations, and how they relate to board-superintendent relations. I find the central board and superintendent have limited authority, enabling district boards to negotiate greater autonomy. Expanding the theory of local capacity to include community and board capacity, I explain how boards’ autonomy varies by their capacity to take on additional responsibilities. Board-superintendent relationships, ranging from collaborative to contentious, also varied by their capacity, as illustrated in a typology I develop. In demonstrating why and how local capacity influences board autonomy and board-superintendent relations in locally controlled districts, the study provides insights for educational leaders to strengthen board-superintendent collaboration.

Introduction

On a cold Tuesday in March, a school board director in Vermont stood before his assembled town meeting. Facing an uncertain future as the legislature debated consolidating districts and centralizing school boards, the director assertively spoke: “Tell them local control is important. Tell them you want to raise your hand and decide for the school in your town meeting. I guarantee it, in three to five years we aren’t going to have any more town meetings.”
The fear of losing local control of schools has played out in diverse communities across the United States for over a century. Since the industrial revolution, reformers have proposed centralizing district governance to improve student outcomes and reduce expenses (Callahan, 1962; Tyack, 1974). These organizational reforms push against tightly held beliefs about self-governance, generating conflict. Former Maine Governor John Baldacci likened the implementation of consolidation to “battle,” explaining: “People hang really strongly onto local control, and don’t want to lose it,” (Nixon, 2015, p. 1). Yet some district leaders advocate for centralized governance and reduced local control, asserting that school boards can generate conflict and confusion with superintendents, undermining school governance (Mountford, 2004).

Conflict over organizational consolidation and perceived loss of autonomy is not limited to local districts. In 2014, Washington was the first state to lose its ESEA waiver. The state legislature refused to reduce local control of teacher evaluations, a requirement from the federal government (Klein, 2014). Similar state-federal standoffs over local control occurred in Texas, Idaho, North Dakota, Montana, and Vermont; all resisted the federal government’s reform efforts on the grounds that they undermined district autonomy (Baesler, 2013; Juneau, 2011; Klein, 2015; Morse & Mathis, 2014; Wong, 2015). While the rationale for resistance varies, many agree with Marty Strange’s conclusion that school centralization and consolidation reforms “[shift] power from elected neighbors to distant bureaucrats,” (2015, p. 1).

The policy conflict over local control is exacerbated by a lack of understanding of how contemporary local control is enacted, particularly in the nation’s rural communities. Local control theories address the role of district professionals: superintendents, central office staff, principals, and teachers (e.g., Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990; Spillane, 1996, 1999; Spillane & Thompson, 1997). The theories do not include the explicit perspective of school boards. Yet school board are generally not trained as educational professionals and therefore their practices are less likely to align with district leaders (Mountford, 2004, 2008). Researching how school
boards operate in locally controlled systems is therefore an important contribution to theories of local control. It also serves to inform the practices of educational leaders who seek greater understanding of superintendent-board relations.

In this qualitative case study, I contribute to locally controlled theory, policy, and practice by examining how and why local boards enact state regulations delegating control. Drawing from theories of policy co-construction and local capacity, I explain the relationship between community and board capacity and board-superintendent relationships in autonomous districts. The study concludes with implications for educational leaders and policymakers.

**Literature Review**

The United States has a long tradition of locally-controlled education, dating back to Colonial America when New England towns implemented common schools and participatory town meetings (Bryan, 2004; Kirst, 2008; Strober & Tyack, 1980). However, local control of education became mired in controversy as the country developed (Callahan, 1962). By the early 20th century, claims of school board corruption prompted large-scale governance reforms (Callahan, 1962; Tyack, 1974). The first major reform utilized a factory model to streamline and professionalize public schools (Callahan, 1962; Kirst, 1984; Tyack, 1974). Known as “the one best system,” it systematically reduced local control by professionalizing the superintendency (Land, 2002; Tyack, 1974), reducing large urban school boards (Kirst, 2008), centralizing district governance (Kirst, 1984; Tyack & Cuban, 1995), and consolidating small school districts (Callahan, 1962; Mathis, 2015). In ensuing decades, declining confidence in public administration shifted power from locally elected boards to professional superintendents, who were designated as districts’ Chief Operating Officers (Glass, Bjork, & Bruner, 2000; Mountford, 2008; Trujillo, 2012). School boards, particularly in rural and suburban towns, retained control
over educational policy work for districts (Cohen, 1982; Kirst, 1984, 2008).

The role of school boards in local educational governance changed in 1983, with the release of *A Nation at Risk*, a short but inflammatory report issued under the Reagan Administration. The report raised questions about educational standards and outcomes in locally controlled school districts, prompting a dramatic shift in the role of both state and federal government in public education (Kirst, 1984, 2008; Mehta, 2013; Mountford, 2008). Poor student outcomes and weak school standards were attributed to ineffective local school boards (Hochshchild, 2005; Kirst, 2008), prompting state-level systemic reform that introduced state-specific academic standards and further centralized organizational governance (Chrispeels, 1997; Kirst, 2008; O’Day & Smith, 1988). These reforms also limited community-driven educational inequities such as de facto segregation, as locally-enacted education policies can institutionalize oppressive and discriminatory values reflected in the community board (Diem, Frankenberg, & Cleary, 2015; Gutman, 1999; Trujillo, 2013; Young, 1995). Many assert that the limited power school boards had evaporated in the wake of *A Nation at Risk’s* educational reforms (Björk, 2008; Kirst, 2008; Mazzoni, 1994).

**School Board Governance Today**

The significant expansion of educational policies have overwhelmed the capacity of local school boards, curtailing and focusing their role into a narrow position of budgetary and policy approval. Contemporary research on school board governance, while limited, finds that most boards retain two district responsibilities: making educational policies and approving the budget (Glass et al., 2000; Mountford, 2008). Some states have further curtailed these responsibilities with legislation that delegates authority to superintendents and state agencies (Malen, 2003). Malen explains the shift for local school boards in these states, where “the focus is on
accommodating state priorities and “correcting” state policies more than determining local school priorities and policies,” (2003, p. 201). Instead of creating and implementing their own educational policies for their districts, school boards essentially “rubber stamp” their approval for policies created by superintendent, state agencies, or special interest groups (Boyd, 1976; Glass et al., 2000; Malen, 2003; Zeigler, Jennings, & Peak, 1974).

One direct outcome of the decline in school board autonomy coupled with limitations of their professional responsibilities is role confusion. School board researchers identify role confusion as the phenomenon that occurs when school board members are confused about the parameters of their work, and therefore may attempt to take on responsibilities assigned to the superintendent, such as firing principals or teachers (Danzberger, 1994; Danzberger, Kirst, & Usdan, 1992; Glass et al., 2000; Land, 2002). Role confusion can generate conflict and exacerbate mistrust between board members and superintendents (Danzberger et al., 1992; Kirst, 1984; Glass et al., 2000; Mountford, 2004). In a national survey of superintendents, Glass et al. (2000) found superintendents reported widespread, persistent struggles with school board role confusion. In a separate study, Mountford noted role confusion “can become a catalyst for controversy that severely weakness trust and collaboration between the superintendent and his or her board,” (2008, p. 86). From this perspective, the gradual decline of local control has disempowered the authority of school boards while exacerbating confusion over responsibilities within districts’ organizational structures.

Theoretical Framework

Although research finds educational reforms curtailed school boards’ autonomy, scholars found school districts – governed by superintendents and central offices – retained significant local control under the same reforms (Diem et al., 2015; Land, 2002; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2008;
Trujillo, 2013). For many years, educational policy experts believed policy implementation was a rational process with linear, top-down implementation (Datnow & Park, 2009; Stone, 1997). More recent research contradicts that stance, instead showing how large scale policies are adapted by the bottom level, resulting in variable implementation (Darling-Hammond, 1990; Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; McLaughlin, 1990). While multiple theories have emerged from this research, I employ the policy co-construction perspective that reforms are shaped by their socio-cultural context (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 1998; Datnow & Park, 2009; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Mehan, Hubbard, & Datnow, 2010). Mehan et al. explain, “the co-construction perspective recognizes that agents at all levels contribute to the policy-making process and ... the agency of and interaction between educators is part of a complex dynamic, shaping and shaped by the structural and cultural features of school and society,” (2010, p. 100). From the policy co-construction perspective, policy adaptation is multi-dimensional, and is shaped by local actors and their relevant socio-cultural context. The theory of policy co-construction is well-established as a means to understand variability in locally controlled districts, and therefore is well suited to explain the autonomy in this article. Furthermore, I expand the use of policy-construction by examining how school boards adapt governance responsibilities delegated by state statutes.

I also employ the theory of local capacity to analyze the variability of policy co-construction and organizational autonomy across the case study sites. Local capacity asserts that local educational actors adapt policies based on their local capacity, which is defined as actors’ beliefs, experiences, and prior knowledge (Chrispeels, 1997; Cohen, 1990; Spillane, 1996; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Local capacity can also include resources, knowledge, networks, and social or economic capital that affect local actors’ interpretation and adaptation of policy (Coburn, 2003; Cohen, 1990; Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Spillane & Thompson, 1997). Capacity influences how both individuals and groups make sense of educational reforms (Cohen, 1990; Spillane, 1996, 1998; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Spillane & Thompson, 1997). Local capacity
conceptualizes the explicit and implicit factors that influence how individuals and groups make sense of education policies. It appears likely that local capacity explains school board actions in locally controlled systems; however, this theory primarily has been used to understand the work of professional educators, such as superintendents, central office staff, principals, and teachers (e.g., Cohen, 1990; Spillane & Thompson, 1997). One of the contributions of this study therefore is to expand the theory of local capacity by examining how it relates to school board practices in locally controlled districts.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this article is to explain how and why locally controlled school boards adapt governance responsibilities, and how these adaptations affect superintendent-board relations. By employing the theories of policy co-construction and local capacity to analyze patterns of autonomy across the case study sites, the article contributes a school board perspective to these established theories of local control.

The article uses two research questions to guide this research: What is the relationship between local capacity and school board adaptation of governance responsibilities delegated by the state? What is the relationship between the variability of governance adaptation in case study districts and superintendent-board relations?

**Research Design and Methodology**

The study employs a qualitative case study design of one supervisory union (SU) and three of its school districts in Vermont to examine how local control is enacted by school boards. I purposefully selected the SU for its size and governance structure; it is comprised of a single
superintendent and central office oversee multiple school districts, each of which are overseen by local school boards. The three neighboring case study districts each encompass a single town with one public elementary school (Pre-K or K – 6th or 8th grade) overseen by either a small, locally-elected school board. As each district works with the same superintendent, the case study sites provide an unusual opportunity to examine how the same superintendent’s relationships are shaped by local district variations. This multiple case study therefore provides key opportunities to analyze how different school boards adapt and modify organizational policies within the same bounded geographic and educational system (Creswell, 2007).

**State Context**

In some regards, Vermont appears to be an outlier in state governance due to its size and diverse organizational structures. However, the state’s extensive legacy and protection over local control makes it the ideal location to research school board autonomy. Vermont was selected because it is one of the few states that continues to resist reforms aimed at consolidation and centralization (Mathis, 2015; Rogers, Glesner, & Meyers, 2012), and therefore provides a rich opportunity to analyze the autonomy of school boards in a state with limited central governance. Vermont’s Agency of Education (AOE) limits state-level accountability and oversight of local districts, engendering systemic autonomy (Holcombe, 2014; Vermont State Board of Education, 2014). Local control of education is fiercely protected; as explained by Shap Smith, Vermont’s Speaker of the House, “the schools are the heart of most communities and the notion of local control is close to a religion here,” (Bidgood, 2014). Vermont therefore can teach us about the organizational control and structures of school boards when they are granted near full autonomy.

Vermont’s decentralized educational system is largely unchanged from the common school model of the 1800s (Mathis, 2015; Rogers et al., 2012). As a result, local control of
education has been continuously enacted for over 200 years (Bryan, 2004). Today, the state’s 283 districts are loosely organized into SUs, supervisory districts, or interstate districts, which are overseen by superintendents and school boards (Vermont AOE, 2012). These local districts also encompass variability in organizational structures; there are 12 distinct district governance structures, ranging from single towns that tuition all students to multiple-town unions with joint schools. Local districts retain their own school boards. The Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA) estimates there are currently 290 – 300 school boards for 255 towns (2014, personal communication). The state does not have a precise count of the number of school boards, as communities may retain multiple boards for the same district.

Finally, the governance structures of Vermont’s multi-district SUs provide an exceptional opportunity to analyze board-superintendent relations. The majority of Vermont superintendents work with multiple district school boards, in addition to a SU school board (Vermont AOE, 2015). Vermont therefore provides an unusual opportunity to examine variations of board relationships with the same superintendent. This structure also is a limitation, however, as few other states employ a multi-district superintendency model (Jones & Howley, 2009).

**Supervisory Union and District Context**

I purposefully selected the SU in the study because it contains multiple districts with varying organizational structures, enabling a cross-case comparison of local control in practice. The SU is geographically large, encompassing at least 8 towns, and over 10 school boards. The superintendent runs a small central office, and is overseen by a composite SU board with more than 25 members. Although this SU contains significant variability and local control, its size and structure is representative of others in the state (Vermont AOE, 2015).
The three sites are among the most independent districts in the union. Each oversees a single school (PreK – K through 6th or 8th grade) and provides school choice for middle and/or high school. One case study district, Jackson, relies on the central office to provide centralized services for finances, transportation, contract negotiations, goods procurement, and other managerial tasks. The other two districts, Ashfield and Conway, do not use centralized services, and historically have rebuffed attempts to consolidate governance. District characteristics are identified in table 2-1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ashfield</th>
<th>Conway</th>
<th>Jackson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Population</td>
<td>1100</td>
<td>1100</td>
<td>900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Board Members</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenure of School Board Chair</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>11 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Composition</td>
<td>K - 8</td>
<td>PreK - 6</td>
<td>PreK - 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Population</td>
<td>~85</td>
<td>~100</td>
<td>~65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Qualifying for Free &amp; Reduced Price Lunch</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Data Collection)

The study methods include collecting and analyzing multiple sources of data to better understand local control as enacted by district school boards. Data sources included 36 interviews with 20 participants, 18 hours of school board meeting observations, 12 hours of annual town/school meeting observations, and 38 policy or educational documents. Data collection took place from January 2014 – September 2015.

On the SU level, I conducted three semi-structured interviews with the superintendent, four phone conversations, and nine hours of informal face-to-face conversations. I also conducted

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1 Districts and participants are identified with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.
two semi-structured interviews with the SU board chair, and four hours of informal face-to-face conversations. The informal conversations were pre-emptively disclosed as research material, documented as memos, and were used to provide background context for the SU and individual districts (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Trujillo, 2013). SU-level interviews addressed, but were not limited to, the organizational structure of the SU, governance roles, and the historical, social, political, and economic context of individual districts (see Appendix D for sample protocols). All SU interviews lasted between 1 – 2 hours, used semi-structured protocols, and were recorded and transcribed.

On the district level, I conducted two interviews with each board chair (one participant was both a district and SU board chair). I interviewed each district principal four times, and interviewed district board members one or two times, depending on their availability. As one school board underwent significant turnover over the course of the study, I also interviewed four former board members to provide additional perspective. Two board members were unable to participate in interviews due to scheduling conflicts. Topics for district level interviews included, but were not limited to, district governance, district and SU role allocation and confusion, perceptions of leadership, and the historical, social, political, and economic context of their districts. All district level interviews used semi-structured protocols, lasted between 30 – 90 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed.

I conducted 30 hours of ethnographic observations of nine school board meetings and four annual town and school meetings. Documenting meetings enabled me to observe the routine work of boards, relations with the superintendent and administrators, and deepen my understanding of governance variations across the sites. Observations serve as a second source for data triangulation. I expanded fieldnotes after leaving sites (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

To understand legally designated responsibilities in Vermont SU and district governance, I explored Vermont State Statutes pertaining to educational governance, including Title 16:
Education; Chapter 5: Secretary of Education; Chapter 7: SUs; and Chapter 9: School Districts (16 V.S.A. § 201 - 5701). I identified and extracted statutes that specifically address designated duties or responsibilities assigned or legally available to superintendents, SU boards, district school boards, and/or principals. I cross-referenced excerpted policies with policy and governance guidance documents from the Vermont Superintendents Association (2009); Vermont School Boards Association (2012), and the 2013 SU bylaws.

I also collected documents including official minutes from school board meetings, annual town and school reports, and newspaper articles documenting educational issues in the SU. The documents provided additional background on policy decisions, community context, district governance and role allocation, and relationships between different educational actors.

Data Analysis

Methods of analysis combined policy document analysis with thematic coding of interviews and ethnographic fieldnotes. I used an organizational coding approach to sort statutes by governance roles and data-driven categories of governance (Patton, 2002; Strauss, 1987), then arranged the data into a role-ordered matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Statute coding revealed themes around finances and budgeting, hiring, policy making and implementation, and professional development (see Appendix E). When coded data was arranged in the role-ordered matrix, some themes showed clear divisions of organizational roles (e.g.: communication, facilities and grounds), whereas other themes illustrated overlapping responsibilities between groups (e.g.: finances and budgets, hiring). Thematic categories with overlapping responsibilities were also likely to be associated with board-superintendent conflict in qualitative interviews.

To descriptively code qualitative interviews, ethnographic fieldnotes, and additional documents, I expanded the statute coding scheme with thematic a priori codes. I created
conceptually ordered matrices to identify thematic patterns and contradictory evidence for within case and cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These matrices illustrated thematic variations between case studies; for example, responsibilities related to facilities and grounds were significant in one district, but not in the others. The matrices were comparatively analyzed in an iterative process to identify variations in role allocation and confusion (Creswell, 2007).

I used data triangulation to assess perceived and enacted role allocation of district governance. In cases where data was limited or contradictory, two administrators answered clarifying questions in informal phone interviews. Additionally, key participants provided member checks to evaluate the validity of findings (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005).

**Background: Vermont’s Organizational Structure of District Governance**

Vermont’s educational system is overseen by a Secretary of Education, who is nominated by the governor, and approved by the legislature. The Secretary oversees a small Agency of Education (AOE). Most educational policies are set by the State Board of Education, which has ten members appointed by the governor and approved by the Senate. The Secretary of Education and the AOE oversee statewide educational policy and governance, and the superintendents report to the AOE. This organizational structure is illustrated in figure 2-1. Superintendents are hired and evaluated by SU school boards, who also are responsible for management and policy work for the SU as a whole. On the district level, managerial and policy work is the responsibility of local, district school boards. These boards hire school principals; however, all principals and educational staff are evaluated and supervised by the superintendent. The governance responsibilities are illustrated in table 2-2.
Supervisory Union Board Responsibilities

Supervisory Union boards oversee the work of the superintendent, central office, and the SU as a whole. The SU board is responsible for hiring and supervising the superintendent, negotiating contracts with both staff throughout the union, and approving the SU budget. They also are responsible for maintaining shared business, financial, and data services. Academic responsibilities include establishing curriculum for the SU, and providing relevant professional development for educators and staff. The board has been granted minimal oversight of policies, as most policymaking is delegated to district school boards.

Superintendent Responsibilities

The Vermont Statutes state: “The superintendent shall be the chief executive officer for the SU board and for each school board within the SU,” (16 V.S.A. § 242). The superintendent’s primary responsibilities are managerial (Cuban, 1988; Johnson, 1996): the superintendent is responsible for the business, financial, and supervisory duties of the district. Additional
responsibilities are relational with the school board. For example, the superintendent can recommend policies and procedures for adoption, and present final candidates for licensed positions (e.g., principals, teachers, counselors), but the district boards have final approval.

**District School Board Responsibilities**

District school boards “may take any action that is required for the sound administration of the school district,” (16 V.S.A. § 563). District boards therefore are responsible for fiscal and managerial governance of their schools, and communicating their work to town residents. A major responsibility of district boards is creating a district budget for approval at the annual school district meeting. The board also is given broad authority to “determine the educational policies of the school district,” including approving policies and rules presented by administrators (16 V.S.A. § 563). Vermont’s delegation of policymaking and budgeting to district boards aligns with national trends described by other researchers (e.g., Glass et al., 2000; Mountford, 2008).

Table 2-2: Major Governance Responsibilities Delegated by the State

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supervisory Union School Board</th>
<th>Superintendent</th>
<th>District School Boards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td>Supervises superintendent</td>
<td>Supervises school principals &amp; district staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring</td>
<td>Hires superintendent</td>
<td>Nominates district staff to hire, including principals, central office staff, and teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy work</td>
<td>Sets policies for the supervisory union</td>
<td>Recommends policies for adoption by SU and district boards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budgets &amp; Finances</td>
<td>Creates budget for supervisory union</td>
<td>Reports supervisory union and district finances within supervisory union, and with the state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial Services</td>
<td>Provides centralized services for local districts, including human resources, financial and data management, and transportation</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

In this section, I describe the organizational governance of the SU in practice, explain how and why case study sites adapt governance responsibilities, and explain how these adaptations affect superintendent-board relationships. First, I discuss the SU governance by the SU board and the superintendent, explaining the underlying causes that governance responsibilities are modified in practice. Second, using policy co-construction as an analytical lens, I examine how each of the case study districts negotiated governance responsibilities in the SU. Third, I examine the relationship between local capacity and board autonomy, and evaluate how capacity creates patterns of superintendent-board relations. In each case, I provide key examples to illustrate patterns in how each board interacts with the superintendent.

Supervisory Union Governance in Practice

Vermont Statutes delegate major governance responsibilities to the SU board; yet in the case study site, the SU board takes on minimal governance duties in practice. The board hires and evaluates the superintendent, passes a budget for the SU that is created by the superintendent, and periodically reviews district-wide policies and proposals. The board has not addressed other responsibilities such as developing SU-wide curriculum or providing professional development to the SU. Thus the majority of governance duties are left to the superintendent and district boards.

The limited activity of the SU board appears to be due to the organizational challenges of running a large, composite governing board. The high number of board members presented significant challenges for governance. The superintendent explained, “the statutes don’t mean anything if the SU [board] can’t agree on anything. When you have as many board members as I do, good luck getting them to agree!” The challenge of reaching consensus was confirmed by
other board members. “There’s 30 - 40 of us. People are knitting, doing whatever they’re doing, and there’s not really a whole lot we can deal with and to try and get consensus,” said one.

In order to pass measures and conduct business, a quorum must attend each meeting: 20 members in attendance with at least one representative per district board. The large quorum is a high bar for the SU board to meet. Board meetings are held in the central location, but the district’s large size and mountainous terrain makes for long, treacherous drives during the winter months. Board members also shared they did not consider the meetings productive or relevant to their local districts, and were therefore less inclined to attend. The lack of attendance is a persistent problem, and can delay board action if not enough members come to meetings. “I sometimes have a hard time getting a quorum to get people to show up,” the superintendent noted. For example, in 2015, the SU board was unable to offer a contract to a new superintendent because they lacked a necessary quorum to approve the vote.

The SU board members interviewed did not think the board played a significant governance role. One long-time board member illustrated the pervasive confusion among participants about the SU board, sharing, “Well, we have three seats, but I think we’re non-voting seats or something like that. I’m not really sure I understand when we can and can’t vote.” As SU board members did not fully understand their responsibilities, they did not realize they were not following state statutes for organizational governance. Instead, they identified district boards and the superintendent as having primary responsibility for educational governance.

In the absence of significant SU board oversight, some of their responsibilities are essentially “up for grabs” by the superintendent and district boards. The superintendent and the central office have taken responsibility for centralized governance tasks affecting the entire SU, such as creating the annual budget and providing data management for districts. However, districts are able to choose whether or not they use the central office services for some roles. Most
districts chose their involvement with the central office years in the previous decade, when SU were first created. One long-time board member explained:

I really feel like what happened was that the superintendent's office tried to get all of this things centralized and some of the school boards went in with it and some of them didn't. And that's really why we're where we are today, with some of them being in [the central office], and some being out.

Both the superintendent and board chairs note that district boards do have flexibility to renegotiate their involvement with the central office. The superintendent advocated for more centralized services among his districts, but recognized the strong preference for local control in the region, and created flexible plans for each district.

Thus each district school board has a separate agreement with the superintendent that delegates responsibility of tasks, such as transportation, finances, human resources, and payroll services, to either the central office control, or local district control, depending on the resources of the community. The inaction by the SU board creates opportunities for district boards to expand their local control of education.

The expansion of local control on the district level can not solely be credited to the inactive SU board, however. Vermont Statutes appear to undermine the resources and capital of the superintendent by granting the position limited authority. The superintendent said bluntly, “The superintendent has no constituency and is a minion of the State.” For example, superintendents are “prohibited from borrowing and from owning real property,” (Holcombe, 2014, p. 5). The superintendent explained, “They wanted to make sure that the superintendent didn’t have any power or authority in Vermont when they were forming them. So, we have to lease [the central office].” By failing to provide superintendents with basic governance rights, such as owning their own central office buildings, the state conveys a message about the limited authority of the position. The position is further undermined by the number of boards the
superintendent must work with, necessitating professional relationships with over 30 board members across more than 10 boards. Operating in a fragmented system with limited authority, the superintendent’s best option for survival is to negotiate with each board independently. The superintendent said:

I hold the State responsible for trying to change [the governance structure], but the state isn’t going to because they don’t want to impose authority from the top down in Vermont. That’s politically unacceptable. And they don’t have the resources or the money to do it anyway! So we all have separate finance and accounting systems, we all have separate student information systems, we all have separate policy handbooks, and all this. It’s quite amazing.

Local district boards gained additional control in the case study SU through a combination of an ineffective, inactive SU board and a legislatively disempowered superintendent. The lack of centralized governance created a fragmented organizational system that situated significant control on the local district level. It also provided opportunities for case study boards to independently negotiate governance responsibilities with the superintendent. Critically, each board created unique governance arrangements with the superintendent. In the next section, I analyze the governance arrangements and their implications for board-superintendent relations.

**District Case Studies**

District school boards in the case study negotiate and retain significant autonomy and local control due to an inactive SU board coupled with a disempowered superintendent. In this section, I examine the different governance arrangements of each case study district, using the lens of local capacity to assess the underlying factors that influenced their arrangements. I then use the lens of role confusion to examine superintendent-board relations in each district, assessing how they relate to broader factors in the case studies. By examining the capacity and confusion of
these empowered local boards operate in a locally controlled system, I seek to identify broader patterns of superintendent-board relationships.

Conway: Role contestation

Conway is a small ski mountain town sustained by the tourism industry. The community is fiscally conservative, and has engaged in an ongoing battle with the state of Vermont over changes to school education funding known as Act 60. The Conway Elementary School is recognized for consistently high student outcomes on state and national assessments. Conway’s five member school board has very low turnover and high stability. The chair has served on the board for over twenty years. Board members are professionals in the local community: one is a Chief Financial Officer (CFO), another is a police detective, and one was elected to the Vermont House of Representatives during the study. All board members described how their specific professional expertise facilitated their work on the school board. Participants across the case sites described Conway’s board as professional and independent. One said:

[Conway] is the most adamantly independent. They have their own financial books. They have their own master agreement with the Union. They take great pride in doing better than anybody else, and in being able to get their folks to pay for it, and everything runs very well from the board, [which] is definitely highly disciplined and self-regulated. The Conway school board negotiated and retained significant autonomy within the SU.

Per their arrangements with the superintendent, the board maintains their own finances, transportation, professional development, and contract negotiations, which are all responsibilities delegated by statute to either the SU board or the superintendent. Conway even maintains a separate school calendar and daily schedule; as a result, by the end of 6th grade, students in Conway attend nearly a full year more school than any other town in the district.

Maintaining local control of education is extremely important to Conway’s board. They credited their autonomy in part to town resources, such as a town office that can assist with
managerial tasks, such as printing paychecks. A board member from Jackson explained,

“[Conway] has more resources in their town. They have a town treasurer who works for the town, and that person is able to have the time to do all the school bills.” Board members believe keeping responsibilities within the town is more efficient, and saves taxpayers money. This is a central priority of the board, who assert they are responsible to provide long-term strategic planning that sustains high quality education while minimizing costs for town residents, what they refer to as an “educationally sound, taxpayer friendly” approach.

Conway’s significant independence within the SU has implications for superintendent relations. The board is highly protective over perceived governance intrusions by the superintendent, even in cases where they do not have legal standing. For example, multiple board members discussed the importance of hiring a strong educational administrator for the school. They also described fiercely protecting their principals, even though the superintendent was responsible for supervision and contract renewal. One board member explained:

Technically the principal works for the superintendent, not really the school board. But we’ve always made it very clear to all the different superintendents that come in, tell us that you want us to fire [our principal] ... and when we get done picking ourselves up off the floor from laughing at you so hard, we’re going to give [the principal] another contract. And that’s where the superintendents get very ugly because they don’t feel like they can run the show when you have a strong board.

However, in 2010 the Vermont legislature gave superintendents the authority to hire principals (V.S.A. H.153, 2010). Early in the study, the superintendent expressed concerns about how Conway would respond to the statute change: “If I ever have to replace [the principal], it’s going to be a [nuclear winter] there in [Conway], because they want to retain authority over who they hire for principal... the law says I can present to them a candidate. They can say yes or no.”

The superintendent’s predictions played out accurately in 2015, when Conway’s principal resigned. The board chair initially refused to accept that the superintendent had legal authority to hire the principal. When the superintendent insisted it was within his legal right to oversee the
hiring process, the chair fired back, “Laws are meant to be broken… Some laws are bad laws.” Another board member privately explained that Conway does not trust the superintendent, and therefore did not want him responsible for significant decisions like hiring. “[The superintendent] actually doesn't have any trust… I don't necessarily believe that he respects where we are or has the same desire to see what kind of educational leader that we [want to] have,” the board member shared. Lacking both trust and authority in the town, the superintendent eventually compromised. Working with Conway’s principal, they modified the hiring process to allow board members to be part of the interview committees. Conway’s board was not able to subvert the law, but they were able to force the superintendent to compromise in their favor.

The example described illustrates how Conway’s board will actively contest governance decisions they feel are not in the best interest of their district. Their inclination to resist oversight by the superintendent is grounded in the board’s confidence that they are fully capable of running their district effectively on their own. Conway’s professional board, coupled with the strong fiscal resources of the community as a whole, empowers them to take on the superintendent or the SU as a whole. Conway’s board therefore has a contested relationship with the superintendent, wherein they rely on their capacity to protect their right to local, rather than SU control.

**Jackson: Role confusion**

Jackson, which neighbors Conway, is a small rural town tucked in the mountains of Vermont. The town center has picturesque New England buildings, a public library, and a general store, but much of the community is geographically isolated. Several years ago, the Jackson Elementary School struggled with high administrator turnover and low test scores. Student outcomes and school stability improved dramatically under the tenure of the current principal, who implemented major programmatic changes with board support. Many of the school board
members cite the ongoing school conflicts as their motivation to join the board. The district school board has five members, and the chair has served on the board for over 11 years. Board members have strong professional expertise that they credit with facilitating board initiatives. Members include an educator, lawyer, CFO, business executive, and through 2014, a legislator in Vermont’s House of Representatives. The newest board member was appointed in spring 2015, replacing the legislator who stepped down from the board at the annual town meeting.

Collectively, Jackson’s board self-identifies as independent, which is confirmed by other participants in the region. At the same time, Jackson has not negotiated with the superintendent to retain responsibilities beyond what is delegated by the state. Jackson relies on the SU central office to provide services including finances and payroll, contract negotiations, shared professional staff (school nurse, counselor, etc.), and other managerial tasks. Jackson’s board, while valuing local control, agree that their town has limited resources to handle additional educational governance responsibilities. The board chair explained, “We have one town clerk, and … she pretty much is the town clerk, and the town treasurer, and the collector of delinquent taxes and, you know she’s got like 4 or 5 different roles… We couldn’t really have [her] do [the school payroll].” Other board members expressed appreciation for central office services provided by the superintendent. One said, “I think the SU provides a lot of backup for us… They have taken a lot of the burden off of the individual schools over the years.” Because Jackson relies on the superintendent’s office for some of their governance work, they have less autonomy than the other case study districts. They are also pragmatic about their limited capacity as volunteers to carry out extensive educational and managerial tasks, and are inclined to draw on available resources from the superintendent or principal when needed.

While Jackson’s board works closely with the superintendent and central office, they demonstrated persistent role confusion over their responsibilities versus those of the superintendent. Over the course of the study, board members were confused over their
responsibilities for contract negotiations, hiring practices, budgeting, and shared finances. The confusion periodically led to frustration and conflict in meetings with the superintendent.

One illustrative example of board confusion and conflict centered on policymaking, a key responsibility of school boards nationwide. For several years, Jackson’s board benefited from having a legislator on the board who could keep them up to date about key educational reforms and policies proposed by the State. After his resignation, Jackson’s remaining board members discussed less availability to stay up-to-date on policies. Discussing proposed consolidation legislation, one said:

We try as a board, in general, to stay out of it until something happens, and then let the dust settle and let people interpret it. Because the law itself, I mean – I don't know if you've looked at the bill… It's an 80 page bill, but it's probably only 15 pages of relevant, salient information in it.

Although Jackson’s board members, excepting the former legislator, did not actively track state level policies, they did expect to retain local control over district policies. The board chair shared that they do create some policies unique to Jackson, but they are difficult to get passed. The majority of district policies are mandated by Vermont’s AOE, limiting local discretion over their implementation. The board chair explained:

Well, policy comes down from legislation these days through the Vermont School Board Association. And then it's ... I don't know who mandates it, I guess I should ask, but it's mandated that we have these policies in place. Somebody at the Vermont School Boards Association will run all the policies, [the superintendent] will hit print on his printer and bring it to all of us, and tell us that it's time for us to sign off on this policy because we have to, because it's mandatory.

The lack of autonomy over policymaking was a source of great concern for the board. Several board members believed the superintendent overstepped his role by assertively pushing certain policy expectations on the board. One board member said,

Sometimes he sometimes he tries to jam stuff down our throat that we don't particularly care for… He brings us a lot more policies and things like that, and says, “You guys need
to set this policy because the state said we did!” And then being independent, small independent schools, I personally don’t take too well to that.

Jackson’s board consistently expressed confidence in their abilities to interpret and construct their own policies. Several pointed out that by having a lawyer on the board, they were able to make sound legal decisions for their own policy work. They would therefore push back when they perceived the superintendent to be attempting to direct the policymaking process. One shared, “It's a huge fight. It's a two hour board meeting. Basically we're told that this is the policy and you really can't change it.”

The superintendent offered an alternate perspective, however, in which he attributed the board members’ frustration to their confusion over their responsibilities within the policy process. He explained:

[Policy review] is a tremendously duplicative repetitious act in this SU, and I don’t think people recognize that. It’s a way for the boards to engage for the public to engage and feel they’re doing something serious about policy. But their legal options are really not very many. We can’t really vary from what’s legally acceptable. So it’s basically me taking the same policy around to everybody and doing it over and over again.

In Jackson, several board members were confused about their role in policy work and board members expressed frustration over their lack of autonomy. Despite their frustration, board members did not want sole control over the policymaking process; rather, they wanted control to ensure district policies were relevant to the community, and in readable language. “If it's not relevant to us, we will try our best to change it to make it relevant to us,” the board chair said.

Jackson’s board illustrates the theory of role confusion in locally controlled districts. Board members are confused about some aspects of their work, and will push back against the superintendent when they perceive they should have more control. Jackson’s response is shaped by the professional experience of the board, coupled with the limited capacity of the town to carry out district management. The board does not want increased autonomy; rather, they would like
the superintendent to increased transparency and communication, both of which would likely minimize role confusion.

**Ashfield: Role collaboration**

Ashfield is a college town situated between Conway and a small metropolitan area. There are few businesses in Ashfield, and many residents either work for the college or are in creative fields (artists, poets, musicians). The town has undergone demographic changes in recent years with an influx of low-income families renting homes in the community, generating tension with some long-term residents. Ashfield’s three member school board has also undergone recent change. After a long period of stability, several board members resigned during the study due to personal or professional commitments. Ashfield’s school board chair has been on the board for six years; two members joined the board in spring 2015. Over the course of the study, board members’ professional work included non-profit management, education, and computer programming. Unlike Jackson and Conway, Ashfield’s board members did not explicitly connect their professional expertise to facilitating their work as board members.

Ashfield’s school board retains significant control over district governance, much like Conway. Ashfield is in charge of their own finances and budgeting, transportation, school calendar, professional development, contract negotiations, and other managerial roles, taking control for responsibilities designated to the superintendent and SU board. “Independence has been a hallmark of the school for a long, long time,” said one community member, a sentiment repeated by participants across the case studies.

Many of the managerial tasks in Ashfield were carried out by school staff, including the principal and a bookkeeper who also runs the front office. The principal explained, “We do our own bookkeeping. [Our bookkeeper] is really our business manager; she is more than just a
bookkeeper. We do our own payroll, all of that.” The bookkeeper and the principal collaboratively oversee budgets, contracts, record keeping, documenting facility repairs, and other district tasks. The town offices provide some support for the district as well, but the majority of work is completed by school staff.

During the study, the Ashfield board showed very little role confusion over district governance. Instead, the board relied on the superintendent and principal to plan agendas, delegate responsibilities, and support ongoing projects. The superintendent was described as a valued advisor who helped the principal and board members make good decisions. One participant shared, “[The superintendent’s] role in most regards is more as a consultant and resource, particularly with his involvement at the state level because he has chosen … to be very involved at the state level. He often has insights that are really useful.” Another participant echoed these statements, describing how the superintendent helped the board reach decisions:

I think he wants to put it all out so that you’re making an informed decision… I find him hard to follow sometimes, but I do think he’s very good at staying neutral. And also giving you the downside of your position… He did that the other night with this new [Smarter Balanced] test, and that’s [his] style.

Overall, the board relied on the superintendent, and valued his contributions. Furthermore, they developed several initiatives in conjunction with the superintendent and central office. For example, Ashfield oversees their own teacher contract negotiations, whereas other district boards rely on the central office to negotiate and develop a salary schedule. In the second year of the study, Ashfield’s board worked with the superintendent to create a new teaching salary schedule. The final product matched the SU-wide salary schedule created by the central office. The board chair explained at a community meeting, “Basically we worked to make their salaries are more in line with rest of the supervisory union. Our teachers are now paid comparably.” By using central office resources, Ashfield’s board retained autonomy over teacher salaries and contract negotiations, yet was able to leverage work already done by the central
office to facilitate the process. This kind of collaboration with the central office administrators is new for Ashfield, but appears to be valued by both board members and the superintendent.

Former board members and other participants noted the increased collaboration with the superintendent was unusual, as the board has a historic legacy for being adamantly independent and protective over their autonomy. “The superintendent’s position used to be a support position,” a former board member said, expressing an interest in reminding the new board “you can be in complete control of your own agenda, and you can turn for support when support is needed or wanted to the SU.” That may still be true; however, Ashfield’s school board has gone through several years of instability and high board member turnover. While the board develops their capacity with new members, they appear to be more reliant on both the superintendent than other boards in the study. As such, there was no evidence of conflict or frustration between board members and the superintendent in Ashfield, nor was there role confusion among long-term board members.

Ashfield’s board therefore represents a different type of board-superintendent relationship, one of role collaboration. Like Conway and Jackson, this relationship is shaped by the board’s capacity and the community capacity. Ashfield’s school board retains local control, yet over the course of the study, they were thoughtful collaborators with the superintendent.

**Discussion**

In this case study, the supervisory union and its encompassing districts adapted and subverted Vermont Statutes designating the organizational structure of educational governance. Previous research on school boards finds that many are largely disempowered, with limited governance responsibilities (Glass et al., 2000; Land, 2002; Mountford, 2004, 2008). Vermont Statutes aligned with these findings, as district boards are granted minimal authority in the overall
SU. One of the major findings from this study, however, explains how school boards adapt Vermont Statutes in practice to retain significant autonomy and local control. While more research is needed to evaluate the scope of local district control in Vermont and similar states, the findings contribute to education policy by explaining how and why some school boards have greater autonomy and authority than delegated by state statutes.

The study also explains capacity within each district, and how local capacity influences board-superintendent relationships. The case study districts each negotiated different governance responsibilities with the superintendent: Ashfield and Conway retained significant autonomy, whereas Jackson relied on centralized services. The extent to which district boards used centralized services was directly connected to their town’s capacity to handle governance responsibilities. Each board also had varying relationships with the superintendent, ranging from active contestation over governance roles to active collaboration. In this section, I synthesize the findings and discuss how the community and board capacity of these autonomous districts shapes their relationship with the superintendent. Further, I explain how these case studies illustrate broader relational patterns between locally controlled boards and superintendents.

**Local Capacity**

As previously noted, local capacity shapes how policies are interpreted and implemented in practice, and is used by researchers to explain variations in policy adaptation by local level actors. However, local capacity has primarily been used to understand professional educational leaders’ work in locally controlled districts. In this article, I expand the theory with the inclusion of school boards. This research therefore illuminated two new variations of local capacity: community capacity and board capacity. Combined, community and board capacity explain how
much autonomy districts retain, and their board relations with superintendents. The following sections describe each type of capacity in greater detail, connecting back to case study examples.

Community capacity

In examining the capacity of locally controlled school boards, community capacity was evident as a major determinant in shaping the extent of board autonomy. Community capacity therefore refers to the resources and beliefs in each town that influence district governance. The towns in this article were small, and as a result, community capacity did not necessarily require extensive resources or governance structures. Rather, the towns with high capacity have access to town offices and business managers, community support for local control, and a history of independence. Conway and Ashfield maintained significant autonomy within the SU, controlling their own finances, contract negotiations, transportation, and other key elements. Both districts had the community capacity to carry out these roles. Conway has a full time town clerk who can be responsible for payroll, a well-funded community, and a mandate from residents to preserve local control. Ashfield has fewer financial resources than Conway, but has a school-based business manager and a similar mandate from residents to maintain district independence. While these resources might be considered minimal in larger urban areas, in this region, these towns are considered to have high community capacity. In contrast, the community of Jackson has low capacity. They do not have a full-time town clerk or business manager, and their community is not as adamantly protective over local control.

The case study districts show there is a direct connection between community capacity and local control. The two districts with high community capacity retained the most autonomy over district governance, whereas the district with low capacity had the least autonomy. The will for local control is not enough; districts must also have the resources to support autonomous
educational governance. However, when towns have adequate community resources, they appear to be able to adapt and undermine state level legislation, thereby retaining local control.

**Board capacity**

Using the lens of local capacity to understand locally controlled school boards introduced a second variation of this theory: board capacity. As revealed in this article, board capacity is the collective knowledge, background, skills, and tenure of school board members. The two most significant factors of board capacity appear to be board tenure and professional expertise. Districts with more long-term board members have greater capacity than districts with new members. Likewise, the professional expertise of board members, such as financial, legal, and political skills that benefit district governance, increased capacity for autonomous governance. By these measures, Conway and Jackson both demonstrate high board capacity, as their members have long tenure, limited turnover, and extensive professional expertise that benefits board initiatives. In contrast, Ashfield has low board capacity, having undergone significant turnover during the study. Additionally, while Ashfield’s board members have professional expertise, their skills did not appear to directly facilitate board work. One of the important factors related to this theory is that board capacity is variable, and can change by election cycle. Thus the capacity of a given school board is not necessarily fixed, engendering variability and potential instability for board-superintendent relations.

**Capacity and Board-Superintendent Relations**

A second major theoretical contribution from this study is the explanation of the relationship between community and board capacity and board-superintendent relations. Previous
research on school boards identified role confusion as a major challenge for boards and superintendents (Danzberger, 1994; Danzberger, Kirst, & Usdan, 1992; Glass et al., 2000; Land, 2002). With role confusion, disempowered board members are confused about the delegation of responsibilities between the superintendent and board, leading to board-superintendent conflict (Danzberger et al., 1992; Kirst, 1984; Glass et al., 2000; Mountford, 2004). In this study, board members were not disempowered. Nonetheless, the regional adaptation of governance structures should have engendered significant role confusion, as there were multiple organizational governance systems enacted across the SU. Yet the boards’ relationships with the superintendent did not solely encompass confusion; rather, they ranged from collaboration to contention.

The patterns of boards’ responses illustrate a critical theoretical relationship between community capacity, board capacity, and superintendent-board relations. A district’s combined community capacity and board capacity shape the extent by which it is able to independently govern the district. Boards with higher combined capacity are more likely to resist superintendent governance, whereas boards with lower combined capacity are more likely to rely on the superintendent. This typology of capacity-based and superintendent-board relations is illustrated in table 2-3.

Table 2-3: Typology of Capacity-Based Board-Superintendent Relations

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<th>High Board Capacity</th>
<th>Low Board Capacity</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>High Community Capacity</strong></td>
<td>Contestation</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low Community Capacity</strong></td>
<td>Confusion</td>
<td>Dependence</td>
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Districts with high community and board capacity have depth of experience and resources that engender strong self-governance. In the case of Conway, which has both high
community and board capacity, the board assertively protected their autonomy and resisted superintendent oversight. The superintendent recognized this relationship dynamic, stating:

[Conway] does not accept the law nor live by it, and I do a delicate dance there with them because I rationalize this is not a problem school, this is not a problem district, this is not a place that’s going to hell. It’s going the other way… So they do a little dance with me and they pretend that they care about my opinion on matters and so forth, and I pretend that I’m doing something for them but it’s [their] show.

Thus the combination of high community capacity and high board capacity is likely to yield contentious board-superintendent relations.

Districts with high board capacity, and low community capacity are empowered, but lack the community resources to be fully autonomous. These combinations appear more likely to experience role confusion. In this study, Jackson has high board capacity, but low community capacity. The board therefore is confident in their abilities to govern, but must rely on the superintendent to carry out key tasks. The lack of direct control and transparency of their district work generates confusion. Like Conway, board members are empowered to argue and contest superintendent decisions, yet they ultimately rely on him to help make good decisions. One Jackson board member shared, “We’re volunteers… He's an educated man with a doctoral degree.” Another put the relationship in perspective, stating he perceived the superintendent to be an expert at his job:

I have to defer to [the superintendent] … because when we ask him questions, we have to understand that he does not have shifting loyalties, but he has different loyalties. He does the same thing for all the boards…. He’s a great resource for us. I know people get upset with him, but that’s the nature of this job.

In contrast, districts with low board capacity may be less likely to contest superintendent governance, as they are reliant on the superintendent for assistance with governance while they develop internal capacity. In the case of Ashfield, the district has high community capacity, but low board capacity. The board therefore has the resources and will to retain local control, but at
the present time, they need expert guidance to facilitate their work. The combination of high community capacity with low board capacity therefore is likely to yield a collaborative relationship with the superintendent.

None of the case studies in the district reflected low community and board capacity; however, participants in the study confirmed several districts in the SU represented this typology. These districts had high school board turnover, low support for local control, and few town resources, therein reflecting a combination of low board and community capacity. Lacking resources and expertise to carry out district governance, these districts were dependent on the superintendent to provide governance and oversight. They were described by the superintendent and other local leaders as having limited engagement in school governance, preferring to leave the majority of decisions to the SU. These districts therefore likely represent a dependent relationship due to their low board and community capacity. Additional study is needed to fully understand the experience of low capacity districts, however.

**Implications and Conclusion**

This case study in Vermont expands theoretical understanding of policy co-construction and local capacity of school boards in locally controlled districts. Case study district school boards retain extensive local control over educational governance. These findings expand, and in some cases contradict, research on the role of school boards in district-based local control (Cohen, 1982; Spillane, 1996; Spillane & Thompson, 1997) and school board governance (Kirst, 2008; Land, 2002; Mountford, 2004; Zeigler, 1974; Zeigler et al., 1973). Board autonomy and authority varies by board and community capacity, which in turn influences the extent to which boards have a collaborative or contentious relationship with the superintendent. These small, rural
boards in Vermont demonstrate the significant power and control districts are capable of retaining when they have strong local capacity.

The study has significant implications for consolidation policies, which are based in part on the understanding that local school boards are ineffective and have limited authority. Some centralization policies, such as Vermont’s Act 46, centralize governance and control under large, composite boards. Ironically, this appears to be precisely the wrong move to streamline governance. In the case study site, the SU board was inactive, as local board members found the structure to be unconducive and irrelevant to local work. Local board members were therefore able to subvert the role of the board, rerouting power to local districts and exacerbating a fragmented system. This case study, while representative of a single region in Vermont, illustrates how towns have the capacity and will to subvert policies they disagree with. Policymakers should therefore proceed with extreme caution when designing centralization bills, as underestimating the capacity and will of local district boards can quickly condemn a policy to failure.

This is not to say, however, that local control is necessary and beneficial to all communities. Findings from the study show community and board capacity shape the extent to which local school boards can maintain autonomous self-governance. Towns that lack community resources, as well as districts with high board turnover, need expert guidance to facilitate district governance. Board turnover is a particularly serious concern, as it can undermine school board capacity overall. A legislator summed up the challenge of board capacity from a policy perspective:

I am aware that [Conway] is exceptional and that it is not what is happening everywhere… But the key pieces for us have been strong local leadership and community involvement. How can you legislate that? I mean, as a legislator, you can’t. It can really be hit or miss in towns. The differences are so huge, but the results of that kind of strong, local philosophy is prized, but really, it is different in a lot of places.
Board capacity cannot be legislated, but it can be strengthened through strong professional development. One suggestion is to increase board professional development, but to integrate it into regularly scheduled board meetings, thereby minimizing time demands on board members.

Training also needs to be extended to superintendents working in decentralized or locally controlled districts. The study highlights the need for variable and flexible responses by the superintendent to effectively work with boards. Superintendents will benefit from being able to assess community and board capacity, and develop appropriate relational responses specific to each community. In the case study, participants noted the superintendent was successful in part because of his flexibility. One participant noted, “We’ve got some very strong-willed boards, so you’ve got to be able to go with it, and [the superintendent] has done an amazing job of that.”

More research is needed to fully investigate the extent of locally controlled, autonomous school boards. However, this study expands understanding of local control, revealing the power of small district boards to negotiate self-governance. The study also illuminates how community and board capacity can shape the extent of their autonomy, and significantly, their relationship with the superintendent. These case study districts help shed light on the significance of local control for school boards.
References


Education, 16 V.S.A. § 201 – 5701.


Chapter 3

Investing in Democracy: The Mechanisms of Community Participation in Locally Controlled School Districts

Abstract

Democratically elected school boards play a crucial role in school governance because they enable community voice in the practices and programs of school. However, research on boards finds they can be disempowered and unproductive. School boards and communities seeking to expand voice in their schools have neither the models nor tools to inform their work, undermining their democratic participation. In this study, I contribute to current theoretical understanding of schools as democratic institutions by examining how locally controlled boards effectively ensure community values align with educational practices in their schools. Using a socio-cultural perspective, I assert that communities and schools are sites of mutually influential social interaction. However, schools have strong institutional norms, necessitating deliberate practices by groups such as school boards to influence the technical core of instruction. I use two exemplary case study districts where locally controlled boards use the budget approval process as a primary mechanism to ensure democratic participation in school programming. The article concludes with recommended practices non-autonomous school boards and communities can employ to expand democratic participation in their schools.
Introduction

Local control, a model of educational oversight where community members democratically self-govern their local schools, can take many forms, from school-based supervisory committees to co-operative schools. In this article, local control specifically refers to democratically elected school boards who are responsible for the fiscal, political, and managerial oversight of their local school districts. Zeigler, Jennings, and Peak explain the significance of the school board, stating, “since the schools are intimately related in the popular view with democratic values, the school board serves as an affective symbol representing the popular value of local control of education,” (1974, p. 13).

Historically, local control has been delegated to school boards of directors who made decisions on behalf of their communities (Theobald & Bardzell, 2000). As the country grew, however, the locus of control shifted to superintendents and district staff, educational professionals who have relevant expertise to make decisions for public schools (Callahan, 1962). Many school boards were relegated to the supporting role to superintendents – de facto rubber stamps to approve district policies and budgets (Boyd, 1976; Malen, 2003). When boards did retain power, researchers found many undermined governance with ineffective or disruptive leadership (Danzberger, 1994; Danzberger, Kirst & Usdan, 1992; Grady & Krumm, 1999; Wirt & Kirst, 1989; Zeigler, 1973; Zeigler, Jennings & Peak, 1974).

Although the number of school boards has significantly decreased in tandem with their loss of authority, school boards remain the primary form of democratic participation in U.S. public education (Alsbury, 2008; Boyd, 1976; Land, 2002; Lutz & Iannaccone, 2008). In states that engender local control, such as Washington, Alaska, and Vermont, school boards play a critical role in educational governance (ECS, 2015). However, theories of schools as mediating
social institutions suggest public schools, while closely interconnected with their communities, remain largely impervious to external changes to pedagogy and practice: the technical core of schooling (Elmore, 2000; Meyer & Rowan, 1978; Weick, 1976). Although local control advocates assert community participation can meaningfully influence practices and programming in schools, it is less clear if this is an accurate assertion from a theoretical or empirical standpoint.

This article therefore examines locally controlled districts to understand the extent to which community voice in education can shape the technical core of their public schools. Using two case study sites that represent autonomous school boards, I first examine the mechanisms school boards use to enact local control that connects communities with their schools. I then analyze if the locally controlled districts show evidence of democratic voice in the programming and practices of their schools. As the study is situated in Vermont, a local control state with highly autonomous school boards, I conclude with implications for communities and school boards in more restrictive governance settings, explaining how they can strengthen democratic involvement in educational governance.

**Literature Review**

Local control enacted through democratically elected school boards is one of the oldest American educational traditions, dating back to New England’s use of town meetings and common schools in the 17th Century (Bryan, 2010; Strober & Tyack, 1980; Tyack, 1974). In this model, voting members of the community gather at a town meeting to publicly discuss and debate decisions for the school and the town (Bryan, 2010). Over time, local control became mired in controversy, as ineffective community boards failed to produce consistent and equitable outcomes (Callahan, 1962; Chubb & Moe, 1988; Tyack, 1974). As a result, local control was curtailed through educational reforms designed to increase the scientific management of schools (Callahan,
1962; Shannon, 1990). Also known as Taylorism, scientific management in schools encouraged greater efficiencies through centralization, professionalization, and consolidation of school districts (Callahan, 1962; Shannon, 1990; Tyack, 1974). Educational governance by locally-elected school boards was replaced by professional superintendents and district administrators (Glass, Bjork, & Bruner, 2000; Strober & Tyack, 1980; Trujillo, 2013). Widespread consolidation caused a dramatic decrease in the number of districts nationwide; those remaining were larger, therein limiting community access and voice in school governance (Mathis, 2015; Theobald, 1997). Multiple studies conclude that school boards are disempowered, transformed “into ‘rubber stamps’ for the approval and legitimation of policies developed by the school superintendent and his staff,” (Boyd, 1978, p. 544). Today, many school boards retain only minimal responsibilities of policy and budget supervision (Glass et al., 2000; Malen, 2003).

The perceived disempowerment of school boards raises serious questions about the legitimacy of local control. Zeigler, Jennings and Peak (1974) conducted one of the first large scale analyses of school board participation, finding minimal participation in school board elections. The authors concluded there is an absence of political involvement in the democratic process of school board governance (Zeigler et al., 1974). Zeigler argued that the lack of participation was so severe that “there is no representative process in the politically understood sense of the term. With regard to education … we now have taxation without representation,” (1973, p. 41). Wirt and Kirst reached similar conclusions in their analysis decision-output theory, concluding that communities now have minimal influence over school governance (1989). Analysis by Malen (2003) suggested that federal and state oversight reduced local control, limiting self-governance by communities. Likewise, Smrekar and Crowson (2015) credit the rapid expansion of federalism to the loss of local control. The authors write, “that which is local in policymaking for public education is a rather far cry today from the community-in-control myth that we long understood to be a societal foundation,” (Smrekar & Crowson, 2015, p. 2).
Locally controlled school boards are far less common than they once were. However, while scholars agree that few urban communities retain community-based governance (e.g., Frankenberg & Diem, 2013; Kirst, 2008; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1994, 2008; Trujillo, 2013), it also appears that predominantly rural regions have retained local control out of necessity and will. Shelly (2008, 2012), using data on states’ resistance to No Child Left Behind (NCLB), concludes sparsely populated states have smaller state government and fewer resources to oversee centralized educational control, necessitating delegation of governance to local communities (2008, 2012). Shelly therefore makes a case that states with smaller, predominantly rural populations are more likely to retain local control. Indeed, much of the literature outlining the value of local control comes from rural researchers.

From the rural perspective, schools are central community institutions, and therefore necessitate local democratic participation in governance (Budge, 2006; Corbett, 2007; Howley & Howley, 2010; Schafft, 2010; 2015). Schafft (2015) writes:

Public schools are institutions of the state, but mandated to provide services within local communities, run by locally elected school boards, and are also local institutions that help to inscribe the boundaries of community, impart a strong sense of local identity and shared purpose, and act as important sites of local civic engagement, (pp. 3 – 4).

From this perspective communities retain a dominant vision of education that is uniquely place-and time-specific (Atkin, 2003; Boyd, 1976, 1978; Budge, 2006; Crowson & Hinz, 2015). However, many theorize the increasingly standardized, global approach to education can sever the critical relationship between communities and their local schools (Apple, 2000; 2006; Corbett, 2007; Howley & Howley, 2010; Schafft, 2010). Howley & Howley write, “Globalization… undermines the local commons from which local community is developed, creating conditions that make the social exclusion of already marginalized groups just that much more likely, further abetting the destruction of community,” (2010, p. 35). Furthermore, reducing local control can undermine the legitimacy of educational institutions (Crowson & Hinz, 2015), as well as one of
the primary forms of democratic participation in our contemporary society (Alsbury, 2003, 2008; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1994; 2008; Rice, 2013). Lutz and Iannaccone caution, “Give up local school governance very reluctantly! It is a grand example of exactly what our American republic is all about: the right to educate all of our children as "we the people" choose, and the right to govern ourselves in a free and equitable republic,” (2008, p. 21, emphasis in original).

Proponents may assert local school boards play a critical role in connecting communities with their schools, but presently, there is little empirical evidence to support that claim. Locally controlled school boards that seek to improve their work lack information and tools on their practice. Furthermore, communities without local control who want to increase participation in school governance need exemplary case studies from which they can model their practices. The purpose of this study therefore is to examine locally controlled boards and identify the implications for school context with less autonomy.

**Theoretical Framework**

In this study, the term community refers to the residents of each town/school district in the study. I employ the theoretical perspective that these geo-politically bounded communities are place-based, socio-cultural constructions (Atkin, 2003; Brown & Schafft, 2010; Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson, & Smith, 2011). As such, the communities are fields of social interaction, established through cultural, political, and economic exchanges within their locale (Boyd, 1978; Brown & Schafft, 2010; Oakes, Welner, Yonezawa, & Allen, 2005; Wilkinson, 1991). The context of a community can therefore be summarized as each town’s respective socio-cultural, political, economic, and historic interactions.

As public institutions in the United States, schools are also sites of social interaction within their communities (Boyd, 1978; Oakes et al., 2005; Renee, Welner & Oakes, 2009;
Schafft, 2015). Schools are what Oakes et al. (2005) call “mediating institutions” as they have a reciprocal influence with their community context. Oakes et al. explain, “Schools are situated within particular local enactments of larger cultural norms, rules, incentives, power relations and values. These forces promote either stability or change, and they accordingly set the parameters of beliefs, behavior, and policy in schools,” (2005, p. 288).

Yet schools have their own legacy of interactions and values that shape their practices. Cuban refers to this legacy as “the grammar of schooling” – the rules and structures that shape organization and instruction of public education (Cuban, 1993). These rules have produced standardized, uniform organization to schooling that is remarkably resistant to reform (Cuban, 1993; Tyack & Tobin, 1994). Furthermore, schools are beholden to layers of federal, state, and local policies that further constrain their practices (Chubb & Moe, 1988; Kirst, 1984, 2008). School districts in decentralized, loosely coupled systems such as Vermont have greater autonomy in their practices, but still are constrained by institutional norms, and rules (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990; Meyer & Rowan, 1978; Spillane, 1996; Spillane & Thompson, 1997).

Thus the extent to which community context can informally influence public schools is constrained by their institutional legacy. Formal influence, such as by a school board or superintendent, is therefore necessary to produce major changes to standardized pedagogy, organization, or programming (Boyd, 1976, 1978; McGivney & Moynihan, 1972). Democratically elected school boards play a crucial role in locally controlled public schools because they enable direct community participation in agenda-setting for school priorities (Alsbury, 2003, 2008; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1998, 2008). Furthermore, voters can replace school board members when their leadership cease to align with the majority values in a community, producing a crucial check and balance system to the school-community relationship (Alsbury, 2008; Lutz & Iannaccone, 2008). It is critical to note that as a democratic institution, school boards are elected by the participatory majority (Wirt & Kirst, 1989; Lutz & Iannaccone, 2008;
McGivney & Moynihan, 1972). No matter their size, communities are not monolithic, and they encompass an array of values (Corbett, 2014). Minority voices, particularly from historically marginalized communities, may be excluded from democratic participation in educational governance (Gutmann, 2003; Howley & Howley, 2010; Young, 1989). In cases where school boards have the ongoing support of their communities, the values they represent may still only reflect those of the dominant majority.

**Research Questions**

In contemporary practice, when local control seems to be systematically curtailed from educational governance, what are the mechanisms locally controlled school boards employ to ensure communities have democratic voice in the programming and practices of their schools? And by extension, what are the implications for school boards where governance structures limit local control?

**Research Background**

The study is situated in Vermont, a predominantly rural state with a legacy of locally controlled school districts (Bryan, 2010; Johnson et al., 2014; Mathis, 2015). Vermont was selected for the study because it provides an unusual opportunity to investigate empowered local school boards. Furthermore, the state’s governance structure, access to democratic participation in educational governance, and progressive educational funding eliminate traditional inequity issues in a comparative study of locally controlled districts. This section provides a brief overview of these three factors at work in Vermont’s educational system.
Supervisory Union Governance

Vermont’s educational governance system is designed to provide regional management while preserving some local control by individual towns. Each school district in Vermont is part of a supervisory union (SU), a larger governing body led by a regional superintendent. The organization of Vermont’s SUs is similar to regional or intermediate districts in other states, such as New York, Pennsylvania, Michigan, New Hampshire, and Alaska (ECS, 2015). In Vermont, an SU superintendent is responsible to a supervisory union board: a governing board comprised of members from each district in the union. Each district is also overseen by a locally elected school board, which is responsible for district budgets and policies. This means each school district—often a single town—retains control over major local educational decisions. In this study, school boards therefore refers to district school boards.

In Chapter 2, I found the SU board was largely inactive, and the superintendent disempowered, enabling district school boards to negotiate additional responsibilities beyond what was officially tasked to them by State Statutes. The extent to which district boards negotiated autonomous governance depended in part on their community capacity: available resources and will to support self-governance. In this study, the two case study boards were selected in part because they are the most autonomous districts within the SU, retaining significant control over local financial, managerial, and educational responsibilities. By selecting highly independent boards, I am able to analyze the mechanisms of empowered district boards.

Town Meetings as Participatory Democracy

A second unusual feature of Vermont’s locally controlled educational system is the community access to and participation in educational governance. In line with national trends,
Vermont’s school boards are required to hold open meetings which the public can attend. Additionally, Vermont school districts hold annual meetings where residents discuss and debate the school budget and other relevant educational issues. This provides direct community participation, which Bryan (2010) notes, “Unlike most other states, Vermont allows its citizens to govern their school systems as they do their towns, directly in open meetings,” (p. 99). Most communities hold school meetings in tandem with the annual Town Meeting Day: the first Tuesday of March, which is an unpaid, optional holiday for all state residents. Called “democracy being practiced in its purest form,” the participatory town meeting “is the key to town government, as voters assemble to discuss issues, debate budgets, air grievances, elect officers, and determine the town and school district business for the coming year,” (Vermont League of Cities and Towns, 2007, p. 95). The annual meeting engenders informed, active participation in local educational governance. Additionally, from a research perspective, these meetings provide a significant opportunity to observe town residents actively debating school priorities with the school board, providing critical insights to community-school board alignment.

**Act 60: Vermont’s Education Finance Legislation**

Vermont has a progressive, centralized educational funding system. The funding system, Act 60, was created in response to Vermont Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brigham v. State* (1997) that the prior school funding system created educational inequities (Shlaes, 1999). Under Act 60, districts create local budgets, which are approved by residents at the annual school district meeting (Shlaes, 1999). The state then collects local education taxes and redistributes them to communities per equalized pupil² (Furney, Hasazi & Keefe, 2005). Districts can spend more than the per equalized pupil rate; however, districts are fined a large penalty if they raise local tax rates

² The FY2013 per equalized pupil rate was $12,365.
over a set excess spending threshold\textsuperscript{3}. To offset inequities prompted by economies of scale, the legislature also created Small Schools Grants to supplement schools with 100 or fewer students (Picus, Oden, Glen, Griffith & Wolkoff, 2012). Act 60 has been controversial; nonetheless, from a research perspective, the equitable finance system produces greater fiscal homogeneity across school districts, enabling more equitable comparisons of local control of school budgets.

**Research Methods and Analysis**

The research is a multiple case study (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 1993) of neighboring, locally controlled school districts in Vermont. I employed qualitative methods of data collection: ethnographic observations of school and community events, semi-structured participant interviews, and documents related to school governance and communication. I thematically coded data, then used a combination of comparative analysis and conceptual matrices to identify within and cross case themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The resulting analysis illustrates how two autonomous districts employ similar mechanisms of enacting local control, despite significant differences in their educational practices.

**Site Selection and Access**

The multiple case study is comprised of two sites purposively selected for their opportunities to deeply investigate local control of education in practice (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 1993). The criteria used to select the districts were their shared characteristics (see table 3-1) and the extent of the autonomy of their district boards. Specifically, each district is comprised of a single rural town, as defined by National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) urban-centric

\textsuperscript{3} The excess spending threshold is incurred for budgets at or above 125% of the current per equalized pupil rate.
locale classification codes for school districts and their encompassing communities. The districts share other traits: they are neighboring sites located within the same SU, oversee one school, offer school choice in middle and/or high school, and have similar demographics. These common organizational, geographic, and demographic characteristics ensure consistency across the study (Yin, 2009). Second, the districts were identified by key participants as having highly autonomous school boards, thereby serving as exemplars of the phenomenon of locally controlled school boards (Yin, 1993). To maintain confidentiality for participants and districts, pseudonyms are used for each town, key details are obscured, and participants are identified by code.

I negotiated access to the schools in the study through two gatekeepers: the principal of Conway Elementary School and the SU superintendent. These two administrators facilitated connections with Ashfield’s principal, and introduced me to Ashfield and Conway’s school boards. I arranged school and classroom observations by communicating with interested teachers and the principals. In the field, I used my positionality as a New Engander and former practitioner to facilitate relationships, and I used initial visits to build rapport with participants.

Table 3-1: Characteristics of Case Study Districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ashfield</th>
<th>Conway</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Town Population</strong> a</td>
<td>~1100</td>
<td>~1100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NCES Rural Classification</strong> b</td>
<td>Rural, distant</td>
<td>Rural, remote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Town Racial Composition</strong></td>
<td>96% white</td>
<td>96% white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Town Poverty Rate</strong> a</td>
<td>~10%</td>
<td>~8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Structure</strong></td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>PreK-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Board Size</strong></td>
<td>3 members</td>
<td>5 members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Population</strong> b</td>
<td>~85</td>
<td>~100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students Qualifying for Free &amp; Reduced Price Lunch</strong> b</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a U.S. Census Bureau, 2015; b National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).
Data Collection

In this study, I used three different sources of school and community data for the analysis: observations documented by ethnographic fieldnotes, semi-structured participant interviews, and school-related documents. Data collection began in Fall 2012 with a pilot study in Conway, and the full study expanded to Ashfield Winter 2013. Between Fall 2012 and Summer, 2015, I conducted nine separate fieldwork trips, each lasting between one to two weeks.

Observations enabled me to see patterns of social interaction and discourse in different community and school sites (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). I therefore observed in places that helped me understand the culture of the school, school board, the community, and their relationships with each other. Observation sites included school board and school district meetings, school-community events, classrooms, and community gathering places such as town libraries and restaurants. Within each school, I observed general routines such as morning entry, recess, and lunch. With teacher permission, I also observed in three classrooms in Conway, and four classrooms in Ashfield. I recorded fieldnotes during observations, then expanded them after I left the field (Emerson et al., 2011). My degree of participation varied depending on the setting; I primarily adapted a role of non-participant observer (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

Interviews provided in-depth understanding of school and community values, culture, and history (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Weiss, 2002). I conducted 40 semi-structured participant interviews with school leaders (superintendent, principals, office managers), teachers, and current and former school board members (see Appendix D for sample protocols). I interviewed the superintendent and principals four times each, and school board chairs twice. I interviewed school board members and teachers once or twice, depending on their availability. Most interviews lasted between 30 – 60 minutes, although some participants chose to extend interviews to 90 – 120 minutes. Protocols were semi-structured and role-specific, designed to facilitate
conversations about educational beliefs and practices in each district (Weiss, 2002). I used different protocols for each subsequent interview (Patton, 2002; Weiss, 2002). All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Documents served to be a valuable source of data for this study, as they facilitated understanding of both formal and informal communications between the schools, school boards, and their respective communities (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). I collected three types of documents: official town materials such as the annual town report; published school board meeting agendas, minutes, and policies; and newspaper articles about each school. Hard copies of town reports were provided by the principals, and other documents were gathered online at official SU and district websites, newspapers, and the towns. In addition, I collected online comments from community-specific forums or newspaper articles. These informal, public comments provided alternate perspectives on critical educational issues for each town.

**Data Analysis**

For this study, data analysis necessitated synthesizing multiple, disparate data sources across two case sites. Therefore, the process began with a broad, descriptive coding scheme that was refined through an iterative analytic process (Creswell, 2007; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). First, I used a combination of *a priori* organizational and thematic codes to sort data by participant groups, broad educational beliefs, and activities (see Appendix E). Data were coded electronically using NVivo software. I then sorted coded data by group and case study. Within these bounded sets, I refined thematic coding using *in vivo* codes for educational beliefs and practices. I used the iterative coding process to identify both emerging patterns and contradictory evidence (Weiss, 2002).
Next, I sorted all data into thematic conceptual matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994), one for each case study site. The matrices were arranged conceptually by group, as well as thematic categories. I used thematic analysis to further refine and condense the matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The refined matrices were used to identify within-case patterns of conceptual alignment, revealing themes related to the role of school funding, the use of school facilities, and goals for student outcomes. The matrices also illuminated contested themes, such as special education services. After identifying within-case themes, I compared each matrix for cross-case analysis. This illustrated congruency of major themes, while highlighting conceptual differences.

**Trustworthiness**

I used multiple sources of data to triangulate the validity of findings, and structured the thematic conceptual matrices to illustrate alignment of data sources (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). Administrative leaders provided member checks through feedback, asking questions, and confirming preliminary findings (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005). I used final rounds of fieldwork to clarify and confirm emerging themes from my initial analysis. I also sought out contradictory and diverse voices in each community to ensure a wide range of perspectives were included in the study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Weiss, 2002).

**Findings**

Understanding the work of school boards in a locally controlled system first necessitates understanding the local context that informs community beliefs and values of education. The findings section begins with a descriptive overview of each district, how its community context shapes major beliefs and values, and how those values relate to public education. Although the
two districts share many characteristics, their underlying context, and hence their dominant values were significantly different. The second section of the findings identifies and describes the primary mechanism by which the school boards enact local control: the school district budget. The third section provides case study examples that explain how specific budget priorities of each district in School Year (SY) 2013–14 demonstrate community voice in the technical core of schooling practices and programs. The case study examples explain how the school boards collaborate with school administrators and community members to develop a budget which supports specific programming initiatives. The findings section concludes by identifying strategies employed by the school boards to ensure community voice and participation in the budget process, and explains how non-autonomous school boards can adapt them to support greater democratic involvement in district governance.

**Conway: The Mountain Town**

The town of Conway is rural, located over 30 miles from the nearest urban area. Despite its remoteness, Conway is an active center of commerce thanks to a large ski mountain and its supporting tourist industry of restaurants, rental shops, and inns. The majority of businesses are locally owned, and there is a noticeable absence of national chains. The principal explained the appeal of Conway, saying, “because we are a tourist-based economy, we have people flowing in and out … that want to leave the big city. And they want a taste of the small town, but they still want restaurants around. Well, this is the perfect place for it.” The appeal to people “from away” is strong; according to a 2011 Bloomberg news article, 87% of property owners in Conway are non-Vermont residents. The seasonal, international influx of tourists and second homeowners influences the overall characteristics of the community. A teacher said:
I think we’re diverse. There are many people who are born and bred in [Conway], and there is that influx of people who may have started off as second homeowners or are involved in some business where they can work long-distance and live here. So we have kids who have traveled all over the world. So it makes for a very interesting mix of kids, some who have never left the valley and some who are more worldly.

Although Vermont is perceived to be a liberal, democratic state, Conway is predominantly conservative. One board member described how his political views related to the town, saying, “I’m certainly not a right-wing Republican. I’m a Libertarian. I support gay marriage or whatever else it might be that would be considered socially liberal, but I also tend to be very fiscally conservative.” Repeating a sentiment frequently repeated in community forums, the board member expressed dismay over the fiscal priorities of Vermont as a whole. “I would say that Vermont in general tends to be very left-wing… It tends to be too left-wing on fiscal issues, and that’s the fiscal train wreck that I think this state has created. The old joke is, Vermonters always like big government as long as somebody else pays for it.” Other residents similarly described Conway as a fiscally conservative community.

Some participants acknowledged a socioeconomic difference between the eastern and western sides of the town. “There are a lot of people with money – there’s the very poor, too. Because it’s the bed cleaners and the maintenance people and so forth that are taking care of the condos and all that. So [it’s] an interesting divided community in terms of [the] socioeconomics,” said one participant, adding that Conway “is the most right wing, international right wing” community in the region. In this area of Vermont, international tourists are less common than more northern regions of the state. However, Conway’s ski mountain industry draws a sizable international population, some of whom have become permanent residents.

The economic and cultural aspects of the ski mountain industry provide the underlying context for Conway’s dominant values. One participant shared, “Mountain politics has always influenced Conway, or have since [The Mountain] started in the 50’s, and those are much more
conservative people, they’re business oriented, they don’t like taxation.” Indeed, Conway’s dominant values are fiscal conservatism and local control, both of which are shaped by the conservative, small business owner mentality of the ski mountain community.

Correspondingly, Conway’s community tends to frame education from an economic perspective. Residents historically have valued fiscal responsibility in the district, school choice, and local governance. The town actively fought the implementation of the school funding reforms created by Act 60. Under the equity-based legislation, Conway sends three times more in taxes to the state than it receives back for educational expenses, generating significant frustration for residents. In the annual town report, the school board reminds residents how much money they lose under the law: “We raised $15 million and sent $10 million to the State of Vermont Education Fund. If there were no Act 68, a $3,000 tax bill would be $1000.” The town has taken assertive measures to overturn Act 60, including jointly suing the state with several other communities and withholding their annual taxes.

Conway is also protective over their right to offers middle and high school choice to families, which is periodically threatened by the Legislature. The town has hired a lobbyist, who in the words of a board member, has been tasked to “protect schools and taxpayers, which includes … protecting school choice in grades 7 – 12.” In their local elementary school, Conway residents value high student outcomes, strong administrators, professional teachers, and programs that ensure long-term fiscal responsibility. For example, the community invested in an expanded early childhood education program on the grounds that it would reduce special education costs later. Most school initiatives promoted by the school board are framed as “academically sound, taxpayer friendly,” therein coupling student outcomes with fiscal responsibility. Thus Conway’s conservative ski mountain community informs the dominant educational values in the district.
Ashfield: The College Town

The town of Ashfield is a rural community located ten miles from a small urban center. The town’s primary business is a liberal arts college, which retains a progressive and environmental mission of education. Other businesses include artists studios, farms, and inns. Many residents I speak with have creative careers as musicians, writers, or visual artists, while others support creative work in non-profit positions.

The town itself is described as peaceful and idyllic. To preserve community character the town has left many roads unpaved; large sections of Ashfield are inaccessible by car during mud season. The town also developed zoning laws to limit sub-divisions and rental properties. One resident explained the underlying rationale, saying, “I think people like the rustieness… the simplicity, the sense that maybe it discourages more people from moving in. People are not really interested in the town getting a lot larger.” Another resident connected the character of the town to limited zoning and the local college:

[Ashfield] is quite leftist, mostly because … [it] has zoning and a plan, and that was the influence of the college people. The majority of people are pretty well-educated, and middle class or better, and that’s because of zoning… You had to have two acres of land and you had to have 100 feet of frontage on the road, so you couldn’t go out and develop something.

Historically, Ashfield was one of the sites for communal living that proliferated in Vermont in the 1960s and 70s. The communitarian values of democratic governance, community consensus, and civil disobedience remain significant beliefs among residents today. At the town meeting in 2015, for example, residents spent several hours debating whether or not to donate $500 to fund the Red Cross. When asked if the debate was typical for the community, a resident replied, “I would say yes. Now, that's just of course just the sampling of the people who show up at town meeting, but I would definitely classify them as the activist, engaged citizens.”
In Ashfield, the progressive, artistic, and community-minded values of many in the community create the foundation for their public elementary school. The school was founded in the 1960s by college faculty and community members who promoted progressive, experiential education. The school was, and continues to be, intentionally designed as a democratic learning environment. The school is structured to facilitate community connections by maintaining multi-age classrooms, small class sizes, and democratic practices including school and classroom meetings. Multiple participants said the school created a close sense of community. Asked to describe the school, one board member shared, “[the school] is very tiny, very intimate classrooms. Kids get a lot of individualized attention. I mean, our largest class right now is our Junior High, which has two teachers and twenty-two students. It's great ratios.”

Other facets of the school’s pedagogy are shaped by the progressive values of the community at large, including experiential and hands-on learning, integrated curriculum, and portfolio-based assessments. Students are encouraged to self-select learning activities, and are required to conduct extensive independent field research projects in upper grades. Many participants believe the experiential aspects of Ashfield’s school are “fostering a love of learning, [because] experience-based education teaches students to apply what they've learned in the world, and take what they've learned in the world and apply it to classrooms.” Students travel to national and international destinations as part of the integrated, field research program. Additionally, the school integrates arts, music, dance, and drama into general curriculum. One teacher shared, “If you look at the curriculum, we have violin for all first graders through third graders... We have a strong music program, I think because so much of the learning [here]… is project-based that integrates art, drama, music often into social studies, science.”

While Ashfield’s school has a strong internal identity, it is closely linked with the values of the broader community. “I would say that the community would like to see the school continue to be student-centered, continue to foster the arts, foster a sense of our place in the wider world,
[and develop] civic responsibility,“ one resident explained. The school principal noted that “a key characteristic of [Ashfield’s school] is strong support that it enjoys in the community. The community’s very proud of it as a school. I think that it has a history that not only makes [the school] unique, but also results in the community really being behind it.” Thus in Ashfield, the community has supported a progressive, democratic vision of education where school is an investment in future contributing citizens to the society.

Mechanisms of Local Control

In the case study sites, the school budget is the primary mechanism by which school boards enact local control. Although the districts had different contexts, and thus different educational values, they both used the budget process as the primary tool to connect the school and community in a locally controlled system. Although both Ashfield and Conway’s boards retained other governance responsibilities, the budget was the most significant means by which the board, community, and school could evaluate and reinforce critical educational values and goals. In the words of one board member: “I think the biggest responsibility we take on is the budget… I think a big part of what we are is almost like an ambassador or a liaison between the school and the community, and it kind of goes both ways.”

While there are many elements of the budget that are beyond the district’s control, such as insurance, SU shared services, and special education programming, there is control over the district’s organizational, instructional, and programmatic elements. These elements can include the number of teachers and assistants which influence class sizes; specialist instruction in art, music, gym, foreign languages, and technology; after school programs; early childhood education; curriculum and instructional materials; professional development, and field trips or special events. These elements make up the technical core of schools: the process of teaching and
Collectively, how these elements are structured and implemented creates the underlying instructional culture of the schools.

In the budgeting process in the case study sites, the principal identifies priorities to fund within the technical core, the school board refines and adjusts the priorities, and the community offers a final approval (see Figure 3-1). The budget process therefore tightly couples the school principal with school board, and the school board with the community. The direct outcome of the tightly coupled system is each group within the system – principals, school boards, and community members – are involved in shaping the culture and the technical core of the school. This is significant because many districts are loosely coupled systems, where administrators have limited involvement with the technical core of schooling (Elmore, 2000). Instead, superintendents, school board members, and principals take on the organizational and managerial roles to buffer the actual work of teaching and instruction from external scrutiny (Elmore, 2000; Meyer & Rowan, 1978). While supervising the work in individual classrooms remains the domain of principals in the case study districts, the boards and communities have a major role in shaping the underlying practices, organization, and programming in their schools.

The school budget process varies by state and district; thus, this section provides an overview of the tightly coupled process the case study districts use to create, refine, and approve their budgets. As discussed in Chapter 2, the case study districts negotiated control of district finances based on their capacity to take on additional responsibilities.

Figure 3 – 1: The School Budget Process
The budget process with the school principals, who identify priorities and problems for the upcoming year, and create an initial budget. “Our school board believes in building the capacity of our board and our school, so I build the budget from scratch. I don’t rely on the Supervisory Union business manager to build it. [The board chair] and I get together to figure out all the tax implications,” Conway’s principal shared. By starting with the principal, the school boards are able to center the budget in the school’s values and needs.

Next, the principal presents the proposed budget to the school board. Ashfield’s board chair explained, “We are going through the budget kind of line by line, and making decisions about what expenses make sense. We’re hoping to guide and shape that [process] and keep [the budget] accountable to the school and the community.” In both districts, board members emphasized the budget needed to represent both the school and the community, and were meticulous in their review process. The process of budget refinement is conducted during open, warned public meetings. Town residents are therefore welcome to attend, as an Ashfield board member explained:

The entire process is happening in a way that is open and transparent to the community, if they choose to participate. Which, actually, last year a number of people did. We had probably two to three people who were coming in and participating in our meetings in a very constructive way.

It is not uncommon to have limited community participation during the initial budgeting process, however. A Conway board member said:

We like people coming to our meetings. We like to talk to them. We like to have as many people on the team as possible. But, you don’t get a lot of people at the meetings, so we kind of view that as a good sign. We’re not pissing people off. They feel like they’re getting a good value for the investment that’s being made.

Once the budget has been finalized by the board, it is publicly shared with town residents per Vermont Statutes. Both towns printed their budgets in the annual town reports; Ashfield included brief explanations, while Conway provides a line by line breakdown of budget changes.
During the study, both districts also held pre-town meeting informational sessions where community members can review the budget with the board members. These meetings enable residents to clarify questions before they vote on the final budget, and demonstrate the multiple opportunities residents have to participate in the budgeting process.

The annual school district meeting is the primary mode for community input on the school budget. Conway and Ashfield both hold their meetings on the first Tuesday of March in conjunction with their annual town meetings. At the annual school district meeting, the school boards present their budgets to the community, summarizing the district’s budgeting priorities and preemptively addressing critical issues. Residents then have time to ask questions, debate specific topics, and then vote to approve the budget. Like the majority of Vermont towns, the districts use participatory democracy where residents vote by calling out “Aye” or “Nay” (Bryan, 2004). The budgeting approval is therefore a public process, where residents must actively voice their vote. (The towns do retain the right to move to a vote by ballot should the voting be contentious.) The town meetings therefore produce active engagement by residents in the budget approval process through discourse, questioning, and participatory voting.

The school budget is therefore the primary mechanism of local control in the case study districts, as the tight coupling of the process ensures principals, school boards, and community residents all have a role in determining annual budget priorities, and by extension, the technical core of the school.

The following section examines how the budget process enables democratic, community participation in shaping the technical core of schooling. For each case study site, I examine specific budget decisions made by each district during SY 2013-14, explaining how the tightly coupled budgeting process reinforces alignment of dominant community and school values.
Conway’s Budgeting Process: Reinforcing Dominant Economic Values

Conway, an entrepreneurial ski mountain town, views education to be an economic investment. Conway’s school board therefore uses the budget as a tool to implement and support programming that will be “educationally sound, taxpayer friendly.” The example described here illustrates how, using the school budgeting process, the district developed and implemented a major change to its technical core that aligned with dominant educational values.

In SY 2013-14, Conway’s school board proposed a multi-year budget increase to implement the International Baccalaureate (IB) program in Conway’s elementary school. The IB program is an elite, global education curriculum used primarily by private schools around the globe. Conway’s board explained IB “is a comprehensive curriculum development program that better prepares our students for the 21st Century through a rigorous integration of inquiry-based learning, global perspective, foreign language skills and technology.” IB provides flexibility in curricular topics, but significantly shapes elements of the technical core including instructional methods, assessment, specialist classes, and school culture. IB certification is a rigorous, five year process. Although IB schools have a prestigious reputation, very few schools in New England have completed the certification process – Conway would be one of the first.

Implementing the IB program was originally proposed by Conway’s principal, who perceived the focus on global, twenty-first century learning to be a good fit for the community. The principal perceived the IB program could be beneficial to produce high student outcomes, prepare students for a globalized future, and be employed as a tool to recruit new families – and their accompanying economic value – to the town. Describing the value of IB, the principal explained the implementation would enable Conway:

To be a world-class school, to prepare our students for a global environment, globally connected world, to think beyond Vermont, to think beyond the United States, to think globally. [The community] has had enough of a taste that if you are excellent it can be an economic driver, it can be a sense of community pride, it can get people to stay here, and
get people to move here. And it can deliver on the promise of preparation for the future. And so I think anything less than a world-class school is going to be disappointing to this community.

Although there is close alignment between the IB program and Conway’s educational values, the school board required the principal to conduct a feasibility study before they discussed implementation. The principal, with support from the school board, embarked on a year-long assessment of the IB program feasibility for the community, including site visits to IB schools and surveys of interest for teachers and parents.

At the end of the feasibility study, the board concluded the program was well-supported by school and community members, and would be a good fit for the district. The board did not add the extra expenses into the annual school district budget, however. Rather, the board created a separate article for the IB program funding, enabling the community to discuss and vote on the IB funding without affecting the rest of the school district budget.

The IB program added $45,200 to the budget for the first year of implementation, with an additional $31,500 per year through the certification process and beyond. The board was therefore asking the community to agree to a multi-year raise in educational funding. Specifically, the article read: “Shall the Town School District authorize the expenditure of $45,200 over the next year to implement the International Baccalaureate program (please see school board report in Town report) at the [Conway] School, with $31,500 to be in the operating budget annually to sustain the program?”

The principal and the board were not just asking for a commitment to school funding, however. The IB program represented a change in curriculum, instruction, and school culture. Yet many residents in this rural, small town were unfamiliar with what the IB program entailed. The board therefore held a pre-town meeting to explain the program and provide residents time to ask questions about the implications of becoming an IB certified school. Many residents attended the
pre-town meeting; the board then used their questions to create an informational handout for residents not in attendance. The handout, provided to attendees at the annual school district meeting, included a brief overview of programming and goals for Conway’s school, how the IB program aligned with those goals, evidence of support from the school and parent community, and a careful breakdown of expenses for the first year of IB implementation. The board chair told the audience at the school district meeting, “we want to be transparent. This is not just a one time expenditure.” The board’s preemptive communication about the IB program was effective: after a brief discussion, residents unanimously approved funding the IB program. A board member reflected, “we asked for this IB program this year, [and] they gave it to us. You see we spent $2.5 million almost like that, [and] there was only one question asked.” Another participant reflected, “when it comes to the school board, there’s so much trust and so much history of high-quality delivery of an educationally sound, taxpayer friendly budget that people aren’t… they’re just very trusting. They aren’t worried that something untoward is going on. So [the lack of discussion] didn’t surprise me.”

The successful budget approval for IB implementation funding is based on two factors. First, as described above, the school board used effective, transparent communication about the program with residents. Community members had multiple opportunities to ask questions and share their opinions about funding IB certification. By giving residents both information and opportunities to participate in the decision-making process, the school board ensured community buy-in for the plan.

Second, the IB program aligned with and reinforced Conway’s dominant values of education. The IB program prepares students for economic success in a globalized world; it establishes Conway as a world-class school; and it can be used as a recruitment tool to bring new communities to the region. All three of these factors were framed as economic investments for residents, many of whom were concerned about the outmigration of local students. At one school
district meeting, a resident exhorted, “we spend a lot of money to educate our kids, and then they move elsewhere. The saying is, ‘we dare you to make a living in Vermont’!” The IB plan, however, was framed as a way to prepare students as global and technologically skilled citizens who can be successful regardless of where they live. “The parochial provincial idea of success simply isn’t satisfying anymore because you see people from New York and New Jersey and from international places coming here on a regular basis every winter… It’s a big world out there, and we’ve got to get our kids ready for the big, big world,” (C1) shared another participant.

Conway’s adoption of the IB program demonstrates how the budget acts as a mechanism for enacting local control that links the school, school board, and community. The IB plan aligns with Conway’s dominant economic values in the education, demonstrating how the school board and community influence the technical core of the school.

Ashfield’s Budgeting Process: Protecting Progressive Practices

Ashfield’s school board, like Conway, uses the school budget as the primary mechanism of local control, aligning community values with practices in schools. Ashfield is a small college town, and values progressive education and democratic participation in governance, both of which are reflected in the community school. While Conway illustrated the development of community support for additional programming expenses, Ashfield demonstrates how the locally controlled district adapts when faced with a budget shortfall. In this case study example, Ashfield’s school, school board, and community collectively determine their funding priorities for school programming when the overall budget must be cut. The budget process illustrates the reciprocal relationship between the community and the school, and explains how the process is used to ensure school practices and programming reflect dominant community values.
During SY 2013-14, Ashfield’s school board faced a dramatic increase in educational expenses from the previous year. In a letter to the town, the board explained “nearly eighty-five percent of this increase is due to expenditures that the school cannot directly control. The costs for special education, high school tuition, health insurance, and supervisory union charges have all increased, and the school was additionally required to comply with a new state mandate for yearly audits.” The district would hit the excess spending threshold if they did not make major budget cuts to offset the increases, which would incur a significant financial penalty on taxpayers. Ashfield’s district was therefore tasked with cutting the school budget.

In Ashfield, like Conway, the school principal starts the budget process by creating a general plan for the upcoming year. Reflecting the progressive values of the school, the principal uses a democratic model of shared decision-making with staff, and they collectively identify funding priorities. The principal then brings the initial budget to the board for their review. “In terms of needing to bring in a budget at a certain amount, [the board] might have some opinions about well, wouldn’t it make sense to cut here or cut there? But the process would be that I would bring them a budget and they would give feedback, but not be in there setting the budget,” the principal explained.

During SY 2013-14, the board was aware of the budget shortfall while the principal planned the initial budget. The board continued to collaborate with staff throughout the budget refinement process. Ashfield’s staff ultimately decided to forgo annual salary raises as a means to maintain programming. The board chair explained:

In order to keep valuable programs while controlling expenses, salaries for our teachers and administrators remained level this year. We didn't adjust wages to accommodate for increased cost of living expenses, nor did we give the step increase that teachers usually receive each year as they gain more seniority in the school. We are sincerely grateful to the [Ashfield] teachers and administrative staff for their support in making this decision. While this choice was made in consultation with teachers and the principal, the school board is deeply unhappy that appropriate raises won't be given to our talented and dedicated staff.
As the board refined the budget, they also kept community residents informed of the fiscal challenges. They held a series of public meetings, inviting legislative and financial experts to speak to residents about key issues. Meetings were scheduled for evenings and weekends to ensure greatest participation, and were recorded and shared online for residents unable to attend. Residents were also welcomed to attend bi-monthly board meetings; one regular attendee was later elected to the school board. The board member shared the experience of attending meetings as a resident during the challenging budget process:

I've been going to meetings for the school board for about half a year even though I haven't been a voting member, but just to understand. I went through the whole budget process. And I was daunted … because I'm not a numbers person… so to take on that sort of project just seemed daunting. But when you really do it and you look at it line by line, you really understand it and it's pretty clear. And it's a group effort.

Over the course of the budget revision process, Ashfield’s board actively sought out community and school feedback on what was critical to maintain, versus what elements could be cut. One resident summed up some of the feedback, sharing, “I would say that the community would like to see the school continue to be student-centered, continue to foster the arts, foster a sense of our place in the wider world, [and develop] civic responsibility.” The final budget retained these priorities, as described in the annual town report: “Our main priority in shaping this budget was to keep a stable environment for our students and therefore no changes were made that would impact the current structure of our classrooms or take away from programs like Spanish, art, poetry, movement, or school lunch.”

Thus the priorities the board protected in the budget were fundamental aspects of the school’s technical core: class sizes, specials classes, and creative programming. These priorities closely align with the dominant progressive, collaborative values of the town as a whole. Despite forgoing teacher raises and cutting non-essentials, the budget proposed raising town taxes by 20%. At the annual school district meeting, residents spent a long time debating the budget. Some
wanted to spend more money to protect teachers’ salaries, while others wanted to see deeper cuts in the programing. Ultimately, reflecting the underlying community support for the budget process, Ashfield residents unanimously approved the budget and its accompanying 20% tax increase. Afterward, one resident noted, “[Ashfield] is a poster child for raising taxes, and it has really shown the legislature the town’s willingness to pay taxes in a commitment to maintaining small schools.” The school principal noted that “a key characteristic of [Ashfield’s school] is strong support that it enjoys in the community. The community’s very proud of it as a school. I think that it has a history that not only makes [the school] unique, but also results in the community really being behind it.”

Ashfield’s example reveals how the school budget can be used to reinforce shared school and community values during a fiscal crisis. The school board used the budget as a mechanism to protect the technical core of the school while maintaining democratic community participation in the process. The board was ultimately successful in passing the budget because, like Conway, they actively communicated and collaborated with residents throughout the process. The resulting plan is a stark contrast to typical school budget cuts: small class sizes and special programs preserved, teacher salaries are frozen, and residents committed to a major tax hike. The budget was successful because it was constructed by the community, and reflected the values that matter the most to Ashfield. Ultimately, local control means local residents get to decide what matters.

**Conclusion: Mechanisms of Local Control**

The two case study examples illustrate how the budget process is used by different communities to align community values with educational practices in the schools. The budgeting process tightly couples the principal, school board, and community. As a result, the budget reinforces alignment of each school’s technical core with dominant community values. Conway, a
conservative ski mountain town, used the budget to implement a global education program that reinforces the community’s economic priorities. Ashfield, a liberal college town, used a budget shortfall to prioritize and protect small class sizes and creative courses that aligned with the community’s progressive values. The differences in the priorities of these two neighboring districts explain why local control over the budget can be a critical tool to link communities and schools. The examples also provide evidence of successful strategies to develop community support. The case study districts used communication, transparency, and active inclusion of residents in the budgeting process to develop community buy-in for the final budget approval, which are applicable in non-locally controlled communities.

**Implications for Non-Autonomous School Boards**

The findings from the study explain how school boards in locally controlled contexts use the budget to align dominant community values with the technical core of their schools. As autonomous, self-governing boards, they are empowered to direct a tightly coupled system. However, these findings also explain practices non-autonomous school boards can adapt to develop greater democratic involvement in district governance. The school budget can be used as a tool to connect school practices with dominant community values within schools. Also, school boards can develop practices to enhance of communication, transparency, and community participation in the budgeting process.

Oversight of district budgets is a fundamental role school boards retain, regardless of their autonomy (Land, 2002; Malen, 2003; Mountford, 2004, 2008). The two case study sites retained extensive control over the budgeting process, rather than working with a superintendent and central office. Additionally, the case study sites each contained a single school, thereby narrowing the focus. The traditional budgeting process involves more administrators and schools
within the overall process. And like both Conway and Ashfield, multiple elements of the budget are non-negotiable, such as contracts, salaries, federal and state grants, and so forth. However, there are elements of school budgets that address the technical core of education, including professional development, instructional materials, specialist programs, and so forth. These elements provide opportunities for board members to collaborate with administrators about these programs, how they are implemented, and why they are priorities for the school. In turn, the school board can communicate these priorities with the broader community to identify what programs may be particularly valued, or worthy of expanding. In other words, the aspects of the budget that directly shape teaching, learning, and school culture offer the greatest leverage points for the school board to link school and community values.

This is not to say that school boards should be micromanaging these budgetary elements; both principals were very clear that the board did not direct line by line expenses. Instead, these specific elements of the budget are opportunities for discourse that deepen understanding of educational practices and priorities between the school board, school administrators, and community at large. Other studies have documented how school board members, as non-professionals in educational settings, lack necessary understanding to make informed decisions about educational practices related to the technical core of schooling (Mountford, 2004, 2008; Rice, 2014; Trujillo, 2013). The budget therefore offers a practical opportunity for school board members to learn from their local educational experts about the decisions and priorities in the school, thereby developing their capacity. Likewise, school boards are able to share their understanding and values with the professional educators, helping develop common understanding of educational values within the district as a whole.

Second, the case study school boards employed several key practices that engendered community participation and support of the budget process. The declining community participation in school board governance has been an ongoing concern among educational
researchers (e.g., Alsbury, 2008; Kirst, 2008; Wirt & Kirst, 1989; Ziegler, 1973; Zeigler et al., 1974). Thus, adopting practices from the case study districts would serve to address a critical need of school boards nationwide. Specifically, both school boards actively sought out community involvement, and employed strategies to develop effective and consistent communication. Conway created transparent, explicit budget documents that provide line by line breakdown of expenditures. Conway’s board chair explained this process helped develop trust between the board and community members:

One of the things I did when I became chairman is [I made] a budget book. So we have every line item, so that if somebody asks, ‘hey, why is this line item that last year was $2000, now it’s $3000? Why is that?’ Well, you go to that page and you look at that line item. We have to replace the fire alarm panel, so it’s an extra $1000. So I think the voters have a lot of confidence in us.

Actions boards can take to increase access and participation of community members in school board governance include providing written overviews of the school budget, explaining priorities and rationale behind key decisions, which both Ashfield and Conway do. Boards can hold budget-specific for residents to ask questions about the budget in person. Ashfield’s strategies of holding meetings at various times can bring more residents to meetings. Likewise, sharing recordings online or on television can expand access to home-bound residents. These meetings enabled residents and board members to actively discuss key educational issues related to the budget, and built a shared understanding of their respective school priorities.

Holding meetings does not necessarily mean residents will attend the meetings. Multiple researchers assert that communities that are satisfied with school board governance do not participate in meetings (Alsbury, 2003; Boyd, 1976, 1978; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1994, 2008). Over the course of the study, Conway had low community attendance at many meetings. Nonetheless, the boards continued to engage in active outreach to communicate and connect with community members. This is a critical element to developing long-term community buy-in and support for
district governance: by maintaining an open system of community meetings, the foundation is there for participation in times of crisis and conflict. Although the level of school board autonomy and empowerment varies nationwide, these locally controlled boards demonstrate steps others can take to improve understanding, communication, and trust with their communities.

**Conclusion**

“Local school boards are the crucible of democracy,” note Lutz and Iannaccone (2008, p. 5). School boards play a critical role in ensuring communities have a voice in the governance and practices of their schools. Yet much of the educational research on school boards points to how they are ineffective and disempowered (Danzberger, 1994; Danzberger et al., 1992; Grady & Krumm, 1999; Wirt & Kirst, 1989; Zeigler, 1973; Zeigler et al., 1974). This article takes a different perspective by examining the work of empowered, locally controlled school boards to understand how they can be used as models to increase democratic participation in less autonomous districts. The article’s findings expand the theoretical understanding of schools as mediating institutions by explaining how locally controlled school boards can ensure community voice in the technical core of schooling. Second, the study explains how school budgets can be used as the primary mechanism boards can use to enact local control, offering implications and examples for practice. Third, the study explains how non-autonomous boards can use the budget process to increase their understanding of educational practices, as well as strategies boards can employ to increase communication, transparency, and participation with community residents.

Democratic governance of education can be messy, and is prone to conflict (Chubb & Moe, 1988; Wirt & Kirst, 1989). This study does not suggest that school boards can eliminate conflict or debate. However, by shifting the focus to what locally controlled boards do well, the research creates a path forward for improving the practices of school boards, and their community
relationships. Education remains one of the foremost educational institutions in which we can, and should participate. These local school boards demonstrate the importance of keeping some aspects of school governance – particularly the budget – local, and how these processes can ultimately benefit all communities. By increasing access to and participation in governance, school boards truly become the democratic institutions they were intended to be.
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Chapter 4

“We are Good! Leave Us Alone!” - Locally Controlled District Implementation and Interpretation of Federal Accountability Mandates

Abstract

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) started a new era high stakes accountability in education. NCLB was framed as promoting equity and ensuring local accountability through mandates that states implement annual high-stakes testing. The federal government and states communicated this rationale for testing to local district leaders as a means to convey the value and purpose of testing, and to ensure compliant implementation on the district level. How local educational leaders interpret policy messaging is shaped by multiple factors, including personal background, training, and local context, all of which influence their implementation and use of testing. In this qualitative multiple case study, I examine how leaders in highly autonomous districts make sense of accountability mandates to understand the theoretical and practical implications for policy implementation and use. I employ policy co-construction and sense-making as the theoretical framework for analysis to explain how local context shapes leaders’ interpretation of non-local policies. I find district leaders’ interpretations of the value and use of testing did not align with the state’s messaging. Instead, district leaders’ sense-making and use of the testing was shaped by local needs, context, and institutional circumstances. This article concludes with implications for state policy implementation.
Introduction

In 2001, President George W. Bush ushered in a new era in federal education policy with the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Framed to promote equity while ensuring local accountability, NCLB mandated state implementation of annual high-stakes testing, with the requirement that 100% of students meet proficiency standards by 2014. While schools were mandated to implement annual testing, districts were also expected to report testing data to communities and the state government (Shelly, 2012; Sunderman & Kim, 2007; Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). The public reporting of the test scores were intended to be used as a tool, one that would both communicate student and school progress to local communities, states, and the federal government, and that could be used as a lever to force changes in ineffective schooling practices (McDermott, 2007; Sunderman & Kim, 2012).

The federal government intended NCLB to be implemented with fidelity by state agencies, who would ensure compliance from local districts (Vergari, 2012). Implementation of assessments was ensured with mandates by revoking federal funding from schools who did not participate. Although multiple localities and states attempted to circumvent NCLB testing mandates, administration of high-stakes testing was ultimately implemented nationwide (Shelly, 2008; Vergari, 2012). However, states adapted reporting and accountability components related to the NCLB assessment mandates, modifying policy elements such as the baseline scores necessary to demonstrate proficiency or sanctions for underperforming schools (Shelly, 2008, 2012; Sunderman & Kim, 2007). States were therefore able to adapt some aspects of the legislation, buffering local districts from federal oversight through selective and state-specific modifications (Shelly, 2012; Vergari, 2012). Some states like Vermont, for example, rarely used the high-stakes
consequences mandated under NCLB, such as restructuring or closing consistently underperforming schools (McDermott & Jensen, 2005; Vergari, 2012). These practices not only minimized external sanctions on the local level, but they also increased local agency on the district level (Henig, 2009; Vergari, 2012).

As states were responsible for communicating the purpose and intended use of test score reporting to local districts, the framing and messaging of NCLB assessment policies to districts also varied significantly across states (McDonnell, 2013; Vergari, 2012). On the local district level, educational leaders’ interpretation of these messages regarding the purpose and value of high-stakes NCLB test reporting shaped multiple elements of implementation and use of the assessment scores. This article uses the theories of sense-making and policy co-construction to examine how local educational leaders make sense of assessment messaging, and how it affected their use of the assessments as a policy tool. The purpose of the article is to examine how autonomous district leaders make sense of the purpose of accountability mandates, to extend theoretical understanding of sense-making from the perspective of school board members, and to suggest implications for state policy communication and implementation. The article contributes to broader theoretical understanding of intergovernmental policy implementation by explaining the relationship between state-level messaging of federal policies and local adaptation.

**Research Background**

**Federal Reforms: Enactment of NCLB**

NCLB represented a significant departure from previous intergovernmental reforms in that the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) initially signaled that they would not provide flexibility for states (Shelly, 2008, 2012; Sunderman & Kim, 2007; Vergari, 2012). The
underlying problem, however, was NCLB was designed primarily by the federal government without consideration for the capacity or will of state educational agencies to implement these reforms (Sunderman & Kim, 2007; Sunderman & Orfield, 2006; Vergari, 2012). Many states had small, under-resourced DOEs and therefore lacked the resources to implement NCLB with the oversight necessary to ensure local compliance and fidelity (Shelly, 2012; Sunderman & Kim, 2007; Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). Although the U.S. DOE capitulated by 2004 and began to offer flexibility waivers, states’ accountability plans encompassed significant variability in how they set standards, intervened for chronically underperforming schools, and maintained accountability and assessment measures (McDermott & Jensen, 2005; Shelly, 2008, 2012; Vergari, 2012).

Scholars are mixed on how NCLB changed intergovernmental politics on the local level; some assert the Act expanded federalism at a cost to local control, therein reducing the power and control of communities and school districts (e.g., Apple, 2007; Hursh, 2007; Jimerson, 2005; Trujillo, 2013). Districts were unable to leverage legal or judicial flexibility for key provisions of NCLB, such as implementing high-stakes testing (McDermott & Jensen, 2005; Vergari, 2012). However, other researchers conclude that much like standards-based reforms, local districts retained flexibility and variability in how they implemented and interpreted federal policies (Henig, 2009; Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013; McDermott & Jensen, 2005; Vergari, 2012).

McDermott and Jensen (2005) write, “NCLB is a massive piece of legislation that simultaneously constrains and liberalizes state and local authority over America's public schools,” (p. 40). Even the mandated assessment component, arguably the most rigid provision of NCLB, appeared to be open to adaptation on the local level. Henig (2009) writes:

Arguably, the growing focus on test scores as a means of accountability may give local governments less leeway than they once enjoyed for co-opting policies set at the higher levels of government, but their bureaucratic capacity and on-the-ground level gives the them leverage that those pronouncing a new age of local obsolescence seriously underestimate, (p. 121).
Based on the significant body of research documenting local district variability implementing standards-based reforms (Cohen, 1990; Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990; Spillane, 1996, 1997; Spillane & Thompson, 1997), and evidence that states’ accountability plans encompassed significant variability, it seems likely that local districts adapted implementation of NCLB’s assessment policies. Of particular salience is how school board members make sense of these federal accountability policies. Although school boards’ control has waned over the past fifty years, most boards maintain responsibility for policy work, including implementation of state and federal reforms (Land, 2002; Lutz & Iannaccone, 2008). Yet school board members are community members, not educational professionals, and therefore have different knowledge of the role and value of high-stakes assessments (McDonnell, 1994, 2005). It is therefore important to assess how board members make sense of accountability reforms to understand the implications for fidelity of implementation.

**NCLB Assessment Reporting as a Policy Tool**

Policymakers use different policy instruments – mandates, inducements, capacity building, system changing, and hortatory devices – to ensure compliance and fidelity with policy implementation (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987; McDonnell, 1994, 2005). Upper levels of government do not have the resources to ensure compliance of implementation by individual communities or organizations (Cohen & Spillane, 1992; Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013; McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). Thus policy instruments are used to support local implementation through incentives, penalties, and other devices (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987; McDonnell, 1994). Many in educational research identify NCLB as an unfunded mandate that forces local level compliance
through mandates or penalties, but the Act integrated multiple policy instruments to ensure fidelity by local actors (Mehta, 2013; Sunderman & Kim, 2007; Sunderman & Orfield, 2006).

To ensure local understanding of external policies, federal and state agencies construct or frame policies to have specific objectives and values for audiences (Lackoff, 2004; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). How a policy is framed is communicated to audiences through hortatory policy tools: symbolic messages conveyed through speeches, memos, editorials, and other forms of communication, intended to signal key policy ideas to leaders (McDonnell, 1994; Schneider & Ingram, 1990; Stone, 1997). Schneider and Ingram explain, “Symbolic and hortatory tools assume that people are motivated from within and decide whether or not to take policy-related actions on the basis of their beliefs and values,” (1997, p. 519).

Throughout NCLB’s implementation, federal and state agencies used hortatory tools to communicate the underlying value and purpose of assessments to the local level (McDonnell, 1994, 2005, 2013). The federal government framed assessments as promoting educational equity and accountability, using phrasing like “the soft bigotry of low expectations” to signal high stakes testing could and should change school performance (Darling-Hammond, 2007; McDonnell, 2013). Many states embraced similar messaging, framing assessments as a tool to leverage equitable opportunities for students (Henig, 2009; Hursh, 2007; Manna & Ryan, 2011). However, individual states’ interpretation and subsequent hortatory use of assessments varied from that of the federal government (McDermott, 2007; Sunderman & Orfield, 2006; Vergari, 2012). McDonnell explains:

Test results are rarely used only as indicators: their persuasive uses often include the intentional shaping of information for strategic purposes and the interpretation of that information in the context of political and social values. The reality of policymaking also means that, despite expert caution, a single assessment may be used for quite diverse purposes, (1994, p. 404).

It is therefore likely that local district leaders heard different messages from federal and state agencies about the purpose of NCLB assessment reforms. Likewise, each hortatory message
signals different values to local leaders about how high-stakes test scores should be used as a tool within districts. Given the multiple dimensions of messaging about the purpose and value of NCLB-mandated assessments, it is therefore valuable to understand the relationship between district leaders sense-making of the value of testing, and how it affects their implementation and use of the reporting mandate.

Theoretical Framework: Policy Co-Construction and Sense-Making

The implementation of educational reforms is not a “zero-sum game” wherein policy is a top-down input that produces a specific output in practice (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990; McLaughlin, 1990). Instead, reforms are adapted by implementers and practitioners on the ground level, generating significant variability within and across educational systems (Cohen, Moffit, & Goldin, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 1990; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). Researchers studying the implementation of SBR found local districts expanded control and governance systems to implement the reforms, even using state reforms to justify expansion of local policies (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990; Spillane, 1996, 1998, 1999; Spillane & Thompson, 1997).

Research on how education reforms are adapted reveals multiple factors shape how systems and individuals make sense of the reforms, including local capacity and will. Policy co-construction and adaptation is a continuous process shaped by encompassing socio-cultural context (Datnow & Park, 2009; Mehan, Hubbard, & Datnow, 2010; Spillane, Reiser & Reimer, 2002). Researchers studying standards-based reform implementation found significant variability in how district leaders made sense of policies, coupled with their local capacity and will to support the reforms, resulting in uneven and diverse policy adaptations (Cohen, 1990; Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990; Spillane, 1996, 1999; Spillane & Thompson, 1997). As a result, standards-based reforms unfolded unevenly, with significant variability across states and districts in the
implementation, alignment, and efficacy of programs. Sense-making is used as a theoretical framework in this study to examine how local district leaders interpret messaging of accountability standards, and how these interpretations shape how district leaders use testing results. However, sense-making has primarily been used to examine educational professionals’ understanding and interpretation of educational policies (e.g., Cohen, 1990; Spillane & Thompson, 1997). School board members, as non-professional educational leaders, also play a critical role in policy implementation and co-construction (e.g., Diem, Frankenberg, & Cleary, 2015; Trujillo, 2013). Yet as school board members have a diverse range of professional expertise, networks, and knowledge, their sense-making process likely diverges from that of educational professionals. One of the contributions of this article is therefore to add a school board perspective to the theoretical understanding of sense-making and policy interpretation.

**Research Questions**

The study seeks to answer two questions: first, how do locally educational leaders interpret state messaging of the value and purpose of mandated assessment policies? How does sense-making of local educational leaders influence local implementation and use of assessments?

**State Context: Vermont’s Accountability and Governance Reforms**

The research study is situated in Vermont, which provides an ideal site for research on local implementation and adaptation of NCLB assessment mandates. Vermont is one of the few states that declined an ESEA waiver, and therefore continued to be held to the 100% proficiency requirements of NCLB until its end in 2015. In 2014, every school in Vermont was identified as
failing to make AYP per NCLB requirements (excluding a small number of Smarter Balanced pilot test schools). As districts were never granted flexibility from assessment mandates, district leaders needed to consider the original intent of the mandate throughout its implementation. Data collection for the study encompassed a three year period when the state transitioned from New England Common Educational Assessment Program (NECAPS) to CC-aligned Smarter Balanced Assessments. The timing of the study resulted in local district leaders discussing and evaluating the transition from the regional NECAPS test to the national Smarter Balanced assessment, offering critical opportunities to observe leadership discourse about assessments.

On a state level, Vermont has a legacy of an early and effective adopter of SBR (Firestone, 1989; McDermott & Jensen, 2005). The state was recognized for setting high quality standards, as well as producing consistently high student outcomes on national and international assessments (Holcombe, 2014; McDermott & Jensen, 2005). Furthermore, the state has embraced an equity framework in education reforms. In 2001, Vermont passed Act 60, which was designed to ensure equitable educational opportunities. Act 60 implemented new state learning standards; a hybrid accountability system that integrated local assessments, student portfolios, and national tests; and a progressive school funding system (Vermont State Board of Education, 2001). NCLB usurped Act 60’s accountability measures shortly after Vermont’s districts began work on new assessment systems. Unsurprisingly, multiple districts opposed the NCLB assessment policies (Center on Education Policy, 2006); several joined a lawsuit led by the National Education Association that argued NCLB was an unfunded mandate (Vergari, 2012). One of the districts that refused to implement NCLB is included in the case study, enabling analysis of how a community responded over time to the assessment mandates.
State Reforms: District Consolidation Legislation

During the 2015 legislative session, Vermont passed Act 46, which mandated consolidation and centralization of school district governance. As a result, school district leaders in the case study sites were actively discussing governance, consolidation, school performance, and community goals during the final year of the study. Additionally, Vermont legislative leaders and the Secretary of Education visited communities, including the case study sites, to clarify the purpose and structure of Act 46. The AOE therefore had extensive opportunities to signal educational priorities to school boards, who were in turn more attentive to messaging from the state. This policy context therefore generated a heightened focus on governance and local control during the study, as well as interpreting messaging from Vermont’s AOE.

Research Methods and Analysis

The research is a qualitative, multiple case study (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2003) designed to explore districts’ interpretation and use of NCLB test score reporting requirements. I collected data between 2012 – 2015, a time period that captured Vermont’s shift from regional assessments (NECAPS) to national assessments (Smarter Balanced Assessments). The study is situated in Vermont, and the case study site is comprised of one regional supervisory union governed by a central school board and superintendent.

Author’s note: In 2015, I co-authored a policy brief in opposition to proposed consolidation legislation in Vermont (Hall & Burfoot-Rochford, 2015).
Site Selection

Within the supervisory union, I selected three locally controlled town districts that had varying responses to NCLB testing policies: Ashfield, Conway, and Jackson. The towns are neighboring school districts, and all are identified as rural by NCES urban-centric locale classification codes. As explained in Chapter 2, the towns in this case study retain significant local control within the regional supervisory union. Despite demographic similarities (see table 4-1), each district retains distinct pedagogical beliefs which are enacted by the school board. The towns therefore encompass significant autonomy and ideological variability, enabling analysis of variability of enactment and interpretation of non-local policies.

Conway is a ski mountain town with a year-round population of 1100. Typical of many districts in the area, the town has one PK - 6 school, and offers school choice for middle and high school. Conway’s five member school board has retained extensive autonomy in the regional supervisory union (see Chapter 2), and the community has a reputation for assertively resisting perceived threats to self-governance.

Ashfield, a college town of 1100 year-round residents, borders the southern edge of Conway. The district has one K - 8 school, and offers school choice for high school. Ashfield’s three member school board historically has been protective of its independence within the supervisory union. Due to recent board turnover, the current board members are more reliant on the regional superintendent (see Chapter 2). Ashfield initially refused to implement NCLB, garnering media attention. The district was forced to capitulate and adopt the assessments when the state threatened to revoke the principal’s certification.

The town of Jackson, has approximately 900 year round residents and borders the northeastern edge of Conway. The district has one PK - 6 school, and offers choice for middle

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5 To maintain confidentiality, towns are identified by pseudonyms.
and high school. Jackson’s five member school board has negotiated less autonomy in the 
supervisory union than either Ashfield or Conway (see Chapter 2), but remains resistant to non-
local educational policies.

Table 4 -1: Characteristics of Case Study Districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ashfield</th>
<th>Conway</th>
<th>Jackson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Town Population</strong></td>
<td>~1100</td>
<td>~1100</td>
<td>~900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Town Racial Composition</strong></td>
<td>96% white</td>
<td>96% white</td>
<td>98% white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Structure</strong></td>
<td>K - 8</td>
<td>PreK - 6</td>
<td>PreK - 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Population</strong></td>
<td>~85</td>
<td>~100</td>
<td>~65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students Qualifying Free &amp; Reduced Price Lunch</strong></td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AYP status SY 2012-13</strong></td>
<td>Reading: Did Not Meet Math: Did Not Meet</td>
<td>Reading: Met Math: Met</td>
<td>Reading: Met Math: Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AYP status SY 2013-14</strong></td>
<td>Reading: Did Not Meet Math: Did Not Meet</td>
<td>Exempt: S-Bac Pilot</td>
<td>Reading: Met Math: Did Not Met</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Data Collection**

For this qualitative case study, I collected data from 2013 – 2015. My primary method of 
data collection was participant interviews with local educational leaders: the superintendent, 
current and former school board members, principals, teachers, and school staff (see Appendix D 
for sample protocols). I used semi-structured, role-specific protocols to ensure consistency of 
questions asked to different participants (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2003). Over the course of the 
study, I conducted 68 interviews with 35 participants. I conducted second interviews with 10 
participants, all of whom were school board members or teachers. Additionally, I interviewed 
each school principal and the supervisory union superintendent three to five times, depending on 
interest and availability. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.
I used ethnographic observations to supplement and inform interview data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Over the course of the study, I documented 34 observations in schools, classrooms, school board and town meetings, supervisory union administrative meetings, and other relevant events. I recorded the observations using ethnographic fieldnotes, which I expanded after I left the field (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). When possible, I cross-referenced meeting fieldnotes with the documented public minutes. To substantiate observation and interview data, I also collected school district documents including reports from Vermont’s AOE, school handbooks, town reports, school board and town meeting minutes, and other official documents (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Yin, 2003). Other data sources, such as newspaper articles, blog posts, press releases, and a case study published by the Center on Education Policy, provided additional context for the study (Patton, 2002). Finally, to understand how Vermont framed and messaged assessment policies to local districts, I collected publicly available memos, op-eds, resolutions, letters, and newspaper articles from Vermont’s AOE, Secretary of Education, and State Board of Education that addressed NCLB, assessment, and/or accountability policies. These documents were gathered online, primarily on the AOE’s website, and include materials from the onset of NCLB through fall 2015. The data sources validated findings through comparison and data triangulation (Miles & Huberman, 1997; Patton, 2002).

Data Analysis

Data analysis in the study was split into two separate processes: district-level data analysis, which included interviews, observations, and documents related to local implementation and interpretation of assessment reforms; and state-level data analysis, which included documents related to Vermont’s formal messaging of assessment policies.
I integrated district-level data analysis with data collection, which provided opportunities to refine data collection and test emerging hypotheses during fieldwork (Creswell, 2007; Spillane, 1998). I inductively coded initial data in Atlas-TI to identify emergent themes related to assessment (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Once data collection was complete, I used the initial themes to iteratively refine the coding scheme, incorporating both \textit{a priori} and emergent codes (Creswell, 2003). I then recoded data in NVivo with a thematic coding scheme, using major categories of educational beliefs by participants and educational practices in schools. These categories were further broken into thematic categories including student outcomes, external assessments, and internal assessments.

The coded data was sorted by district into thematic matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which I arranged by assessment practices, outcomes, and beliefs; interactions and perceptions of the Vermont AOE; and perceptions of local control. I analyzed the matrices first within districts, then across the collective cases. The matrices illustrated patterns of practices that persisted across the districts, such as the significance of local will in implementation. The matrices also enabled me to rule out initial hypotheses, such as school board resistance to testing, as it became clear that with the exception of a few outliers, participants were consistently in support of testing systems. My findings were shared with key participants, who clarified and confirmed findings.

State-level data was initially sorted into a conceptually ordered data display by their intended audience – general public or district leaders – to assess if policy messages varied by target audience (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). I then drew from prior work by McDermott (2003, 2007), McDermott & Jensen (2005), and McDonnell (1994, 2005, 2013) to construct \textit{a priori} thematic coding. Specifically, I coded evidence of equity and accountability discourse, as well as state descriptions of federalism (see Appendix E). I then analyzed data within and across target audiences. Evidence of variable messaging was minimal; however, I did find patterns of resistance to federal accountability measures coupled with framing
assessments as a tool for promoting equity. Findings were reviewed with a Vermont legislator to test their validity.

Findings

All three case study districts implemented the NCLB assessments, although one district initially resisted implementation. District leaders’ interest and capacity to support the assessment reforms varied. As a result, the districts provided different supports for testing implementation, reflecting the relationship between local will and variability of implementation.

Adopting NCLB Assessments

Initial adoption of NCLB assessments varied across the case study. The school boards for both Conway and Jackson approved the NCLB assessment policies shortly after they were introduced by Vermont, whereas Ashfield initially refused to adopt NCLB.

Ashfield’s resistance to NCLB was based on the community’s dominant educational philosophy. The school district prioritized student-centered, project-based learning, and eschewed standardized curriculum and assessments, which did not align with the college town’s progressive education. A staff member explained, “We didn’t feel that our students were going to benefit from taking the test, or that we would benefit from the information provided by a one time test.”

Ashfield did not receive Title 1 funding at the time of NCLB implementation, therefore district leaders felt they could opt-out without incurring financial penalties. The school board passed a formal resolution refusing to implement the assessment component of NCLB, stating:

We believe that the No Child Left Behind Act is an inherently flawed piece of legislation that fails students and fails schools. The administrative and testing requirements are time consuming and expensive and do not serve the needs of students. The tests are not designed to challenge or engage students and they do not aid in their learning. NCLB is a
vehicle to remove control of our children’s education from local communities and school districts and place that control with the Federal Government.

By refusing to implement NCLB, Ashfield took on the role of a test case in Vermont for local resistance to federal and state mandates. Vermont’s Education Commissioner responded by threatening to revoke the licenses of both the superintendent and principal unless the community adopted the tests. At the time, the Commissioner said to a local newspaper, “I will have to examine whether or not the principal and the superintendent could lose their licenses. I will have to examine if their jobs would be in jeopardy… If the people in [Ashfield] don’t like state tests that's up to them, but … I have to enforce the law.”

Ashfield did not want to lose their principal (although by all accounts, they did not mind the loss of the superintendent), so their school board and principal developed a plan for implementation that met the letter of the law while significantly undermining its efficacy. A former board member shared:

We said we will offer the tests but we’re not going to insist on anybody taking the test. And we sent a letter to the parents explaining why we felt that [way] … I’d have to check the statistics but I’d say a good 30% of our students did not take the test, and that would have meant right off the bat that we were a failing school.

District leaders report that the community continued to support the school despite its failure to meet AYP. One noted, “in terms of outcomes as measured by NECAPS, or traditional testing, Ashfield prides in not caring about that stuff.” The lack of support for state-mandated standardized testing persists in Ashfield, both among parents and district leadership. Although the opt-out rate has declined in recent years, the principal said, “Even now I will often get one or two [parents who opt-out], though it’s a lot smaller than it used to be. And we honor those requests.” Nonetheless, Ashfield met NCLB-mandated 95% participation rates over the course of the study.

6 Vermont’s leading educational official was called the Commissioner of Education until 2014, when the state shifted the role to a political appointment, renaming it Secretary of Education.
In contrast, district leaders for Jackson and Conway reported implementing NCLB assessments with little controversy. Neither district engaged in the same level of resistance to the accountability measures. It is important to note, however, that at the time of NCLB implementation, Conway was embroiled in a contentious standoff with the state over the funding distribution under Act 60. Conway’s school board was therefore fully engaged in a battle over school funding, and may not have had the resources to also assess the impact of the new assessment mandates. The bottom line, however, is that while not all school boards agreed with the testing, the state was able to force compliance even without financial penalties.

**Current Implementation of High-Stakes Assessments**

In the years since NCLB was first introduced, Jackson and Conway each hired new principals. The principals each shared that their respective boards hired them with the expectation that they would maintain or raise student test scores. Thus the Jackson and Conway principals had mandates from their boards to support testing implementation.

In Conway, the principal implemented additional testing, approved by the board, to provide formative measures of assessment for teachers. The school volunteered to pilot test the Smarter Balanced Assessments in 2013-14, and one of Conway’s teachers served on Smarter Balanced’s national educator panel. Jackson’s principal also implemented additional testing, and gained board support to provide targeted math and English Language Arts professional development for teachers to further improve test scores. During the study, both principals received recognition for their work producing consistently high student outcomes.

The district leaders in Ashfield continue to oppose standardized testing, although as they now receive Title 1 funds, the community has little leeway with opting out. They asserted their resistance in various ways, such as communicating their disapproval in board policies and annual
reports. In the 2013 town report, the principal wrote, “We have complied with the NECAP testing (see the scores at the end of this report) but we have not embraced it. It is not a focus of instruction and we have not added on additional layers of standardized assessment.” Ashfield’s lack of will to implement the assessments also had implications for practice. In 2015, the principal explained that the school decided to minimize the disruption of testing for teachers and school programming. The principal shared:

One thing we decided to do early on was, we allotted the suggested amount of time for the test. But if students didn't complete it in that time, the recommendation is that they be given additional time. We decided this year not to do that. That they would do as much as they could and as well as they could on that.

After the tests were completed, school staff shared that students started the testing late due to challenges with accessing the technology. In comparison, both Jackson and Conway reported providing students with unlimited time to complete the computer-adaptive testing. Jackson’s younger grades even provided “goodie bags” for students taking the test as a way to demonstrate support.

The S-Bac tests are completed on computers, necessitating access to and proficiency with technology. The variability of access and integration of technology across the three districts reflects their respective capacity and will to support implement of the assessments. Conway made a commitment in the mid 2000s to implement technology into the schools. Students have one-to-one laptops beginning in second grade, and each classroom has a smart board that teachers actively use. Jackson students also have access to computers, although not to the same extent as Conway. Ashfield has a computer lab, but has historically underfunded technology. The school board recently made a commitment to increase the number of school computers through additional funding and grants. Yet the school board explicitly stated in their annual report to the community that they were not investing in technology due to the testing requirements. In their 2014 School Director’s Report, the board wrote, “The SBAC is an online assessment and we have
a number of concerns as to how it will impact both our students and our technology budget. We do not intend to purchase new technology based on the requirements of this assessment.”

Vermont’s Chair of the State Board of Education cautioned the challenges with technological access, writing in an op-ed, “Districts with more access and whose students have more familiarity with technology will find it easier to administer these tests. Will the tests measure reading and mathematics or will they measure computer access and literacy?” (Morse, 2015). Given the uneven access to technology provided to students at Ashfield, Conway, and Jackson, it is likely that students’ experience and comfort with testing on computers will vary.

All three districts were required by the state to implement state assessment systems. The districts reflect varying will and commitment to supporting the testing, though. Conway demonstrates strong local capacity and will for NCLB assessments through their use of additional standardized tests, pilot testing Smarter Balanced assessments, and providing necessary time and technology to support implementation. Jackson also demonstrates strong local will, although their technological capacity is somewhat less than Conway. Ashfield has opposed NCLB testing since the onset, and clearly illustrates the role local will plays in shaping efficacious implementation of reforms. Ashfield’s ongoing resistance to testing has resulted in the school providing the minimal requirements necessary to carry out the testing.

If the purpose of standardized assessments is to get reliable school and student measures, these three neighboring districts in Vermont illustrate significant variability within the system. In the following section, I examine how district leaders interpret the tests, and what implications their perceptions offer for top-down, high-stakes reforms.
**Districts’ Interpretation of NCLB Assessments**

The use of mandated assessments are shaped by the symbolic and hortatory messaging of accountability policies (McDonnell, 1994; 2005; Schneider & Ingram, 1990) and as such, carry expectations and weight for school leaders using them. How the tests are construed and interpreted by the local district leaders influences how they use them as their own policy tools. In this section of the article, I examine how district leaders understand and make sense of NCLB assessment policies, and compare these interpretations with state messaging of the assessments. I identify key findings related to measurable student outcomes, testing as a tool for internal local control, and testing as a tool for external local control.

**Measurable Student Outcomes**

One of the primary functions of standardized testing is to provide measurable outcomes on student performance. Vermont is somewhat different from other states in that it takes a more holistic approach to accountability, asserting that high stakes test scores should be used in tandem with local assessments and other measures. The State Board of Education explained, “Standardized tests – along with teacher-developed assessments and student work samples -- can give educators and citizens insight into the skills, knowledge and capabilities our students have developed… When used appropriately, standardized tests are a sound and objective way to evaluate student progress,” (2014). Nonetheless, Vermont’s AOE has been careful to maintain standardized assessments do have an important role in student and school performance measures. In a memo to educational leaders titled *Understanding Why We Test*, Secretary Holcombe wrote: “The Agency has received several requests from school leaders to provide a rationale for statewide testing…To that end, we offer the following: Statewide assessments provide
information on students’ mastery of state standards," (2015). NCLB assessments are useful, according to the AOE, because they provide measurable student outcomes. Over the course of the study, Vermont’s AOE and Board of Education consistently employed this rationale for mandated assessments in their communications to educational leaders and the general public.

The state-level messaging that testing is a tool to measure student outcomes was consistently adopted by the case study district leaders. Across the case study sites, administrators and school board members consistently expressed the importance of publicly demonstrating measurable student outcomes. In the communities that supported NCLB assessments, district leaders asserted that the mandatory assessments – NECAPs and Smarter Balanced Assessments – had value because they demonstrated student outcomes. In practice, this looked different across the case study sites, with Jackson more fully embracing the value of tests than Conway.

Jackson’s district leaders and teachers took a particularly strong stance on the use of test scores, identifying high student outcomes on standardized testing as the top priority of the school. One teacher explained the importance of preparing students to be successful on the NECAPs, saying:

I hear from so many adults, “don’t teach to the test, don’t teach to the test!” [But] you have to think of testing as a genre, and that you need to teach kids how to take a test. You think about it, they’re going to be taking multiple choice assessments their whole lives.

Using the same rationale as Vermont’s AOE, the teacher emphasized how test were valuable because they measure individual student performance. The staff therefore makes an effort to ensure students understand and are motivated to do their best on the assessments. The teacher continued:

I think this school also made it very clear to these students [why they need to do well], because one of the big flaws with the NECAP assessment is there is …there’s no reason for kids to even what to do well. [The kids] say, “Why should I try hard on this?” But I think that we all approached it as a school is, “this is important for our school, and you are being scored on how you do well.”
The importance of individual student performance is further reinforced by Jackson’s principal, who meets with students individually to review their test scores and set goals for future assessments. The principal said:

I have for the past 4 years challenged the kids in 4th through 6th grade to achieve at least 100 points more [on the NECAPS] than they did the year before… I would meet with them before the test individually and then meet with them afterwards, and we would look at the subscales of the assessment. And most of them have never had anybody sit down and look at them with them before.

In addition to the value of individual test scores, Jackson’s school staff and district leaders perceived test scores to have a value in measuring the school’s performance as a whole. This does not align with Vermont’s Agency of Education, which has actively resisted using test scores alone to evaluate schools. Nonetheless, Jackson’s school staff and district leaders use aggregated grade and school-level scores to set annual accountability goals. Furthermore, the aggregated test scores are publicly reported in Jackson’s local newspaper, at the annual school district meeting, and to the school board. Thus in Jackson, participants demonstrated a unified perspective that aligned with the state message that student test scores are a valuable tool to measure student progress, yet also extend beyond the state’s messaging about the value of test scores for evaluating school performance as a whole.

Conway’s participants expressed similar opinions about the value of mandated assessments. However, district leaders and staff viewed the role of testing more broadly than Jackson, identifying test scores as only one tool among several to identify and measure student outcomes. Conway’s principal described the importance of using multiple measures for student outcomes:

When the teachers and I agree upon what the outcomes are, we want kids to excel at a high rate. We want them to be excellent readers and writers. We want them to be able to be math problem solvers. We want them to have divergent thinking. We want them to be able to take a novel problem and take a, a strategic approach to it. We will look at a variety of data. We will look at student work samples, we will look at outcomes on tests like the Maps, the NECAPS, the S-Bac.
From this stance, high-stakes test scores are one of many tools Conway use to assess student outcomes, a message repeated by teachers and staff. Similar sentiments were also shared by school board members. One board member explained that a good education should produce “a well-rounded child, who is engaged…And obviously there’s some formal way you need to test that a little bit. I don’t know that [testing is] everything that makes a good education, but … you have to have a form of measurement.”

Although Ashfield strongly resisted adopting NCLB assessments, and continues to provide minimal support for implementation, I found evidence that district leaders have gradually shifting towards accepting the inevitability of the testing. For example, Ashfield’s district leaders agreed with Jackson and Conway that there needs to be a standardized means to measure student progress. As Ashfield’s district leaders do not support the use of high-stakes tests, they instead use student-created portfolios to measuring growth. The portfolio assessments were created by community members after Ashfield initially refused to adopt NCLB. Employing a democratic process, school staff, district leaders, and community members collaboratively agreed on portfolios as a means to measure specific areas of student development. Today, all eighth grade students present a portfolio of their learning to a panel of teachers, school board members, and community members at the end of the year. Their portfolios demonstrate students’ growth aligned to Ashfield’s Realms of Learning, and the process is highly valued in the community.

Despite the ongoing use of student portfolios, in the final year of the study, board members discussed needing to add on a quantifiable measure for student growth. Reflecting the shifting, and ambivalent attitude in Ashfield towards standardized tests, one board member said, “I, for one, am definitely for standardized testing to a point. But I feel that when that’s all the kids are doing, is learning not just what’s on the test but how to take the test, and strategies, and
Another board member attributed the shift towards testing to external pressures from the state:

I think when No Child Left Behind first started it was very easy for people to just feel like we need to butt up against this and reject it. Then what actually happened in my opinion has only a little bit to do with the board and has a lot to do with the outward pressure into conform or get penalized… I think the overall opinion of the board and the administration has trended a little more towards, okay we should try to get everyone to participate and this school doesn’t go overboard on teaching to the test or spending inordinate amounts of time because of the test. But we have moved more into a place of really, everybody takes the tests now and we kind of did conform to it. I personally think it had more to do with how we’re pressured and all of that than anything the board did.

The underlying sense from Ashfield’s board is that while they don’t agree with standardized testing, they do need a quantifiable means to externally demonstrate student outcomes. In the 2013 town report, the school board noted, “As test scores receive more attention we are challenged to report student learning and achievement more effectively. It's difficult to reduce the richness of student presentations and projects to numbers. We continue to explore new ways to communicate this.”

Ashfield’s superintendent and principal also expressed an underlying value of test scores to measure student outcomes, and the overall progress of the school. Both note that while they do not agree with testing, they do believe if the school is successful, students should do well on the testing. One shared, “I’m really disappointed in our test scores this year because I’ve always maintained that if we’re doing a good job teaching, even without teaching to the test, the scores should reflect that. And so I can’t deny that I’m disappointed.” The messaging coming down to Ashfield and across the district is that it is important to have a means to identify student outcomes, preferably on standardized assessments.

It is also important to note that all three schools believe that these results will provide evidence that they are doing a good job teaching students; none of the schools expressed concerns about how students were performing overall. While Jackson appeared to be most selectively
focused on test scores as the primary measure of student success, both Ashfield and Conway leaders described the importance of using multiple, flexible measures to assess and measure student progress. The perception that testing is important to measure student outcomes, yet only one piece of a puzzle, aligns with Vermont’s State Board of Education messaging about the role of testing as tool for districts.

**Testing as a Tool**

On the federal level, NCLB assessment policies were conveyed to not only measure student outcomes, but also as a tool to ensure educational equity (McDonnell, 2013; McDermott, 2007). Vermont’s commitment to equity-based educational reforms pre-dates NCLB, such as Act 60’s progressive educational funding system (McDermott, 2003). Since NCLB, Vermont repeatedly employs an equity frame when discussing and promoting the use of testing. In a 2015 memo, Secretary Holcombe articulated the value of assessments as a tool for equity:

> To us, the primary benefit of the scores is that they provide another data point for our conversation about the statewide gaps in achievement that we see for children who live in poverty, children with disabilities, children who are learning English, and children who are affected by historic or structural discrimination or inequities.

In a similar memo to parents and caregivers, Holcombe noted, “Without these assessments, any inequities are hidden, and thus likely to be left unaddressed,” (2015). Across the various documents and memos published, Vermont’s Agency of Education consistently and assertively signals that standardized tests enable equitable assessments and measurements.

Despite the dominant messaging from Vermont’s Agency of Education about testing as an equity tool, I found very little evidence that district leaders conceptualized testing as a tool to ensure educational equity. The most overt reference was in Conway’s 2013 school district report, where the principal shared that the school had eliminated an economic achievement gap:
“[Conway] is proud to have completely eliminated any family income achievement gap, meaning students performed equally on the NECAP regardless of family income. This is unique, as the State of Vermont has family income achievement gaps of 25% in Math and 24% in Reading.” The only other reference over the course of data collection to equity came from leaders in Ashfield who asserted NCLB assessment policies would exacerbate inequities. The board wrote in their 2004 resolution, “The legislation's solution for parents that find their children in a "failing" school is to encourage them to move their children to schools that have not yet been labeled as "failing to progress". Inevitably we believe that this will undermine communities and create classism.” Overall, the district leaders did not identify equity as a major role of standardized assessments.

However, the district leaders did interpret assessments to be a valuable policy instrument, although not to promote equity as Vermont’s Agency of Education intended. Rather, the individual districts perceived standardized testing could be used as a hortatory tool to maintain and protect local control. District leaders described using testing both internally to their communities, and externally within the state governance structure.

*Testing as a tool for maintaining local control internally.*

Across the case study sites, the school budget is the primary mechanism for enacting and sustaining local control between the school, school board, and community at large, as explained in Chapter 3. The principal and school board approve a budget together (sometimes with assistance from the superintendent), then the school board presents the budget to the community at the annual Town Meeting, where residents vote to approve or alter it. It is therefore logical that all three districts used test scores as hortatory devices to develop and maintain community buy-in for their annual school district budgets. Conway and Jackson school board members identified
high student performance on tests as a tool to ensure community support for school funding, while Ashfield’s leaders leveraged resistance to maintain support of progressive education.

All schools are required to report their test scores annually to the community, and all three do so in the annual town report, which is combined with the schools’ proposed budget. Jackson has worked hard to steadily improve test scores over the past five years, and used their test scores to develop community support. In the 2015 town meeting, the principal articulated the district’s goal of “balancing student needs with community resources. This has changed a lot over the years. We want to ensure all students are learning at highest level while balancing fiscal responsibility.” The principal then used test scores to articulate the school’s academic success, make a direct connection to the budget by saying, “Certainly this is something in which the community can take pride because this shows how your tax dollars are spent.” A school board member expanded later, saying, “to be honest, what’s there to complain about? You’ve got a top-rated school, tax increases are minimal, principal of the year running the place, what’s to complain about? … It’s hard to argue with success, and we’re transparent about it.” Jackson’s stressed that high test scores were a demonstration of the school’s success.

Conway takes similar pride in their test scores, and likewise use the test scores as evidence of school success at the annual town meeting. The principal shared, “I’m always looking for ways to measure what we do so I can make the argument to pay my teachers well, and don’t cut our budget.” School board members articulate the importance of test scores in demonstrating that they maintain an “educationally sound, taxpayer friendly” budget.

Ashfield also reports their test scores to the community with the annual budget. However, the district leaders frame testing as antithetical to the values and programming they are asking the community to support in the budget. For example, in the 2013 town report, the board outlined how they are opposed to the testing, then give examples of how the community can learn more about Ashfield-based measures of student outcomes:
We have complied with the NECAP testing (see the scores at the end of this report) but we have not embraced it. It is not a focus of instruction and we have not added on additional layers of standardized assessment. We have focused on students’ demonstrating and providing evidence of their learning through portfolio presentations, I-project presentations, field research presentations, student led and student involved conferences, and the annual Learning Fair.

By framing test scores in conjunction with project-based learning and public events, the school board is staying true to broader community values and independence in education. Like the other two districts, however, Ashfield actively and publicly involves the community in student outcomes by hosting open house nights for student learning, project presentations, and portfolios. Ashfield also makes learning public to the community, developing buy-in, but they do so using their own methods of instruction.

The school districts also perceived test scores to be a useful tool in providing internal feedback about the school’s performance. Using test scores to measure school success is a standard tool within the United States, and was one of the initial components of NCLB (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Hursh, 2007). Under NCLB, test scores are intended to be used to identify and provide sanctions for low performing schools. Vermont historically has not created high-stakes interventions for schools (McDermott, 2003). Under NCLB, the state used technical supports to facilitate school growth, and has never intervened to take over a school. In fact, Vermont has actively protested against the punitive classification of schools as failing to meet AYP under NCLB regulations. In a 2014 letter to parents and caregivers, Secretary Holcombe wrote:

**The Vermont Agency of Education does not agree with this federal policy, nor do we agree that all of our schools are low performing**…This policy does not serve the interest of Vermont schools, nor does it advance our economic or social well-being. Further, it takes our focus away from other measures that give us more meaningful and useful data on school effectiveness. (Holcombe, 2014, *emphasis in original*).

While the federal government and many states assert that test scores are an effective tool to evaluate schools, Vermont’s AOE has deliberately avoided such explicit accountability measures.
Despite the AOE’s indication that test scores are not a sole measure to judge schools, the case study districts viewed testing as a way to maintain local control by confirming they were on the right track as leaders and as a school. As explained by Conway’s principal:

This school has made the commitment for a long period of time to make sure they have small enough class sizes so that they can deliver a high quality education and high quality student outcomes, but with that responsibility comes accountability. If we’re not getting the student outcomes and we've invested in professional development and we've invested in small class sizes, then there would need to be some interventions.

Jackson and Conway school board members credited students’ high test scores as evidence that they were doing good work governing their schools. One administrator shared, “We are an exceptional school, and the outcomes of students able to demonstrate their knowledge on a multitude of standardized tests.” The school board chair in Conway pointed out that if his school did not get high test scores, it would be a sign that something was wrong. Another credited the school as a whole to test scores, noting in an annual newsletter, “It is a tribute to the community, staff and most importantly, the students, that our statewide assessment scores moved from the bottom 15% of schools in Vermont (2008) to 15-20% above the state average (2013).” For district leaders that value testing, assessments are a meaningful way to ensure they are on the right track.

Conway also perceived test scores to be important to publicly share within their district, calling out the superintendent for failing to do so. One board member expressed frustration, arguing that transparency was for the benefit of school boards to have measurable progress:

We’ve had things where [the superintendent said], "Well, we're not going to actually show test scores. We're not going to identify the talents that they belong to, actually." It's like, Why? Who is that helping? Is that protecting somebody's feelings? Is that what this is about, or do we want to just put up the best practices going on somewhere? … Maybe boards have the right to know that, and say, “Oh, my administrator’s not getting the same kind of results that [your] administrator’s getting? Maybe we should talk about that.” Another Conway board member explained that if the school’s test scores decreased, “I think we’d be like, what’s going on? What’s going on with the other schools? What are they
doing? And how are they getting test results?” In both cases, the board members understood test scores can be a valuable tool to understand progress outside of the district.

Ashfield’s administrative team, despite their historic lack of support for testing, also felt that test scores were an important tool to measure the school’s progress. One former board member, who was adamantly opposed to NCLB implementation, now perceives the school to be less successful because of its lower test scores. The board member asked:

How do you maintain the necessary responsibility along with freedom that you have to have in order to be a school that doesn’t accept sitting in straight rows and just taking standardized tests? One of the things I do is look at those standardized test scores and say, wait a second, we used to nail these things and we have to send our kids off to [high school] completely content that they wouldn’t have any issues educationally whatsoever. I’m not so sure that’s true anymore.

Another board member did not think the school’s test scores were a reflection on its overall performance. Instead, the member sought another way to measure school performance:

We do all these things, they are so rich and very substantive to me compared to bubble tests… I just think there should be maybe a more balanced, number of ways that we decide [how the school is doing]… I wish that we could do it better, because it would be just such a great service to develop a way of analyzing, is education working?

The board member does not agree with testing, but recognizes the value that assessments have in providing information on school outcomes. Similar sentiments were echoed by other current and former board members in Ashfield. Their overarching beliefs about test scores illustrates the board’s shift toward accepting testing.

**Testing as a tool for maintaining local control externally.**

The third interpretation of the purpose of standardized testing was also evident across all three districts: assessments were considered a tool to retain local control statewide. As previously noted, the study overlapped with several years of legislative debate, and ultimate approval, of
district consolidation. In the three case study districts, retaining local control was a significant priority. Board members were also deeply concerned over the centralization of board governance in newly consolidated districts, which would reduce local autonomy and self-governance.

Across the three districts, leaders concluded that high student outcomes on standardized and comparable data could be used as a tool to maintain and protect local control. The sentiment was first expressed by a principal describing a school board:

My school board's extremely activist. So the Department of Education in Montpellier gets annoyed by my school board a lot, because they are very – don’t mess with [us]! Don't try to consolidate us! … We have high student outcomes. We are good! So don't mess with us! And, in fact, you should look at us! But I think a lot of the time we are actually in their face and kind of putting our thumbs in their noses, so they don't want to.

Here, the principal made the case that a successful school can be left alone from state oversight. This concept was repeated by current and former board members in all three districts. The broad perception was that a successful school would be less likely to be closed or consolidated under the new legislation. It is important to note that Act 46 required consolidated districts, but did not require schools to close. However, the communities still interpreted the Act as a threat to retaining their community schools. One told me, “So that’s something we need to look at, figure out a way to survive. If the goal of the community is to survive as long as we’re having a school in the community, we need to figure out if that’s what the community wants, how do we do that.”

While evaluating the implications of Act 46, board members discussed the importance of demonstrating successful governance and outcomes as a means to ensure the state would not force consolidation. The phrase “leave us alone” repeated across these conversations, especially among Jackson and Conway, who felt their academic success should buffer them from oversight. Ashfield’s board members were less certain, lacking overt assessment measures to demonstrate their success at self-governance. While talking with me, one reflected:

How do you ascertain A) that you’re doing a good job, or B) maybe more importantly, does this community really feel that you’re doing a good job or are they just being
complacent? …If there’s going to be a state-wide emphasis, then get your butts out, get your community together, verify that you do have the community’s support and then if you do, then [the state should] back off, go away, and leave us alone!

Another board member returned to the question of testing in relation to local control, stating:

I’m not a big fan of standardized testing because I don’t think it captures everything. But I do understand there needs to be some account, like what if you’re living in a town where there’s a lot of local control, and your local control is going a little bonkers on you and you actually don’t have a good school?

The board member concluded that communities needed a standardized way to share their outcomes to prove they were successful.

All districts were concerned about maintaining their independence under Act 46, and many believed that they could demonstrate their success with their student outcomes. Ashfield’s gradual transition towards testing, while in some ways contradictory with the town’s legacy of progressive, anti-accountability activism, appears to be an effort to demonstrate the strengths of the school district and retain local autonomy and self-governance.

Over the course of the study, the three districts shared many similarities in how they interpreted standardized testing. Yet the district leaders also encompassed different conceptualizations of the value of testing, reflecting the varying socio-cultural context for each community. Jackson’s leaders perceived standardized assessments to be critical for measuring and demonstrating student outcomes. Conway’s leaders similarly saw the value in high student outcomes, but described them in a broader context of other performance measures. Ashfield’s leaders opposed standardized testing, but did believe their district needed to use quantifiable measures to demonstrate their success and performance as a school.

Despite their range of beliefs about the underlying rationale of testing, the district leaders all described using NCLB testing as tools to maintain internal community support, assess
leadership and school outcomes, and protect the districts from external controls. In short, all three communities perceived testing to be a tool to leverage and retain local control of their schools.

Discussion

The study illustrates local implementation and adaptation of federal accountability policies mandated under NCLB. In some ways, high stakes assessments represent a clear limit to local autonomy: Ashfield was not able to circumvent mandated assessments, despite their best efforts to do so. Yet how the districts implemented standardized testing encompassed a wide range of variability influenced by local capacity and will. Districts had control over how time allocations for tests, technology support, professional development, and adoption of additional standardized testing, all of which alter the efficacy and fidelity of standardized testing implementation. Local will proved to be particularly salient: Conway’s support for testing resulted in the district pilot testing the Smarter Balanced Assessment. In contrast, a decade after Ashfield first refused to adopt high stakes testing, the district continued to reject requirements needed to fully support assessments. Mandates may have worked to force compliance with testing, but the state was not able to dramatically alter Ashfield’s beliefs about assessments.

Although the districts encompassed variable implementation of NCLB assessments, all three districts shared similar perceptions of testing as a tool. Some of the local interpretations of assessments appear to be influenced by Vermont’s messaging regarding accountability systems. The AOE stresses testing serves an important role in measuring student outcomes, a belief that was shared in Conway and Jackson, and subverted in Ashfield. However, Vermont’s extensive messaging that testing is a tool to promote and ensure educational equity had little transfer in the case study sites. Instead, district leaders interpreted tests to have value as a hortatory tool to communicate success, measure progress, retain community buy-in, and possibly resist external
consolidation and state oversight. These beliefs, shared across the districts, do not align with Vermont’s overarching messaging about the value of test scores, therein raising the question of how leaders came to adopt these beliefs.

Returning to previous research in the field, it appears that the use of testing as a tool to gauge school outcomes may be messaging from the federal government and the general public. Testing has been a dominant narrative in public discourse. McDonnell notes, “The basic policy idea of holding schools externally accountable through standardized testing of their students is now well-institutionalized,” (2013, p. 172). Furthermore, the dominant perception that high-stakes testing can effectively measure schools is an enduring myth well established in the political and public discourse nationwide (McDonnell, 1994). It is therefore reasonable that case study school boards adapted this belief from federal, rather than state messaging.

District leaders’ perception that testing can preserve and protect local control is also a surprising finding, as it does not align with state messaging on testing. However, accountability measures were not the only policy Vermont’s AOE were discussing over the course of the study. The most significant policy topic for local districts was consolidation. District leaders appear to have integrated assessment policies into the more pressing issue of consolidation legislation and the potential loss of local control. The AOE is not using test scores to mandate or encourage district reorganization and consolidation under Act 46. However, the AOE did use the same symbolic frame for both testing and consolidation: both are necessary to ensure equity in education. District leaders, actively seeking ways to preserve local control and protect themselves from mandated consolidation, may have embraced that messaging to mean consistently high student outcomes could prevent consolidation.

To further investigate this hypothesis, I asked board members to describe their relationship with the AOE. I anticipated participants would describe antagonistic relationships, given the ongoing conflict over testing, consolidation, and school funding. Instead, board
members in all three districts stated that they had very little contact with the AOE, with the exception of reporting test scores. As summed up by a board member from Jackson:

We don’t have any interaction with the Agency of Education, whatsoever. I mean the old Secretary of Education came down and congratulated [the principal], I believe… on our improvements and test scores being improved more than anybody in the state… As far as I am concerned, they don’t really provide us with anything except for test scores. I mean they are the ones that... gather and consolidate all the test scores, that’s really all I can think of that we get from the Agency of Education.

If the only communication district leaders have with the State AOE is related to test scores, it follows that district leaders will perceive test scores to be of external value to the state.

Conclusion

Although NCLB represented a dramatic expansion of federal oversight into state and local educational politics, this article explains how local district leaders adapted reporting elements to match local, rather than federal needs. NCLB appeared to curtailed local control, but states’ modification and symbolic messaging buffered local districts from extensive oversight, and ultimately amplified local agency. In this study, districts still had significant flexibility in how they implemented the top-down mandates. Furthermore, the district leaders illuminated how federal and state governments can mandate implementation of specific reforms, but they can not mandate how district leaders will interpret those policies.

Instead, district leaders’ interpretation of the meaning and value of testing appears to be based on messaging from multiple sources. Vermont had a significant role in signaling the underlying purpose of standardized assessments, yet they share airtime with the federal government, which has its own policy agenda. While this case study does not identify how board members developed their beliefs about assessments, it appears they may have been influenced by multiple, overlapping policy messages, as well as their local community context.
Assessments are a policy tool much like any other, and as such, school leaders will use the tool to their own devices. The messaging and hortatory qualities of standardized assessments can be powerful, and also can be hard to control how they will be interpreted by implementers. In the case of these three case study districts, the tests were ultimately adopted by all three districts, yet they encapsulate variation in implementation and interpretation of the assessments.

NCLB was replaced in December, 2015 with the Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA). The new reauthorization shifts the locus of control of assessment and accountability mandates from the federal government back to states (U.S. DOE, 2016). As states develop greater flexibility in their accountability systems, it will be important to consider the legacy and context of what districts already understand and believe about testing. Starting over with local assessments is not the same as starting with a blank slate. The messaging of testing, even within a locally controlled system, may be the most enduring legacy of federal oversight in education.
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Chapter 5

Conclusion

American education was built on the historical precedence of local community control over school governance (Cohen, 1982; Tyack, 1974). It is a powerful foundation, that community members should have a voice in the nature and outcomes of their public schools. Its legacy is evident in many school reforms, from the charter school movement to parent trigger laws to the opt-out movement of Common Core testing. It is also evident in contentious school board elections, and dramatic superintendent turnover, as communities use the electoral process to express their dissatisfaction with their public schools (Alsbury, 2003, 2008; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1994; 2008). Parents and communities want democratic participation in local school governance.

Despite the strong desire to retain local control in public schools, educational reforms slowly eroded community participation, shifting power to educational experts such as superintendents and district officials (Callahan, 1962; Tyack, 1974). For the past century, researchers continue to assert community-elected school boards are ineffective, disengaged, combative, exclusionary, or otherwise undermining efficacious, democratic oversight of public schools (Land, 2002; McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2014; Trujillo, 2013; Wirt & Kirst, 1989; Zeigler, Jennings, & Peak, 1974). Wirt and Kirst conclude school boards are so disengaged from communities that “local control becomes less and less a real description… much may have been lost for the citizen’s role in democracy,” (1989, p. 174). From this perspective, effective, empowered community-elected school boards is an outdated myth; in truth, local communities have not had democratic control over their schools for a long time. In the words of one school board member from Jackson, “I think in the old days the boards used to do more, and I don’t think it is [that way] anymore. It’s just the people, the state, doesn’t trust the boards anymore.”
What then should we make of the locally controlled case study school boards in Vermont? The boards operate in an unusually fragmented, loosely-coupled system, governing tiny districts in small, rural towns. At best, the boards illustrate a quaint, outdated tradition of local control, at worst they are outliers that bear little resemblance to the majority of schools boards nationwide. What, if anything, can these Vermont school boards teach us about local control today?

The autonomous, empowered case study boards may be anomalous, but they provide a powerful contradiction to the current understanding of locally controlled school boards. Chapter 2 illustrates how boards can subvert state governance statutes to expand their control, and explains how local capacity influences the extent of board autonomy and their ensuing relationships with superintendents. Chapter 3 explains the mechanisms boards use to ensure democratic participation in the practice of local schools. Chapter 4 explains how boards implement and interpret federal accountability policies in ways that reflect local, rather than external values. Collectively, these chapters illustrate the work of locally controlled school boards.

Several themes emerge from the study as a whole, which provide implications for practitioners, policymakers, and future research. First, the study demonstrates that school boards can have more autonomy and control than currently described in the literature. In loosely-coupled educational systems typical of decentralized states, local school boards can retain, negotiate, or subvert governance structures to gain additional control and responsibilities. The extent of board autonomy is influenced by their community capacity to take on additional responsibilities, a finding with particular significant to rural and impoverished districts that may lack the resources necessary for greater self-governance. Board autonomy also varies by the authority enacted by other district administrators, such as the superintendent and central school boards. In regions where superintendents are highly empowered, boards likely will have more difficulty expanding their control over governance.
The finding that school boards can retain more autonomy than previously understood is also significant because of the size of the districts in the study. These school boards govern small, rural districts with very little political competition. In the field of district governance, an enduring theory school boards is community school board typology by Donald McCarty and Charles Ramsey (1971). The authors establish that school board characteristics align with the political structure of their communities, and superintendents adapt their leadership to match those characteristics (Björk & Lindle, 2001; McCarty & Ramsey, 1971). The typology identifies four major community-school board structures: dominated, factional, pluralistic, and inert (McCarty & Ramsey, 1971). Small, rural school boards are assigned to the inert category, where uncontested school board elections yields a provincial, sanctioning board that relies on a decision-making superintendent (McCarty & Ramsey, 1971; Peshkin, 1978; Spring, 1989). The findings from my research, while too small a sample to provide a major rebuttal, contradict the assertions of this popular school board typology. My study found small, rural school boards with limited political activity are not only empowered and autonomous, but can employ a range of school board-superintendent relationships far beyond the narrow parameters of McCarty and Ramsey’s descriptors. In fact, I believe McCarty and Ramsey’s community school board typology perpetuates an outdated, overly reductionist conception that small, rural school boards are not capable of autonomous, effective governance. The field of district governance would therefore be well-served by mixed methods research on school board-superintendent relations and community size. Of particular interest is the role of capacity on board-superintendent relationships, which would enable testing of my hypothesized typology.

A second theme of the research is that in locally controlled districts, school boards play a significant role in policy adaptation and co-construction. Literature in this field discusses the significance of “street level bureaucrats” adapting policies on the bottom level of systems
(Weatherley & Lipsky, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1990). However, this research has primarily addressed the work of professionals in the system: teachers, principals, central office staff, and superintendents (e.g., Coburn, 2001; Cohen, 1990; Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990; Spillane, Parise, & Sherer, 2011; Spillane & Thompson, 1997). While school boards may be included in some of the analysis, the research does not provide specific articulation of their role (Land, 2002). This study therefore contributes to research on local control and policy adaptation by introducing the significant role school boards play in policy co-construction. The case study boards adapted state statutes related to organizational governance, and attempted to subvert policies for hiring procedures, Title 1 funding, and standardized assessments. Aligning with findings on district officials, the underlying capacity of board members (e.g., beliefs, values, history, professional background, social networks, etc.) shaped how they interpreted and ultimately implemented policies. Even in scenarios when boards had limited autonomy, such as with federal accountability mandates, they still adapted the underlying messaging to align with local needs and values related to local control.

The finding that locally controlled school board members play a major role in policy adaptation and sensemaking has significant implications for policy and practice. The study explains boards support or resist policies based on their underlying capacity. Much like previous research has demonstrated with teachers and administrators (e.g., Coburn, 2001; Cohen, 1990; Spillane, 1996, 1998), fidelity of implementation is shaped by the underlying capacity and socio-cultural sense-making. As policymakers and researchers have known for years that implementation is shaped by practitioners’ capacity, extensive resources have been invested in researching and developing professional development to ensure practitioner-implementers have a deep, substantive understanding of reforms (e.g., Coburn, 2003; Spillane et al., 2002).

The theories of policy adaptation and co-construction necessitate professional development to ensure implementers understand policies, but school boards are generally not
been included in such trainings. As previously discussed, school boards’ significance has been widely dismissed (e.g., Land, 2002). Many states mandate professional development workshops for school boards (Mountford, 2004, 2008; Wirt & Kirst, 1989), which is further supported by special interest groups, such as School Board Associations. However, school board members are notoriously resistant to attending such trainings. The regional superintendent laughed out loud when I asked about trainings, continuing, “Why a volunteer board members be willing to take a day off to be trained for 8 hours?” Nonetheless, school boards are responsible for implementing educational reforms by endorsing them, funding necessary resources for implementation, ensuring access and time for needed professional development, and signaling to administrators their underlying significance. The case study school boards demonstrated with federal assessments how they can subvert implementation and messaging to their own purposes. If policymakers want to ensure reforms are implemented as intended, board members need to be included in professional development, training, and communication about the underlying purpose and function of reforms. Such efforts could be combined with workshops and development for district practitioners, or could be designed specifically for school board members. Regardless of the delivery, policymakers need to take specific steps to ensure school boards understand the reforms and programs they are being asked to support.

A third major theme to emerge across the articles is that locally controlled school boards enable democratic voice in school programming, practices, and policies. Significantly, community participation is not solely enacted through a competitive electoral process. In fact, the majority of board members in the study either ran unopposed, or were appointed to a vacant position. School board literature asserts a lack of competition in school board elections proves they are undemocratic and fail to ensure community representation in district governance (Wirt & Kirst, 1989; Zeigler, 1974; Zeigler et al., 1973). These findings, however, offer a different explanation: locally controlled school boards enable community access and participation in
governance more concrete mechanisms than elections. The school boards used the budget process as a mechanism to ensure community participation in school governance. Residents were given multiple opportunities to participate, from community meetings to open school board sessions to voting on the budget at the annual school district meeting. Boards described their responsibility be transparent with residents, effectively communicating their decisions. One board chair explained, “The closer you are to voters, I think the better decisions you make.”

The finding that school boards engender greater democratic, community participation in district governance merits future research. Developing community voice in school governance is an important topic in educational leadership and policy research. By situating this study in Vermont, it is possible that the legacy of participatory democracy engenders a wider access in school governance. Thus, it would be valuable to examine if these boards employ different democratic techniques because of their political climate, or are there other states with similar patterns of democratic participation in school board governance? Likewise, given that Vermont is over 95% white, it is important to examine how community diversity relates to access and voice in school board governance. These lines of research can expand and improve practices of democratic governance in boards to ensure all communities have access and voice in the governance of their public schools.

One final note from this study is the care and concern of these school boards in meeting the needs of their students, communities, schools, and taxpayers. Some literature suggests school boards are apathetic or disengaged (Land, 2002; Zeigler, 1974; Zeigler et al., 1973). These school boards cared deeply about their work, and all were proactively pursuing strategies and programs to improve their schools. Conway’s board, in their explanation of implementing an International Baccalaureate program, wrote:

We felt that we could not rest on our laurels but needed to continue to improve to sustain the levels we had achieved. If we did nothing then we would resemble the current state of
education for Vermont - so far behind the eight ball that they have to take drastic measures to become current after years of neglect.

Indeed, all three case study sites implemented programming over the course of the study intended to improve educational practices and outcomes for students. These programs included expanding early childhood education, implementing school lunch programs, increasing access to technology, proposing new funding systems for special education, and funding additional professional development for teachers. These school boards relied on their administrators to help them identify research-based plans that would be beneficial for their communities.

Despite the strong support boards received from their administrators, many expressed a desire for more information and guidance in making sound educational and financial decisions for their districts. Specifically, districts wanted Vermont’s Agency of Education (AOE) to conduct research that would inform boards’ practices and work in the state. One board member, expressing the views of many in the study, shared:

It’s sad because [the AOE] should be researching things. They should be telling us what works and what doesn’t work, and we don’t get that from them at all. They just tell us what they think we should do. I feel like the Agency of Education should be the hub of research. They should be doing what you’re doing right now.

In many ways, the boards appear to be highly independent, and unlikely to access external sources such as the AOE for support with their work. However, these board members clearly indicated that if the AOE conducts research on Vermont schools, not only will they likely use the information, it would likely build trust and support for the AOE. While these findings are specific to the districts in the study, it is logical that other locally controlled school boards nationwide would value research-based insights endorsed by their respective AOE to guide their work.

It is worth noting that educational research is expensive, and like many state AOEs are small with limited resources (Shelly, 2008, 2012; Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). One model for state-specific research is The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, a legislative agency that funds
research grants. The grants are not necessarily large, but are required to be conducted by a Pennsylvania State University or College, further grounding the research within the state. The research grants topics are selected based on legislative need. This model could be replicated in other states to ensure a reliable system of producing state-specific research. By partnering with colleges and universities, AOEs can expand their reach, supporting research that directly benefits local communities while strengthening ties to in-state institutions of higher education.

The future of research in Vermont specifically will need to address the major changes currently underway in the state. Act 46, the consolidation legislation, has already made waves in all of the case study districts. Ashfield has asked voters to approve increasing the school board to 5 members as they face the task of finding a similar K – 8 school district to partner with. Conway and Jackson briefly discussed joining together, possibly with a shared administrator, but are still discussing options. Administrative changes are underway in the districts as well; a new superintendent will start next year, along with one or more new principals in the case study districts. It is unclear how much will change in the districts, or how much control the boards will be able to retain with these major shifts underway. In spite of the changes ahead, over the past three years, these small, rural communities in Vermont provided a powerful illustration of what local control can look like in its best form. These districts are the model of what education was always intended to be in America: community-based democratic governance of public schools.
References


Appendix A

Positionality

My positionality as a researcher is a central element of this study. I first became interested in the intersection of local control and rural communities when I taught elementary school on the eastern edge of the Navajo Reservation in New Mexico. At the time, I was struck by how little voice the local community had in our school, despite our role as one of the few institutions in an isolated, remote region. I carried this question to my graduate studies at Smith College, where I researched place-based education enacted by Maine’s island schools. I then took a position as a teaching and research fellow with the Island Institute, spending fifteen months living on Cliff Island, Maine, a very small island community with only 75 year-round residents. Living on Cliff Island dissuaded me of the perception that small, rural communities have homogeneous values, as the residents were roiled with conflict over everything from the color of the school to the management of the deer population.

After my position with the Island Institute, I went on to teach at several different types of schools on the east coast, from a progressive private school to a low income public school to a laboratory school at Smith College. These experiences provided me with first-hand understanding of the limited variability of schooling, in that some elements such as pedagogical practices can vary significantly within and across schools, while other elements like organizational governance do not. I became increasingly interested in who has a voice in educational systems, and how different actors can influence educational practices. These fundamental questions led me to a doctoral program, first at the University of Pennsylvania, and then at Pennsylvania State University, where I transferred to work with Dr. Kai Schafft.
My research agenda was shaped by my previous experiences teaching and living in rural regions of the country. I came into graduate school with firsthand knowledge of the variability of public education, the importance of rural schools to their communities, and a sense that community participation in education was important, yet hard to guarantee. Critically examining these foundational beliefs was therefore a central aspect of my dissertation process.

Positionality not only shapes my underlying beliefs, but how I engage with participants in my study. I chose to conduct the research in Vermont for a variety of reasons, including the fit with my topic, accessibility, and personal interest in the region. I had not previously lived in Vermont, however. Like many regions of the country, where you are from is important to New Englanders. I am from Maine, have family in New Hampshire, and previously lived in both Massachusetts and Rhode Island. By Vermont standards, I am “from away.” Nonetheless, I relied on my identity as a New Engander started conversations with reticent participants. More than one conversation began with a discussion of where I was from, and how my family connected to the relatives of the interviewees. I also used my background as a former teacher to build rapport with educators, many of whom graciously allowed me to observe in their classrooms. In the first several years of the study, I was mindful of minimizing my footprint in sites, and primarily engaged as a non-participant.

My positionality dramatically changed during the winter of 2015. At the time, Vermont’s legislature was in the second year of debating district consolidation. Having grown increasingly frustrated by the noticeable absence of discourse on the role or value of rural schools, my colleague, Ian Burfoot-Rochford and I co-authored a policy brief on the topic in 2015. I was aware the policy brief was a potentially controversial document, and therefore shared it with key participants at each site prior to publishing it with the Center for Rural Education and Communities. One site strongly agreed with the brief, and asked if they could present our brief to the governor along with a study they had conducted, to which my co-author and I readily agreed.
Our policy brief generated significant controversy in Vermont politics. We testified before the House Committee on Education, the Senate Committee on Education, and had a private audience with the Speaker of the House. Meanwhile, Vermont’s Agency of Education published two separate rebuttals of our brief. My positionality as an anonymous, non-controversial graduate student was dramatically changed by the policy brief.

The initial effects of my role in the brief appeared to be negative. One superintendent, whom I had contacted about potentially participating in the study, decided not to participate due to my involvement with the brief. However, when I next returned to Vermont for fieldwork, I discovered strong support for my brief. The positive response changed my relationship with participants, significantly increasing access. Publishing my brief demonstrated to board members my commitment to the region, and my trustworthiness as a scholar. In the following months, the openness of board members enabled me to develop a much more nuanced understanding of district governance and superintendent-board relations. Meanwhile, the superintendent disagreed with my brief, but used it as an opportunity to educate me on the complexities of a multi-district superintendency. These findings have been turned into a separate study, but also provided a strong foundation for my research within this study. Active participation in a contentious policy debate is generally unwise during the data collection stage. However, this turned out to be a crucial experience that ultimately expanded my access and understanding of the case study sites.

There is one final point to raise related to my positionality and the policy brief. I wrote the brief as an advocate of rural schools and an opponent of consolidation. Despite my personal opposition to the stance adopted by Vermont’s AOE and governor, I took their critiques seriously from a scholarly perspective. I evaluated the AOE’s rebuttals of our work to assess where we could have improved our work. This, in turn, prompted a deeper reflection on the fundamental beliefs I held about rural schools and their communities. I spoke with esteemed rural educational scholars about some of these emerging questions about rural education research, and I went back
to the literature to critically re-examine some of the foundational studies we employed in the brief. Ultimately, this reflection led to the shift in my dissertation from a rural research study to an evaluation of local control, as I realized some of my inherent beliefs about rural education were not supported by research. Today, I believe the issues of educational governance in Vermont are far more complex than I initially understood, and I am grateful to the communities who helped me develop a deeper understanding of what is actually happening on the ground.
Appendix B

Site Access

In 2010, during my first semester as a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania, I conducted a qualitative pilot study exploring the characteristics of rural Vermont elementary schools. I conducted my study in three schools, two in the south, and one in the northeast region of the state. I gained access to these schools by emailing the principals directly, identifying my research topic, and requesting permission to visit. The following semester, I created a new research plan and refocused my study to a single supervisory union (akin to a regional school district) that included two of the original pilot study sites. After I secured IRB approval from the University of Pennsylvania, I worked with two of the pilot study participants – one principal and the regional superintendent – to recruit additional sites. I introduced myself and my research to principals, teachers, staff, and school board members at each potential site, answered questions, and secured permission to conduct my research at three schools in the supervisory union.

In 2014, I transferred to the Pennsylvania State University, and promptly secured IRB approval for both my existing data collected in the previous years, as well as my future dissertation research. I also recruited a fourth site in the same supervisory union, and collected data at four sites through August, 2015. In the initial stages of analysis, I realized one site was too small to maintain confidentiality of participants, and reluctantly decided to exclude it from the analysis. The final analysis includes data from three sites, including one of the original pilot study school districts.
Appendix C

Rural Research

My research was conducted in rural Vermont. There is no single definition of “rural” in educational research (Brown & Schafft, 2010; Coladarci, 2007), thus there are many ways to quantify this statement. Vermont has the second largest population of residents living in rural regions in the country (U.S. Census, 2010). Nearly 73% of Vermont’s schools are located in rural areas, a percentage only exceeded by Montana and South Dakota (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). As I originally designed my study to have a rural focus, I recruited sites for the pilot study based on their rurality using measures of geographic and population data (Brown & Schafft, 2010). Sites were first identified using the U.S. Census definition of rural areas: non-metro communities with a population equal to or less than 2,500 people. To further refine rural identifications, I used the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) urban-centric locale classification codes for school districts and their encompassing communities. All of the schools in the case study are classified as either “rural, distant” or “rural, remote” using NCES’s 2012 Common Core of Data. Rural, distant is “census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster,” (NCES, 2012). Rural, remote is “more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster,” (NCES, 2012). Employing both US Census and NCES classifications ensured school sites are rural under typical geographic and demographic measures.

Situating research in a rural area is not enough, however, to characterize it as a “rural study.” In a seminal essay by Theodore Coladarcci, the former editor of The Journal for Research on Rural Education, he explained:
researchers are not entitled to offer conclusions about rural education just because their research takes place in (or draws on data from) a rural school, community, or region. Rather, researchers must establish warrants, or compelling justifications, for the rural-related conclusions they provide. Far too often, it remains unclear whether the researcher has uncovered a rural phenomenon or, instead, a phenomenon that is observed incidentally in a rural setting, (2007, p. 3).

I began the study with the intent of researching rural school boards as a means to understand how they were inherently different from those in suburban and urban regions. As the study progressed, I came to realize the phenomenon I was actually investigating was local control as enacted by small, community-elected school boards. Local control is not unique to rural communities. Rather, it is a form of organizational governance that persists in states as diverse as Texas, Michigan, Maine, and Montana (ECS, 2015; Shelly, 2012). Some theorize that local control is more common in rural towns, as they tend to be smaller and geographically remote, thereby necessitating a local form of governance (Boyd, 1978; Lutz & Iannaccone, 2008; Shelly, 2008, 2012). Nonetheless, my research on the work of locally controlled school boards does not solely speak to rural communities. In fact, I suspect what I observed in Vermont would also be evident in neighborhood-specific school boards in urban areas, because my study examines democratic, community-based educational governance. Therefore, this is a study situated in a rural area, but is not inherently rural research.
Appendix D

Sample Interview Protocols: Principal, School Board Members, Superintendent, Teachers

Interview Protocol for Principals – Interview 1

Introduction: Thank you very much for meeting with me today. I am researching rural schools in Vermont for my dissertation at Penn State University. My goal today is to learn more about your school and the community it serves. This interview should take about an hour.

Consent Form: I am responsible to an Institutional Review Board to conduct ethical research. This means I will not identify you, or provide identifying details such as the school where you work, in any research that I share with others. This form outlines your rights and my responsibilities to protect your confidentiality in my research. Please read this over and sign it if you agree to participate. One copy is for your records. Do you have any questions about the form or my research?

Tape Recording: I like to use a tape recorder for my note-taking purposes so I can engage more fully in our conversation. Are you comfortable with tape recording this conversation?

Introduction
  1. How long have you been principal at this school?
  2. What did you do prior to becoming principal?

Characteristics of school
  3. How would you describe your school to someone who has never been here?
  4. How is your school similar to other schools in the area?
  5. What makes your school different from other schools in the area?

Community
  6. How would you describe the surrounding community?
     a. Probe: Do you live nearby? How long have you lived in the area?
  7. What role does the school play in the local community?
     a. Probe: Does the community use the school building or grounds for events? What kind of events are held here?
  8. In what ways can parents and community members participate in school activities?
     a. Probe: Are there other opportunities for community members to support the school?
     b. Probe: In your opinion, why do people participate/not participate in school activities?
  9. Do you have any partnerships with nearby community businesses or organizations?
     a. Probe (if yes): Can you tell me more about the purpose of the partnership?
 10. Communities often have a vision of the role their local school should play in the community.
  11. In your opinion as the school principal, what role does the community envision for this school?
12. Are there general goals or concerns the community is addressing this year? (not educational)

Organization – school size, teachers, & autonomy

13. Can you tell me about the rationale behind classroom organization, as in: how and why are teachers and grades assigned in a given year?
14. Do teachers participate in committees or school events other than teaching?
   a. Probe (if yes): What kinds of activities do teachers participate in here?
15. How does teacher evaluation work at the school?
   a. Probe: What role does the superintendent play? The school board?

Closing

16. What are you most proud of accomplishing recently?
   a. Probe: Can you tell me more about how this came about?
17. What are the key issues your school is facing this year?
   a. Probe: What is your plan to address these issues?
18. Is there anything else that you would like to share, either that we touched on and you would like to discuss in depth, or that we didn't talk about?
19. Are there other people you would recommend I contact to better understand your school or community?

Thank you very much for your time.

Interview with School Board Members - Interview 2

Introduction: Thank you very much for meeting with me again. As we previously discussed, I am researching rural schools in Vermont for my dissertation at Penn State University, and I want to understand your work as a school board. Today’s discussion will cover background on the role of the school board, as well as current educational issues in Vermont. With your permission, I will be recording our conversation today. As a reminder, the recording and anything you say is confidential. Do you have any additional questions before we begin?

1. Last time we discussed why you decided to join the school board. This time I am wondering how you joined the board – did anyone encourage you to run? Did you run unopposed?
2. What is the role of the school board within the SU?
   2a. What responsibilities does the school board have?
   2b. What responsibilities belong to the superintendent?
   2c. In your opinion, what board responsibilities are most important?
   2d. Are there any responsibilities you wish the board had, but does not?
3. How would you describe the relationship between the board and the SU over the past ten years?
   3a. How would you describe the relationship between the SB & Montpellier? (AOE)
   3b. How would you describe the relationship between the SB & the town?
4. Can you tell me how you get a sense of what the community wants from the board and the school at any given time?

Next I would like to ask you questions about recent state policies.
4. Consolidation is a controversial issue right now. As a school board member, what are your thoughts about the proposed legislation?
   If support: What will the benefits of consolidation for your community & school?
   If oppose: What challenges does consolidation cause for your community & school?
5. What has been the board’s perspective on school funding and Act 60/68?
6. Common Core State Standards, Next Gen Science Standards, and S-Bac testing are all major changes for Vermont’s schools. What involvement does the board have with implementing these policies?
   6a. Does the board have a position on these standards & assessments?
   6b. Is there anything you wish you knew about these new tests?
7. Ten years from now, where do you envision your school and community will be? Why?
8. Is there anything else that you would like to share, either that we touched on and you would like to discuss in depth, or that we didn't talk about?

Thank you very much

Interview Protocol for Superintendents – Interview 1

Introduction: Thank you very much for meeting with me today. I am researching rural schools in Vermont for my dissertation at Penn State University. My goal today is to learn more about your supervisory union and the work you do as superintendent. This interview should take about 1 hour.

Consent Form: I am responsible to an Institutional Review Board to conduct ethical research. This means I will not identify you, or provide identifying details such as the school where you work, in any research that I share with others. This form outlines your rights and my responsibilities to protect your confidentiality in my research. Please read this over and sign it if you agree to participate. One copy is for your records. Do you have any questions about the form or my research?

Tape Recording: I like to use a tape recorder for my note-taking purposes so I can engage more fully in our conversation. Are you comfortable with tape recording this conversation?

Introduction
1. How long have you been superintendent here?
2. What did you do prior to becoming superintendent?
Characteristics of SU
3. To begin, can you give me an overview of your SU?
   a. What towns are in the SU?
   b. What school boards are in the SU? Are there any joint school boards?
   c. What schools do you oversee?
4. How would you describe the overall SU to someone who has never been here before?
5. How is this SU similar to others in the area?
6. What makes this SU different from others in the area?
Community
7. Next, I would like to get your insights on the schools in your SU.
8. SU: Tell me about (Conway, Ashfield, Jackson) school. How would you describe it?
   a. How is (Conway, Ashfield, Jackson) school different from other schools in the area?
   b. What are your goals for (Conway, Ashfield, Jackson) schools?
   c. What is (Conway, Ashfield, Jackson’s) community like?
   d. How would you describe (Conway, Ashfield, Jackson’s) school board?
   e. Is there anything else helpful to know about (Conway, Ashfield, Jackson)?

Closing
9. What are you most proud of accomplishing in your role as superintendent?
   a. Probe: Can you tell me more about how this came about?

10. What are the key issues your SU is facing this year?
    a. Probe: What is your plan to address these issues?

11. Is there anything else that you would like to share, either that we touched on and you would like to discuss in depth, or that we didn’t talk about?

12. Are there other people you would recommend I contact to better understand the SU?

Thank you very much for your time.

Interview Protocol for Teachers – Interview 2

Introduction: Thank you very much for meeting with me again today. As we discussed during my last visit, I am researching rural schools in Vermont for my dissertation at Penn State University. My purpose for speaking to you today is to learn more about your experiences with policies at the school. This interview will take no more than 45 minutes. As a reminder, everything you say is confidential.

Tape Recording: I like to use a tape recorder for my note-taking purposes so I can engage more fully in our conversation. Are you comfortable with tape recording this conversation?

Introduction:
1. Last time we talked, you told me about your classroom this year. What are you working on right now?

Politics - Impact of educational policies:
2. Common Core Standards are gaining a lot of attention. How have the standards influenced your work this year?
   a. Probe: How closely are you expected to follow the standards?
   b. Probe: What is the principal’s view on the CC? The school board?
   c. Probe: How are parents and the community responding to the new standards?

3. School-specific questions: In your town, the board recently approved (school-specific topics: IB program, special education consolidation, reducing principal’s schedule). How is that going?
   a. Probe: What was the rationale for making the change?
   b. Probe: What kinds of changes do you expect it will bring?

4. Are there other policies, like NCLB, Act 68, or Response to Intervention, that influence your work as a teacher here?
   a. Probe: How do they influence your work? Can you give me an example?
School Boards:
5. How would you describe the current school board?
6. What role does the school board play in your work over the course of a year? Day to day?
7. What issues is the school board currently discussing?
   a. Probe: why are these important?
   b. Probe: what do you expect the outcome will be?
8. Are there any issues you wish the school board would address? Why?
9. Are there any issues you wish the school board wouldn’t address? Why?
10. In some towns, the school board doesn’t necessarily reflect the views of the community. How closely do you think this school board’s decisions reflects the views of the community as a whole?
    a. Probe: can you give me an example?

Closing:
11. What do you find most rewarding about your school?
12. If you could change two things about your school, what would they be, and why?
13. Is there anything else that you would like to share, either that we touched on and you would like to discuss in depth, or that we didn't talk about?

Thank you very much for your time.
Appendix E
Coding and Analysis Examples

Chapter 2: Excerpt from State Statute Role Allocation Matrix

Chapter 3: Excerpt from Codebook

**Beliefs & Values**
Beliefs, values, vision of specific aspects of education. These can be explicit, such as from interviews or mission statements, or they can be implicit, such as from professional development goals. May include outcomes of education (what students and communities GET), or beliefs about the structure of education (should include flexibility or autonomy).

**Education Beliefs: Community**
Beliefs, goals, values, and otherwise defined role of education related to the community. May include goals or outcomes (ex: lowers taxes in town), use of school (ex: space for community to gather), or overarching values specific to the community (ex: school fosters love of arts & crafts).

**Education Beliefs: Schools**
Beliefs, goals, values of education ascribed to a specific school, such as a school philosophy or approach that extends beyond curriculum or instruction.

**Education Beliefs: Students**
Beliefs, goals, values of education related specifically to students, both in the local school and in middle/high school.

**Education Beliefs: Universal**
References goals of education that are not specific to role in community or role with students. May be expressed globally, ex: the purpose of education is to create a stable society.

**Nested under Education Beliefs: Students**

**Academic performance**
Student outcomes related to academic excellence, including grades & standardized test scores. Includes critical thinking references.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavior &amp; work habits</td>
<td>Promoting good work habits and self-discipline, including individual student behavior, discipline, organization, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Readiness</td>
<td>Promoting occupational or vocational skills, including ability for students to be able to get jobs after the finish high school or postsecondary education. Preparing students for a “changing world”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Readiness</td>
<td>Preparing students for postsecondary education, including college &amp; trade schools. Also includes middle &amp; high school readiness for elementary schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community &amp; Collaboration</td>
<td>Promoting human relations skills, students can interact well in groups &amp; teams. Collaboration, cooperation, developing broader school community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Promoting multicultural awareness or understanding of diverse cultures, people, and countries. Can be specific countries or languages (Spanish) or can be general reference (global education).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy skills</td>
<td>Student outcomes related specifically to building basic literacy skills (reading, math, writing, speaking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral values</td>
<td>Promoting specific moral values generally (lying, stealing, bullying) or aligned with political perspectives (support LGBT issues, oppose abortion or illegal immigration).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal growth</td>
<td>Promoting personal growth (self-esteem, self-knowledge, etc.). Includes kids’ positive attitudes towards attending school, desire to learn, interest in knowledge. Creativity. Life long learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Fostering religious or spiritual development, including understanding of diverse religions. Does not include yoga, but does include meditation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nesting under Beliefs &amp; Values generally</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizenship</td>
<td>Citizenship values around education &amp; the community. May include beliefs about the role of education in shaping citizenship &amp; democracy (discussing the role of town meetings in education), using schools to create future citizens OR specific decisions by the school board related to citizenship (implementing a civics program, mandating pledge of allegiance).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>Economic values around education and the community. May include beliefs about school spending (too much/too little) OR economic role of education (generate growth for local region) OR economic decisions by school board (implementing PD to reduce costs). Does NOT reference students’ economic outcomes (those go under post K-12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOS</td>
<td>Beliefs that are not otherwise specified here. Includes consolidation, school choice, local control. For students, includes values about environment &amp; sustainability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Facilities Value</td>
<td>Use of school facilities, including building, grounds, and vehicles. Can be abstract, such as the fear of consolidation (although that is usually listed under NOS) or specific (use school as community center)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Population</td>
<td>Specific goals or beliefs about maintaining or growing student population. Does NOT include general references to student population in school, or concern that population is decreasing. Needs to be a belief that population is important to education in school/community/etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Integration, understanding, use of technology in education. Can include student use &amp; knowledge of technology OR implementation of technology in schools. USE, not beliefs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 4: Coding Scheme for State-Level Messaging

Materials are district-specific: AOE or State Board of Education memos to superintendents and principals; public minutes from AOE or legislature presentations to districts; newspaper articles from AOE or legislature presentations to districts.

- Code for Equity Discourse if referencing inequality or differences between groups
- Code for Opposition to Federalism if referencing explicit disagreement or opposition to national/federal policies, interpretation of policies, etc.

Materials are not district-specific: AOE or State Board of Education press releases, memos for parents or general public, or Op-Eds.

- Code for Equity Discourse if referencing inequality or differences between groups
- Code for Opposition to Federalism if referencing explicit disagreement or opposition to national/federal policies, interpretation of policies, etc.

Excerpt of Equity Discourse Coding: District versus General Documents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equity Discourse to Districts: District Meetings &amp; Memos for Administrators</th>
<th>Equity Discourse to State: Newspaper articles, press releases, state memos, Op-Eds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internals\AOE\RH_Memo to Supts Principals VSBA_SBAE Test_2_17_15 - § 1 reference coded [7.27% Coverage]</td>
<td>Internals\AOE\EDU-SBE_AssmntAcct_Adpted081914 - § 4 references coded [9.49% Coverage]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, I ask you to not let the inappropriate uses to which tests are put under NCLB undermine what value there is in tests, when used appropriately. Unlike previous tests, this is a computer adaptive test which adjusts the difficulty of questions in response to the answers students provide. This allows for more accurate information about what each child can and cannot yet do; this information will help teachers to better respond to their students’ needs. Without tests, we would not know for example, that one of our highest priorities as a state needs to be improving the learning of our boys who are growing up in poverty. We would not know that while the performance of our most affluent students outstrips the nation and is improving every year, we have founeder in our efforts to improve the learning of students with disabilities. Let’s work together to use these tests to improve, not shame, our schools and systems. We know we have work to do to improve, and used wisely, tests can be one of a series of tools that help us target our efforts.

What standardized tests can do that teacher developed tests cannot do is give us reliable, comparative data. We can use test scores to tell whether we are doing better over time. Of particular note, standardized tests help monitor how well we serve students with different life circumstances and challenges. When used appropriately, standardized tests are a sound and objective way to evaluate student progress.
Excerpt of Opposition to Federalism Coding: District versus General Documents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opposition to Federalism Discourse to Districts</th>
<th>Opposition to Federalism Discourse to State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internals\AOE\RH_Memo to Supts Principals_Keeping Perspective SBAC_3_23_2015 - § 2 references coded [ 22.18% Coverage]</td>
<td>Internals\AOE\EDU-Letter_to_parents_and_caregivers_AOE_8_8_14 - § 6 references coded [ 25.75% Coverage]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tests can be powerful tools for establishing trends, evaluating our effectiveness with different subgroups, and auditing other local assessment tools. However, as the paper explains, there are very good empirical reasons to be cautious about making conclusions and consequential decisions based on these scores, particularly during a transition. My hope is that this paper will help you work in a thoughtful way with your communities as we make this transition.</td>
<td>Vermont has a proud and distinguished educational history, but we know we can always do better. We are committed to supporting our schools as they find more effective and more engaging ways to improve the skills and knowledge of our children. As we have done before, we intend to draw on the tremendous professional capability of teachers across the state as we work to continuously improve our schools. Our strength has always been our ingenuity and persistence. In spite of federal policies that poorly fit the unique nature of Vermont, let's continue to work together to build great schools that prepare our children to be productive citizens and contributors to our society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Let's not let the stress and high stakes associated with testing in other states undermine and distort our strong Vermont commitment to ensuring that all students have rich, broad, high-quality opportunities to learn.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
VITA

Daniella Hall

Education:
Ph.D. in Educational Leadership, The Pennsylvania State University, 2016
B.A. in Studio Art, Wellesley College, 2000

Professional Experience:
University Graduate Fellow, The Pennsylvania State University, 2014 – 2016
Supervising Teacher, Smith College Campus School, 2009 – 2012
Classroom Teacher, Woodside School of Topsham, ME, 2005 – 2009
Lead Teacher, The School in Rose Valley, PA, 2004 - 2005
Island Institute Fellow, The Island Institute, 2003 – 2004
Teaching Fellow, Smith College, 2002 – 2003
Classroom Teacher, Smith Lake Elementary School, NM, 2001 – 2002

Selected Publications:

Academic Presentations:
Seventeen refereed national and international conference presentations including annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association, the University Council on Education Administration, the Cambridge Student Voice Conference, and the Rural Sociology Society.

Professional Service:
Reviewer for The Journal of Rural Education Research and Perspectives on Urban Education
Founder, Dissertation Writing Network, The Pennsylvania State University
Member, Committee on Open Expression, University of Pennsylvania