

# The eJournal of Education Policy

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An international refereed journal providing  
perspectives on current policy issues facing  
K-12 and higher education



# The eJournal of Education Policy

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## Contents

<b>Charter School Entry, Teacher Freedom, and Student Performance</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Mavuto Kalulu, Morgan Burke, and Thomas Snyder</i>	
<b>Using existing data to predict reading achievement among English language learners in the United States</b>	<b>16</b>
<i>John L. Adams, Lisa L. Persinger, Kathy J. Bohan, and Robert A. Horn</i>	
<b>An Ethical Perspective on Increasing LGBTQIA+ Inclusivity in Education</b>	<b>32</b>
<i>Heidi C. Kuehn</i>	
<b>Could more holistic policy addressing classroom discipline help mitigate teacher attrition?</b>	<b>41</b>
<i>Gabriela Ramos and Thomas Hughes</i>	
<b>Is innovation outpacing insight: Why schools need policy to address communication practices with parents</b>	<b>59</b>
<i>Stacey Berklan and Thomas Hughes</i>	
<b>Book Reviews</b>	
<b>Staehr Fenner, D., &amp; Snyder, S. (2017). Unlocking English learners' potential: Strategies for making content accessible. Corwin.</b>	<b>77</b>
<i>Reviewed by Lauryn Kincheloe</i>	
<b>Khalifa, M. (2018). Culturally responsive school leadership. Harvard Education Press.</b>	<b>80</b>
<i>Reviewed by Benedict Zele</i>	

## Charter School Entry, Teacher Freedom, and Student Performance

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### Abstract

Charter schools are the most popular alternative to traditional public schooling in the United States. The majority of research indicates positive effects of charter schools on student performance in traditional public schools. Most studies use the share of charter school students enrolled as a measure of the competitive pressure of charter schools. We contend that competitive pressure on traditional public schools also comes from an alternative teaching environment provided by charter schools. A teacher may be attracted to the freedom that a charter school provides, which can empower them to be innovative. These changes can spill over to traditional public schools. We empirically examine the impact this choice for teachers has on student performance in traditional public schools. We measure student performance by the percentage of 8<sup>th</sup>-grade students that attain proficiency level and above on National Assessment of Educational Progress exams. Our results indicate a positive relationship between teacher freedom in charter schools and the performance of traditional public school students.

*Keywords:* Charter Schools, Charter School Laws, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), School Choice

## **Introduction**

Charter schools provide an alternative to traditional public schooling in the United States. Nobel Prize Laureate Milton Friedman argued that competition in K – 12 education is key to improving education outcomes (Friedman & Friedman, 1990). Competition can encourage teachers in both traditional public schools and charter schools to improve their delivery of service, otherwise they may lose students. Evidence on the competitive effect of charter schools on student performance is, however, mixed. The results range from a positive (Booker, Gilpatric, Gronberg, & Jansen, 2008) to a negative effect (Bifulco & Ladd, 2005). Most of the studies measure charter school competition using percentage of charter school enrollment. We expect that charter enrollment alone does not fully capture the competitive pressure traditional public schools face from charter school entry. Teachers are also choosing where to teach, and charter schools offer an alternative. One factor that teachers may consider is the additional freedom they have in charter schools, which can empower them to be innovative. By offering an alternative place of employment, charter schools put pressure on traditional public schools to retain and attract quality teachers. Does this employment competition affect student outcomes?

The main contribution of this paper is to examine the relationship between the differing state laws concerning teacher freedom in charter schools and the educational outcomes in traditional public schools. In theory, a traditional public school may react to charter-school competition by creating a better workplace for their teachers, and this may increase their effectiveness on student outcomes. Similar to competition in business, where a new nearby restaurant can force the old restaurant to improve its facilities, worker training, and ultimately improve customer service. We utilize an assessment of states' charter school laws by the Center for Education Reform to determine whether or not a state grants charter school teachers freedom to make decisions apart from the traditional public schools. Currently, forty-four states have charter schools laws. We examine the effect for school years 2008 – 2009, 2010 – 2011, 2012 – 2013, and 2014 – 2015. The school years are selected because our outcome variable, the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) exams, are conducted every other year.

Our results reveal that teacher freedom explains some of the states' differences in the percentage of students that attain proficiency level or above in both math and reading. The share of students enrolled in charter schools has a positive and significant effect on students' performance when we account for endogeneity.

The next section discusses the literature review. We then discuss the data, the empirical analysis and results, and conclude with some policy recommendations.

## **Literature Review**

Studies on the effects of charter schools on traditional public school performance have yielded mostly positive, but mixed results. The positive effects range from modest to strong. Bohte (2004) examines the effects of charter schools on Texas public schools' performance using school-district data from 1996 to 2002. His study suggests modest overall performance gains for traditional public school students. Bohte observes a larger positive effect on low-income students enrolled in traditional public schools. A later study on Texas public schools by Booker et al. (2008) observed larger positive effects on overall performance from 1993 to 2003. They also show that the benefits mainly accrue to the disadvantaged groups and low-achieving schools.

Buddin and Zimmer (2005) discovered modest positive results in overall performance for students in California. Yusuke Jinnai (2014) examined the effects of introducing charter schools on traditional public schools through direct and indirect impacts of grade ranges by exploiting the fact that charter schools grade ranges expanded over time. Direct impacts refer to overlapping grade ranges, and indirect impacts refer to non-overlapping grade ranges. Using North Carolina student-level panel data, Jinnai demonstrated overall positive effects of introducing charter schools. He argues that 85% of the previous studies underestimated the effects of introducing charter schools by not addressing direct and indirect impacts. Cordes (2016) discovered a similar result when examining the spillover effect of charter schools on public schools in New York City. She revealed that charter schools significantly increase overall performance in math and English language.

While Cordes (2016) observed significant positive effects for both math and English language in New York City, other studies show mixed results. An earlier study in New York City by Winters (2011) revealed a moderate positive effect of charter school penetration in New York City in reading but not in math. Contrary to Winters, Sass (2006) found a moderate increases in math scores but no significant effect on reading in North Carolina. Bifulco and Ladd (2005) discovered an insignificant effect of charter school competition on performance in North Carolina traditional public schools. However, they point out that this may be due to the limited amount of competition for the traditional public schools. Imberman (2011) concluded that charter school penetration reduces traditional public school performance in math and reading in elementary students.

Several possible reasons can explain the mixed results of the effect of charter school competition on public school performance. First, the studies use different estimation techniques. For example, both Bohte (2004) and Booker et al. (2008) study charter school impact on Texas public schools but find slightly different results, albeit both finding positive effects of charter schools. Aside from using slightly different samples, Bohte uses time-series analysis while Booker et al. (2008) uses panel-data analysis. Second, the researchers are examining outcomes in different states. The competitive effect of charter schools may be state specific and hence the different results in different states. Third, the studies use different measures of students' performance. We have seen that some studies find a significant effect in one measure but not in the other (Sass, 2006 & Winters, 2011). Fourth, the measures of charter school competition differs across studies.

Different measures of competition can lead to different estimates of charter school impact. Some studies measure charter competition by the distance between traditional public school and the nearest charter school (Cordes, 2016), while others measure charter school competition by the percentage of students who left traditional public schools to enroll in charter schools (Winters, 2011). Our study measures competition by not only looking at the charter school enrollment, but also looking at an aspect of the charter school laws that allow charter schools to be a true alternative to traditional public schools – the freedom of teachers to operate differently from a traditional public school. The traditional public school may improve their conditions for teachers to keep them from going to a charter school, and those improvements may create better outcomes for students.

## Data

Our data is a state-level panel for school years 2008-2009, 2010-2011, 2012-2013, and 2014-2015. We collected our data from the National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau, and the Center for Education Reform (Zgainer & Kerwin, 2015). Table 1 provides the summary statistics for all the variables used in the analysis.

Table 1: Summary Statistics

	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
Math (%)	33.604	7.761	11.000	55.000
Reading (%)	32.839	6.729	14.000	48.000
Share of charter students (%)	4.648	6.408	0.000	42.690
Teacher freedom	0.745	0.437	0.000	1.000
Limited English proficiency (%)	6.732	4.116	1.000	24.000
Free & reduced price lunch (%)	47.148	11.043	20.000	92.000
Household income	53823.260	8891.984	36600.000	74551.000
Per pupil expenditure	6882.215	2168.640	4070.000	14570.000
Pupil teacher ratio	15.567	2.716	11.700	23.700
Minority (%)	0.392	0.195	0.060	0.940

N=149

Our outcome variable is student performance. We measure student performance using the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) assessments. NAEP presents assessment results as the average score and the percentage of students that attain a certain achievement level. We use the later measure in our analysis for simplicity and clarity. NAEP reports the percentage of students performing at or above three achievement levels, namely basic, proficient and advanced. We use the percentage of students that achieve at or above proficient level. NAEP exams have an advantage over other measures of performance such as ACT and SAT because the same tests are administered to a representative sample of students across states unlike ACT and SAT which may suffer from a self-selection problem. NAEP exams are administered in different subjects to students in grades 4, 8, and 12. We focus on 8<sup>th</sup>-grade reading and math exams, since 4<sup>th</sup> grade may be a little early to test the competitive effects and 12<sup>th</sup> grade doesn't have as much charter competition. Researchers such as Winters (2011) and Sass (2006) have shown that the impact of charter schools is subject specific.

Our main independent variables of interest are the share of charter students and teacher freedom. Our analysis is restricted to 42 states and the District of Columbia because as of 2015 eight states did not have charter schools. Previous research has used the share of charter students as a measure of competitive pressure on traditional public schools. The expectation is that the higher the percentage, the higher the competition which should in turn cause traditional public schools to improve for fear of losing students. Our main contribution is to recognize that part of the competitive pressure that traditional public schools face arise from the differences in the freedoms that charter school teachers have compared to traditional public schools. Another less trivial contribution is the instruments that we use to deal with endogeneity.

The data on teacher freedom are obtained from the Center for Education Reform (Zgainer & Kerwin, 2015). Teacher freedom takes the value of 1 if charters are their own legal entity and may work independently of district contract work rules and they have the option to participate in the state's retirement system, and 0 if not. Table 1 shows that 75 percent of states grant charter teachers' freedom.

Many other factors affect student outcomes. To isolate the competitive effect of charter schools on students' performance, we control for several of those factors. Our analysis controls for demographic variables, including the percentage of minority students, those on free-and-reduced lunch, and those students with limited English proficiency. The rationale for including these variables is that states with a higher percentage of disadvantaged students tend to perform worse than those that do not. We also control for classroom inputs such as student-teacher ratio and per-pupil expenditure. The expectation is that students tend to perform worse in larger classes because they get less attention than with smaller classes. We use household income to control for the socio-economic differences across the states.

## **Empirical Analysis and Results**

### **Regression Analysis**

Based on the nature of our data, there are three issues that have to be addressed to ensure the reliability of the estimates. First, the values of our dependent variable are restricted between 0 and 1. Thus, the usual linear regressions such as OLS are not appropriate for estimating regression parameters. Papke and Wooldridge (1996) argue that using OLS for such data cannot guarantee the estimates will lie within the unit interval. They instead propose quasi-likelihood estimation (QMLE) methods. The results of our estimations are shown in Table 2. In columns 1 and 3 we provide the coefficient estimates of using pooled QMLE. The dependent variable in column 1 is the percentage of students that score at or above proficiency in Grade 8 math while in column 3 the dependent variable is the percentage of students that score at or above proficiency in Grade 8 reading. We are interested in the average marginal effects, so we provide the average partial effects (APE) in columns 2 and 4 for math and reading, respectively. The results in columns 2 and 4 show a negative effect of the share of charter schools students in both math and reading. The coefficient for teacher freedom is positive and statistically significant for both math and reading.

Using pooled QMLE, however, ignores the panel nature of our data, which is the second issue that we have address. Hsiao (2007) states that panel data has a greater capacity to capture the complex behavior of economic players than cross-sectional and time-series data on their own. We follow Papke and Wooldridge (2008) and estimate the parameters using the Generalized Estimated Method (GEE). Columns 5 and 7 provide the coefficient effects while columns 6 and 8 provide the average partial effects. Unlike pooled QMLE estimation, the results show that the share of charter students has a negative relationship with math and no statistical relationship with reading. Teacher freedom has positive and statistical relationship with both math and reading.

The third issue we address is the possibility that the share of students in charter school is endogenous. Recall that the share of charter school is used to measure the level of competition public schools face. Poor performance is one of the reasons parents would want to enroll their



children in alternative schools such as charter schools. In addition, states that perform poorly seem more likely to authorize alternatives to traditional public schools. Thus, there is a possibility of a two-way causation between students' performance and the share of students enrolled in charter schools.

To address the endogeneity, we follow Woodridge (2015) who recommends use of a control function method where you run a regression of the endogenous explanatory variable on all the explanatory variables and an instrumental variable for the endogenous variable. You then predict the residuals which are then included in the main model. A valid instrument must satisfy the condition that it must be highly correlated with the endogenous variable. In addition, the coefficient on the residuals must be significant, thus rejecting the null hypothesis that the explanatory variable is exogenous. In our case, we instrument the share of charter school students with two instruments. The first one is the dummy variable that takes the value of 1 if both legislative houses as well as the executive branch is controlled by republicans, and a 0 otherwise. The rationale is that republicans are more likely to advance school choice programs than democrats. The second instrumental variable is the lag of the performance which we envisage is correlated with the decision to switch to charter schools but does not affect the dependent variable because the cohort taking the exams is different from the cohort that took the exam two years earlier. In addition, the students that sit for the exam are randomly selected and there is no one school that can systematically decide to improve their NAEP score based on previous year's score.

Table 2: Estimates for competitive effects of charter schools on students' performance

Model:	Fractional probit				Fractional probit				Fractional probit			
	Pooled QMLE				GEE				GEE (Control Function Method)			
	Math		Reading		Math		Reading		Math		Reading	
VARIABLES	Coefficient	APE	Coefficient	APE	Coefficient	APE	Coefficient	APE	Coefficient	APE	Coefficient	APE
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Share of charter students (%)	-0.5552** (0.2186)	-0.1991*** (0.0784)	-0.9232*** (0.1673)	-0.3291*** (0.0597)	-0.5463** (0.2660)	-0.1964** (0.0959)	-0.5795 (0.3675)	-0.0268 (0.1308)	5.1792*** (1.2297)	1.8751*** (0.4453)	4.5322*** (0.7482)	1.6288*** (0.2665)
Teacher freedom	0.0995*** (0.0228)	0.0353*** (0.0080)	0.1061*** (0.0178)	0.0373*** (0.0062)	0.0891** (0.0417)	0.0317** (0.0148)	0.0655* (0.0360)	0.0232* (0.0126)	0.0574* (0.0327)	0.0207* (0.0117)	0.0627** (0.0253)	0.0224** (0.0090)
Limited English proficiency (%)	0.8317** (0.4109)	0.2983** (0.1475)	-0.0714 (0.3283)	-0.0254 (0.1170)	-0.3402 (0.4470)	-0.1223 (0.1608)	-0.9557* (0.4911)	-0.3411** (0.1749)	0.9284** (0.4426)	0.3361** (0.1601)	0.3151 (0.3417)	0.1133 (0.1226)
Free & reduced price lunch (%)	-0.5119*** (0.1503)	-0.1836*** (0.0540)	0.0747 (0.1285)	0.0266 (0.0458)	-0.0697 (0.0831)	-0.0251 (0.0299)	0.3821*** (0.0874)	0.1363*** (0.0316)	-0.0211 (0.1139)	-0.0076 (0.0412)	0.5424*** (0.0955)	0.1949*** (0.0343)
Household income	0.0128*** (0.0019)	0.0046*** (0.0007)	0.0122*** (0.0016)	0.0044*** (0.0006)	0.0172*** (0.0023)	0.0062*** (0.0008)	0.0175*** (0.0020)	0.0062*** (0.0007)	0.0195*** (0.0022)	0.0071*** (0.0008)	0.0192*** (0.0018)	0.0069*** (0.0006)
Per pupil expenditure	-0.0158* (0.0083)	-0.0057* (0.0030)	0.0077 (0.0064)	0.0028 (0.0023)	-0.0194* (0.0113)	-0.0070* (0.0041)	-0.0057 (0.0074)	-0.0020 (0.0026)	-0.0383*** (0.0099)	-0.0139*** (0.0036)	-0.0144** (0.0064)	-0.0052** (0.0023)
Pupil teacher ratio	-0.0151*** (0.0052)	-0.0054*** (0.0019)	-0.0004 (0.0040)	-0.0001 (0.0014)	-0.0031 (0.0061)	-0.0011 (0.0022)	0.0168** (0.0077)	0.0060** (0.0027)	-0.0480*** (0.0101)	-0.0174*** (0.0037)	-0.0316*** (0.0075)	-0.0114*** (0.0027)
Minority (%)	-0.5751*** (0.0916)	-0.2062*** (0.0326)	-0.6309*** (0.0741)	-0.2249*** (0.0262)	-0.6379*** (0.1440)	-0.2293*** (0.0510)	-0.6415*** (0.1062)	-0.2289*** (0.0378)	-0.9502*** (0.1152)	-0.3440*** (0.0413)	-1.0120*** (0.0899)	-0.3637*** (0.0318)
v1h									-5.6748*** (1.1555)			
v6h											-4.5879*** (0.8560)	
Wald chi2	310.03		443.33		120.6		231.87		192.15		383.48	
Log pseudolikelihood	-93.63		-93.10									
N	149	149	149	149	149	149	149	149	145	145	145	145

Standard errors in parentheses \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

### Interpretation of the Results

We believe the appropriate estimation is the GEE (Control Function Method), which incorporates all three estimation issues raised earlier. Columns 10 and 12 show the average partial effects (APE), and we see that the APE for the share of charter school students is 1.87 and 1.63 for math and reading, respectively. This means that on average a 1 percentage point difference in charter school enrollment is associated with 1.87 and 1.63 percentage-point performance difference in math and reading, respectively. Recall, however, that our model is nonlinear which means that the marginal effect of the share of charter school students is not the same at different levels of the share of charter students. APE gives the average of the marginal effects at the different values of competition in our sample. Figures 1 and 2 graph the predicted values of the percentage of students that achieve at least proficiency level in grade 8 math and grade 8 reading at different values of competition (share of charter school enrollment).

Figure 1: Predictive Margins for Charter Enrollment with 95% Cis (Math)

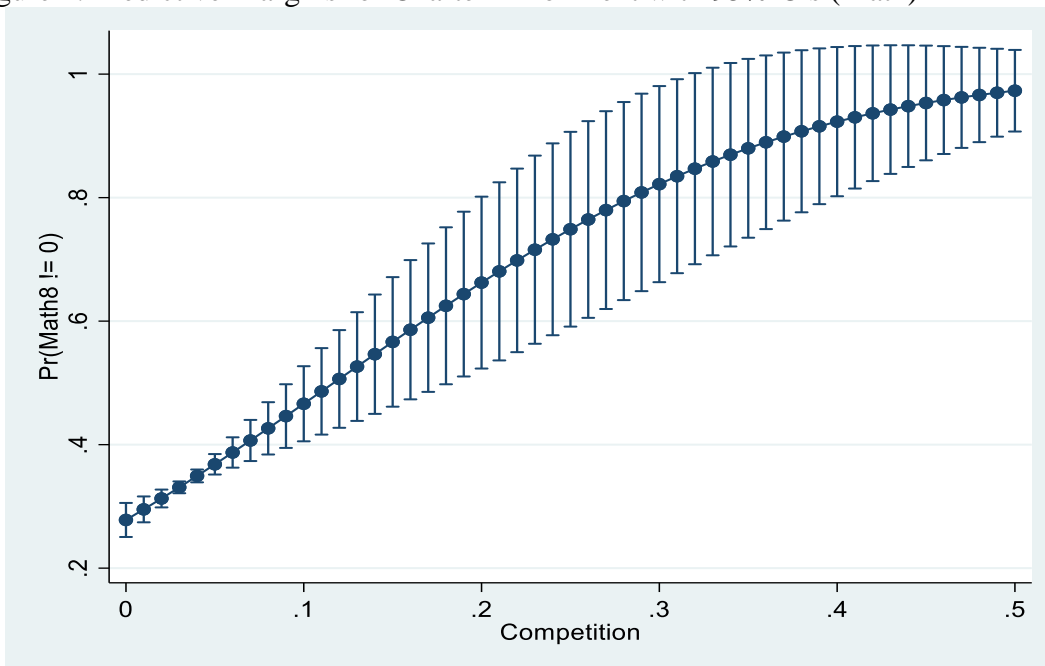
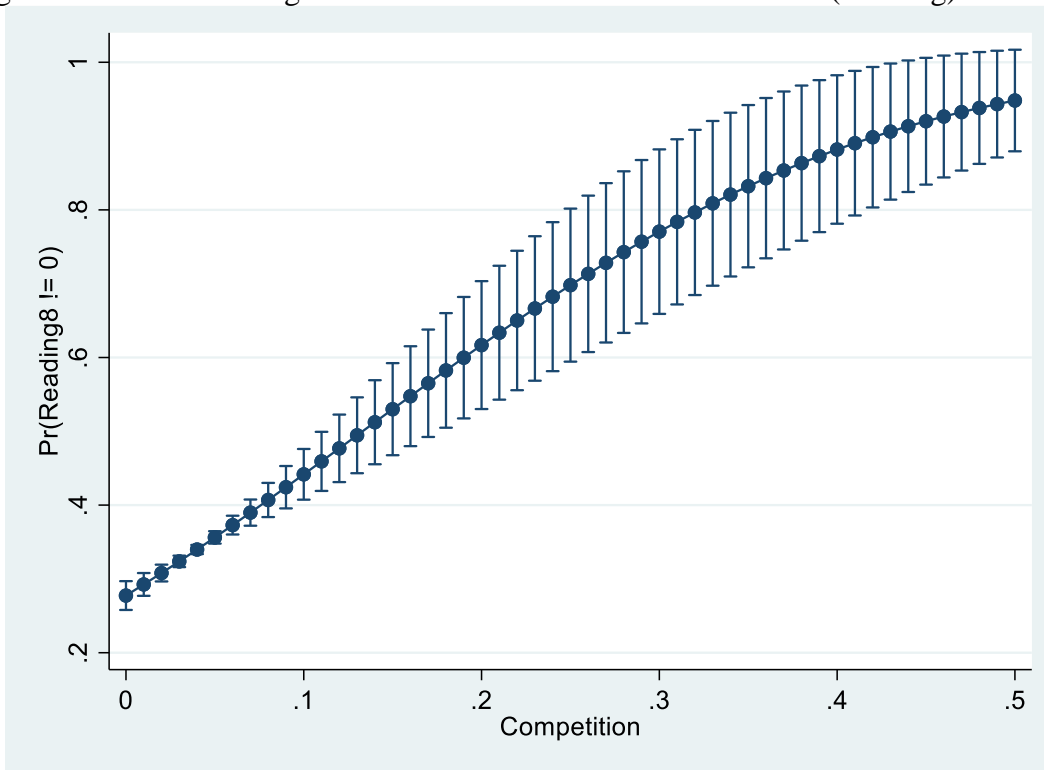


Figure 2: Predictive Margins for Charter Enrollment with 95% Cis (Reading)



Figures 1 and 2 reveal that there is a positive relationship between the share of students enrolled in charter schools and students' performance. The slope of the graphs reveal that the effect of charter school competition increasingly higher at lower levels of competition but diminishes as the share of charter school students increases. The inflection points are at around 0.12 and 0.13 for math and reading, respectively. Thus, the marginal effect of the share of charter school enrollment starts to diminish when the percentage of students enrolled in charter school is about 12 percent for math and 13 percent for reading. The nonlinearity of the graphs in Figures 1 and 2 imply that different states experience different effects of charter competition depending on the percentage of students enrolled in charter schools in the states. To illustrate this, we provide the marginal effects of competition for a few selected states in Table 3. These states have different percentages of students enrolled in charter schools that may be of interest. Kentucky is one of the eight states in the nation that did not allow charter schools as of 2015. The percentage of students enrolled in charter schools is, therefore, zero. Oregon represents the mean of the percentage of students enrolled in charter schools in our dataset. District of Columbia has the highest percentage of students enrolled in charter schools. We also include our own state of Arkansas.

**Table 3: Marginal Effects for Selected States**

State	Share of Charter Students <sup>1</sup>	Marginal Effect (Math)	Marginal Effect (Reading)
Kentucky	0.000	1.691	1.487
Arkansas	0.026	1.811	1.582
Oregon	0.041	1.869	1.628
District of Columbia	0.394	0.760	0.907

Note 1: The share of charter school for each state is the average of the four years included in the panel dataset.

Table 3 shows that a 1 percentage-point increase in charter school enrollment in various states has different impacts. Take math for example. The marginal effect in Kentucky is 1.69 percentage points, while that of the District of Columbia is 0.76 percentage points. Similarly for reading, the marginal effect in Arkansas is 1.58 percentage points, while Oregon’s is 1.63 percentage points.

For teacher freedom our results show that on average traditional public school students in states with charter school laws that allow teacher autonomy outperform those that do not. States that allow charter school teachers the choice to negotiate their contract work rules independently of the district and have a choice to participate in a retirement system (including the state’s retirement system as an option), on average perform about 2 percent higher than those that do not in both math and reading (columns 10 and 12). Collective bargaining contracts contain provisions on how many classes teachers are required to teach, subjects and grade levels they are required to teach, how much preparation time as well as the frequency of meeting parents (Livingston, 2012). Such provisions can have an effect on the productivity of teachers which then affects the performance of students.

### **Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

Having a variety of alternatives injects competition into the education system and can affect performance similar to competition in other markets. As cited earlier, the evidence on the impact of charter schools is mixed, but mostly positive. Studies typically consider the number of students that are enrolled in charter schools as a measure of competition. Our study also considers teacher freedom as a competitive effect of charter schools on the public school system. Teachers may require a better environment in traditional public schools, and this can lead to better outcomes for their students.

Introduction of charter schools is not a be-all and end-all solution, but our study provides evidence that policymakers can take into consideration. We have shown that stronger charter schools’ laws that encourage competition is associated with better student performance in reading. We also find that competition arising from flexibility in the organization and running of charter schools does not make states worse off in math. States legislatures can use our evidence in support of charter school laws to ensure better outcomes for students. Those states that do not have charter schools can consider injecting competition in their education system.

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This research is an extension of a study completed for the first author's doctoral dissertation. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to John L. Adams, Department of Behavioral Sciences, Olivet Nazarene University, Bourbonnais, IL, 60914.



**Abstract**

This study investigates the utility of existing measures of Oral Reading Fluency (ORF), reading retell, and language proficiency for predicting reading achievement among Spanish speaking English language learners in the United States. Consistent with previous findings, ORF predicts a large proportion of the variance in reading achievement. Additionally, retell and language proficiency are significant predictors above and beyond ORF. These findings support the potential utility of using existing measures for monitoring the reading progress of students who are second language learners within a district. Implications for policymakers are discussed.

*Keywords:* Progress Monitoring, English Language Learners, Reading Achievement, Statewide Reading Achievement Tests, Language Proficiency

## **Context of the Problem**

Reading is an important skill with far-reaching impact well beyond the classroom (Palani, 2012). In the U.S. state of Arizona, schools are evaluated on students' reading growth (Arizona Department of Education, 2019). To incentivize high academic standards, the state awards additional funds to schools that show exceptional performance in this area (Arizona Department of Education, 2019). Yet, some of the most at-risk students continue to fall behind (Sanders et al., 2018).

Among students at risk for reading failure, Spanish-speaking English Language Learners (ELLs) make up an increasing proportion of students learning a second language in Arizona and across the U.S. (English Language Learners in Public Schools, 2018). Spanish-speaking students face a different set of challenges than monolingual English-speaking students and underperform in reading relative to their ELL peers (Roberts, Mohammed, & Vaughn, 2010). To investigate the impact of linguistic diversity on reading skills' development, we first turn to the role of language in reading acquisition.

## **The Simple View of Reading**

According to the Simple View of Reading, reading skills are acquired through a combination of language and decoding skills (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990; McCardle, Scarborough, & Catts, 2001). The Simple View of Reading asserts that reading comprehension is a product of oral language skills and word level reading skills. Consistent with this model, numerous studies have shown that language differences contribute to differences in reading performance among ELLs (e.g., Geva & Farnia, 2012; Proctor, Carlo, August, & Snow, 2005; Uchikoshi, Yang, & Liu, 2018). Jeon and Yamashita (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of reading comprehension studies, finding vocabulary knowledge, grammar knowledge, and decoding skills were the strongest correlates of second-language reading skills among second language learners.

Vocabulary and listening comprehension, in particular, are strong predictors of reading comprehension and become more important following the mastery of basic reading skills (Adlof, Catts & Lee, 2010; Babayiğit, 2014; Goodwin, August, & Calderón, 2015; Gottardo, Mirza, Koh, Ferreira, & Javier, 2018; Lindsey, Manis, & Bailey, 2003; Vaughn et al., 2019). Evidence suggests language differences contribute to continued disparities in comprehension skills after decoding gaps between ELL students and their non-ELL peers close (Droop & Verhoeven, 2003; Vaughn et al., 2019). The correlation between language skills and reading comprehension has been shown to be even stronger among ELL students than for non-ELL students (Babayiğit, 2014; Proctor, Carlo, August, & Snow, 2005).

With the importance of language differences established, we are left with the practical question of how to address these differences. The Multitiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework provides a structure for addressing student needs in an inclusive manner. MTSS is a structured approach providing students with interventions at the required intensity based on frequent use of meaningful data. MTSS follows a tiered structure in which higher tiers call for more intensive academic interventions in small, homogenous groups (Ball & Christ, 2012). Within this framework, progress monitoring with Curriculum Based Measures (CBMs) is one approach for

identifying and addressing students' needs (Deno, 1985; 2003; 2016). Understanding CBMs is critical for making meaning of outcomes studies using them.

### **Curriculum Based Measures and Reading Outcomes**

CBMs are brief probes that test students' grade-level academic skills (Deno, 1985). They are effective at identifying and monitoring students' academic needs (Deno, 2003). These measures are widely used in U.S. schools in the early grades.

Oral reading fluency (ORF) predictive utility is strongly supported in the literature. ORF measures are text passages students read aloud for usually one minute while the examiner marks errors. Scores record the number of correct words read and the number of errors. Reschly, Busch, Betts, Deno, and Long (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of 40 correlational studies including ORF measures finding moderate to strong correlations (average of  $r = .67$ ) between ORF and high-stakes reading assessments for students from grades 1-6. Yeo (2010) performed a follow-up meta-analysis of 27 studies employing multiple reading CBMs as performance predictors on state achievement tests, finding an average correlation of .68, in the moderately high range. Authors of both studies concluded that using reading CBMs to predict reading outcomes is strongly supported (Reschly et al., 2009; Yeo, 2010). Additionally, Kilgus, Methe, Maggin, and Tomasula (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of the diagnostic accuracy of ORF, finding support for the sensitivity and specificity of ORF cut scores for predicting overall reading achievement on high stakes tests. The exact cut scores used to achieve desired sensitivity and specificity varied between studies, but the general finding of predictive utility was upheld.

Fewer studies support the predictive utility of other (non-ORF) reading CBMs (Fuchs, Fuchs & Compton, 2004), but comprehension CBMs have shown promise. Maze is a reading comprehension CBM where students read a passage wherein three word options complete a sentence at about every seventh word. Student scores are based on the number of words correctly restored in the passage. Maze measures have been shown to be a significant predictor of reading achievement, but not as strong a predictor as ORF (Wiley & Deno, 2005).

Beyond Maze CBMs, Shapiro, Fritschmann, Thomas, Hughes, and McDougal (2014) found that a 10-point retell quality rating predicted a small portion of variance above and beyond ORF in a sample of third grade students. Retell measures typically involve asking students to retell the story read following completion of an ORF probe. Scores can be based on overall quality of their retell or on the number of words used to retell the story. There is promise in considering the additional predictive value comprehension CBMs have in identifying how children will perform on high stakes reading tests.

The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) Retell measure, one type of commercially available CBM, includes a similar quality rating measure of passage comprehension as used by Shapiro et al. (2014), in addition to the number of words used in a correct retelling. Missall, Hosp and Hosp (2019) found the DIBELS Retell subtest was significantly correlated to standardized tests of reading achievement, but Retell and other measures showed less correlation to performance than did ORF. However, Missall et al. (2019) only examined the number of words retold and did not include consideration of the retell quality ratings. Our study includes a comprehension quality rating as one measure investigated.

For MTSS to be most effective, assessments must be used appropriately and provide information necessary to identify students needing intervention as well as directing those interventions (Deno, 2016). Yeo (2009) concluded that language proficiency was a potentially important variable, but insufficient evidence to substantiate use of language proficiency measures existed at that time. Few studies have looked specifically at the predictive utility of CBMs for ELL students. The next section will summarize findings of the few predictive utility studies.

### **CBMs and Prediction of Reading Outcomes for ELLs**

Scheffel, Lefly, and Houser (2016) found the predictive utility of DIBELS ORF (DORF) was roughly equivalent for all students. Notably, their analyses did not account for differing levels of language proficiency among ELL students. Kim, Vanderwood, and Lee (2016) found no significant difference in DORF and DIBELS Daze predictive accuracy across language proficiency levels. Researchers investigated comparisons between students falling in different language proficiency categories, but did not account for oral listening and speaking development separately from reading and writing. Similarly, Burns et al. (2017) employed categorical language proficiency data, using overall English language proficiency level to predict student growth on an oral reading fluency CBM. They found students at the lowest levels of proficiency showed the greatest gains in words read correctly in second and third grades. The study also found that language proficiency level predicted a small proportion of variance in a computerized measure of reading achievement. This provided the opportunity to better handle language proficiency level complexity but did not deal with complexity associated with language proficiency with listening versus speaking versus reading versus writing. The present study builds on this finding by employing scaled scores from a state-wide measure of language proficiency broken down to listening and speaking, thus removing the proficiency subtests based on students' English reading and writing skills. This provides a cleaner measure of language proficiency that is not influenced by reading and writing skill levels.

There is a clear need for investigating language proficiency's potential contribution to CBMs' predictive accuracy. Existing studies (e.g., Kim, Vanderwood, & Lee, 2016; Scheffel, Lefly, & Houser, 2016) have either ignored proficiency level or employed it as a unitary construct without considering that oral language develops before reading and writing (Shanahan, 2006).

Studies reviewed here indicate progress monitoring data and language proficiency information, specifically listening and speaking skills, have potential for predicting ELL students' performance in reading beyond CBMs. Though CBMs are effective, they are best used in combination with other sources of information (Deno, 2016). Improving screening procedures' accuracy is imperative for prudent use of school resources.

### **Current Study**

This study aims to improve the predictive model of ELL students' performance on high stakes reading tests by extending prior research with additional relevant variables. We investigate the predictive utility of reading comprehension measures and language proficiency above and beyond ORF. Previous studies have provided strong support for ORF utility and some support for the utility of comprehension CBMs and language proficiency. We seek to build on these findings by employing a previously underexplored measure of reading comprehension quality

and a language proficiency composite score that eliminates reading and writing subscores, thus providing a cleaner measure of oral language proficiency status in the model.

### **Research Questions**

Research questions for the current study are:

1. To what extent do ORF and reading comprehension CBMs predict reading performance among ELLs as measured by state high stakes reading tests?
2. To what extent might oral language proficiency add to the predictive utility of the CBMs among ELLs?

### **Method**

## **Sample**

From an initial sample of 2,865 students drawn for a broader study, the current study sample included 231 Spanish-speaking ELL students. Data were gathered from a large school district in the southwestern United States from the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years. Students were included in the data set if they were identified as ELLs by the Primary Home Language Other Than English (PHLOTE) form used in Arizona public schools. Students were removed from the data set if they were missing one or more of the scores used in the predictive model. One hundred percent of the students included in the sample were Hispanic. Fifty-seven percent were male, 43% were female. AzMERIT scores include four categories from Minimally Proficient to Highly Proficient. Eighty percent scored in the Minimally Proficient range, 11% scored in the Partially Proficient range, and 9% scored in the Proficient range. None of the students in our sample scored in the Highly Proficient range.

## **Instruments**

**Arizona English Language Learner Assessment (AZELLA).** The Arizona English Language Learner Assessment (AZELLA) is Arizona's language proficiency test used state-wide to determine if students require services due to different linguistic performance. The test measures Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing proficiency, providing a Total score. In the present study, standard scores from the Listening and Speaking subdomains were summed. This researcher-created composite was used to represent language ability unaffected by reading and writing skills. This composite is one of the predictor variables for the study. These scores were taken from the students' second grade year in spring 2015.

**Reliability and validity.** For the present study, AZELLA Listening and Speaking subtests' reliability are most relevant. Test authors report a Cronbach's alpha of .66 for second grade on the Listening subtest. Test authors report a Cronbach's alpha of .81 for the second grade Speaking subtest. Authors report a panel of educational experts was used to evaluate content and perform field-testing.

**Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills Next Edition (DIBELS Next).**

DIBELS Next is a battery of CBMs used to assess basic reading skills development, primarily through one-minute reading tasks (Good et al., 2013). Measures of interest for the present study

are those administered to second grade students in the Spring semester: DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency-Words Read Correctly (DORF WRC), Recall, and Retell Quality. DORF WRC tests students' ability to read a grade-level passage aloud for one minute. The student's score is equal to the number of words read accurately within the time limit.

Retell Quality is then rated on a scale of one to four, where four represents the highest quality Retell. A rating of one indicates two details retold from the reading passage. A two indicates the student successfully recalled three or more details. A rating of three indicates three or more details retold in appropriate sequence. A four rating indicates the student successfully retold three or more details in sequence and captured the main idea of the passage. These, Retell, Retell Quality and DORF WRC scores were also collected during students' second grade year in the spring of 2015 and are additional predictor variables for this study.

***Reliability and validity.*** Reliability coefficients for most measures fall well above the standard of .70 (Cortina, 1993) for second and third grade students for the Total score. However, the test-retest reliability coefficient for Retell is reported at .27 for second grade students. The test-retest reliability coefficient for Accuracy is .57 for second grade students.

The test makers treat Retell Quality scores as a categorical score; they are not reported as interval variables. However, there is a precedent in the literature for treating Likert scale variables as scale variables when characteristics are similar (Norman, 2010). Findings will be subjected to tests of validity as a part of the present study.

#### **Arizona's Measurement of Educational Readiness to Inform Teaching (AzMERIT)**

AzMERIT is a computer-administered achievement test for Arizona administered annually starting in third grade. The measure contains both fixed response (i.e., multiple choice, multiple response, matching) and open-ended response items (American Institutes for Research, 2017) and is used to determine overall reading skill proficiency for public school students. Every state in the United States has a similar test. Students' AzMERIT scores were taken from their third-grade year in spring 2016.

***Reliability and validity.*** AzMERIT internal consistency coefficients were reported through Cronbach's alpha for each grade level and major subgroup tested. For grade 3, Cronbach's alpha value was .90, well above the commonly recommended standard of .70 (Cortina, 1993). For Hispanic third grade students, the value was similar at .88.

The AzMERIT technical report states many of the items were initially created for Utah's state achievement test. The report details development phases and validation for the measure, which consisted mostly of context experts' item review for alignment with grade-appropriate standards (American Institutes for Research, 2017).

## Data Screening and Analysis

Table 1

*Correlations Matrix for Predictor Variables and AzMERIT ELA*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. AZMERIT	-				
2. DORF	.58**	-			
3. Retell	.44**	.58**	-		
4. Quality	.44**	.44**	.64**	-	
6. Listening/Speaking	.41**	.35**	.31**	.34**	-

\*  $p < .05$  (two-tailed). \*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

Participants were screened from the larger sample to include only Spanish-speaking ELL students. Students were included in the final data set only if Spanish was indicated as their primary language, language most spoken, and language first acquired. Students with missing scores on any of the predictor or criterion variables were excluded. The final sample consisted of 231 students.

The data were tested to ensure assumptions of linear regression were met. Data were screened for missing, normality, and homoscedasticity of error terms. One of the variables, Retell Quality, demonstrated a positive univariate skew that was not correctable by standard transformation methods. As a result, this variable was retained in the original format for primary analyses. Correlations and scatter plots indicated a linear relationship between the predictor variables and the AzMERIT. Examination of Q-Q and Residual plots indicated assumptions of homoscedasticity and multivariate normality were met. Variance Inflation Factors fell below 10 and Tolerance values fell above .4. All multivariate assumptions for primary analyses were met.

Hierarchical regression analysis was run in three steps to address both research questions. In the first step, only DORF WRC was entered. At step two, additional DIBELS Next variables (Accuracy, Retell, Retell Quality) were included. In the third and final step, the Listening/Speaking variable (AZELLA) was added.

## Results

### Research Question 1

To address research question one, researchers ran a prediction model using ORF (DORF WRC) and reading comprehension CBMs (Retell and Retell Quality) as predictors for the state reading test (AzMERIT) in steps one and two of the hierarchical regression model. Step 1 contained only the DORF WRC variable for spring 2015 as the predictor for AzMERIT spring 2016. We ran the model with only this variable to sort out the improvement in prediction with additional CBMs and because ORF is the best supported and understood CBM in the literature. As expected and consistent with prior research, DORF WRC was a significant predictor of AzMERIT score,  $F(1,$

234) = 122,  $R^2 = .34$ ,  $p < .001$  at step one. These findings indicate that DORF WRC accounts for 34% of variance in children’s AzMERIT test scores in English Language Arts.

In the second step, Retell, and Retell Quality were added to see what additional variance in test performance might be explained beyond the DORF WRC. In the second phase, only DORF WRC and Retell Quality were significant predictors,  $F(4, 231) = 62.66$ ,  $R^2 \text{ Change} = .04$ ,  $p < .001$  where the addition of Retell Quality improved the prediction model by 4%.

### Research Question 2

Research question two focused on whether ELL students’ oral language proficiency improves the prediction for third grade state test performance. To address this question the AZELLA Listening/Speaking Composite was entered in step three to see if language proficiency improved the prediction of high-stakes reading test performance. The Listening/Speaking Composite contributed significantly to the prediction of variance in AzMERIT above and beyond the variables in the first two steps, adding an additional 4% to the variance explained,  $F(5, 230) = 56.88$ ,  $R^2 \text{ Change} = .04$ ,  $p < .001$ . Table 2 provides a summary of these models.

Table 2.  
*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis (N = 231)*

Variable/Model	$\beta$	$t$	Sig.	$F$	$R^2$	Sig.
<b>Model 1</b>				122.3	.34	< .001
DORF WRC	.59	11.1	< .001			
<b>Model 2</b>				48.4	.39	< .001
DORF WRC	.48	7.53	< .001			
Retell	.01	.186	.853			
Quality	.22	3.25	.001			
<b>Model 3</b>				40.9	.42	< .001
DORF WRC	.43	6.87	< .001			
Retell	.01	.076	.939			
Quality	.18	2.74	.007			
Listening/Speaking	.19	3.41	< .001			
$R^2 \text{ Change (Model 2)} = .04$				$R^2 \text{ Change (Model 3)} = .03$		

### Discussion

Consistent with previous studies, the present study supports ORF’s utility as a predictor for children’s performance on high-stakes state reading tests. ORF alone predicted over a third of variance in test performance for ELL students. Our study extended prior research by investigating the contribution of Retell and Retell Quality CBMs above and beyond ORF in this prediction. Additionally, we added a unique oral language proficiency score to determine its value in the prediction model.



For ELL students, Retell Quality was a significant predictor above and beyond ORF for the second and third steps of the regression model. The Listening/Speaking composite derived from the AZELLA was a significant contributor in the step three. The amount of additional explained variance was small relative to ORF; however, these results provide support for the importance of attending to language proficiency and suggest a possible avenue for future development in progress monitoring second language learners.

Given the final model's statistical significance, we now turn to the model's individual components with attention to features that may be useful to policy makers. We discuss the predictive validity of Retell Quality and the Listening/Speaking composite as continuous variables. These variables provide additional information when used together to get a better understanding of ELL students' progress toward passing high stakes tests.

### **Retell Quality**

Given the limited range of scores, the contribution of Retell Quality above and beyond ORF is surprising. In fact, the measure performed similarly to the 10-point measure reported by Shapiro, Fritschmann, Thomas, Hughes, and McDougal (2014). This is striking for two reasons. First, the range of DIBELS Retell is restricted relative to the measure used in the Shapiro et al. study. Range restriction typically reduces correlation, which in turn, reduces the variable's impact in the model. Second, data used in our study were gathered by teachers and staff in the course of regular educational service delivery. In contrast, Shapiro et al. (2014) gathered data with help from trained doctoral students. This difference in data collection methods speaks to the ecological validity of our findings and validates the notion that improved predictions are possible within the current education system, with current measures, and with current levels of training. This is good news for district policy makers.

Future research with similar scales should focus on potential scale and population characteristics that may influence the predictive utility of retell measures. Some notable differences in the samples used in our study reveal potential starting points for investigating factors that may affect the predictive utility of retell. For example, the sample in the Shapiro et al. (2014) study consisted primarily of Caucasian students, while our study included only Hispanic students. However, the overall correlation of Retell Quality with the state-wide reading test among English-only students in Adams (2017) was stronger than the correlation between Shapiro's (2014) measure and the state-wide reading test. This may be due to a number of factors including 1) differences in state-wide tests, 2) differences in student populations under investigation, or 3) characteristics of retell measures. Partial replication studies that include Retell Quality and similar measures with different student populations and state-wide tests help sort out these potential explanations.

### **Listening/Speaking Composite as a Significant Predictor**

Consistent with the Simple View of Reading, Retell Quality and the Listening/Speaking composite added to the prediction of state reading test performance above and beyond ORF. Given ORF's strength as a predictor, the contribution of these variables provides strong evidence in supporting the utility of language proficiency monitoring for ELL students. To date, this is the first study to employ language proficiency scaled scores in predicting reading outcomes. Past studies made use of categorical scores. Additionally, this is the first study in which reading and

writing portions of a language proficiency measure were systematically excluded from analysis. Since reading is the construct under investigation, it stands to reason that a reading subtest within a language measure might confound results with respect to the contribution of language abilities to reading.

### **A Step Toward Practical Applications for Policy Makers**

While the present findings cannot and should not be implemented as-is in a screening or placement procedure for tiered instruction, our study reveals the potential of existing measures to be used in this way in the future. Consistent with Deno's (2016) recommendation, we combine measures to produce greater predictive accuracy. Most importantly, the present study employs data gathered by teachers in the course of normal instruction. Given budgetary and personnel constraints, school policy makers stand to benefit from research that prioritizes practicality and ease of implementation.

Additionally, this research suggests that district leaders should ensure that retell quality measures are required at the building level. This variable and other retell variables are not often seen in the literature, which may reflect limited use or perceived value in schools. Our research suggests that this notion be revisited.

Ultimately, schools would benefit from a predictive formula that would allow educators to differentially predict second language students' performance using CBM and language proficiency data. While the current findings support the viability of such an approach, further investigation into the specific measures and the generalizability across populations is needed before we can have confidence in a predictive formula.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Though it adds to the potential utility of the findings, using existing data limited the present study in several ways. Item level data were unavailable which restricted analysis to total scores on each scales and subscales used. Item level data would be informative regarding specific sub-skills that contribute most to the prediction of reading outcomes. Only general conclusions about the potential utility of these data can be drawn based upon these results. Using data that are already gathered in schools provides potential for efficient improvement of data-based decision making; however, future research addressing the same questions with different measures of reading, comprehension, and language skills will help us understand whether the general model holds up.

Future research should investigate the extent to which models like ours add to the sensitivity and specificity of CBMs as predictors of reading achievement among ELL students. Additionally, research should contribute to creating decision criteria that could be put into practice in schools. Due to the relatively small sample of ELL students meeting our criteria and the disproportionate number of these students who scored in the Minimally Proficient range, this was not possible in the current study.

The evidence from this study supports an optimistic outlook for districts seeking to improve prediction of ELL students' performance on critical reading tests. We provide initial support for the viability of developing a predictive formula that would allow policy makers to differentially

predict ELL students' performance given CBMs and language proficiency test results from as early as twelve months prior the state reading test. Additionally, this study demonstrates the potential of repurposing data school systems are already gathering to glean useful information. As education policy makers look toward the future of data-driven decision making in increasingly diverse schools, both findings support the exploration of potential improvements to current monitoring practices.

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## **An Ethical Perspective on Increasing LGBTQIA+ Inclusivity in Education**

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### **Abstract**

All students should feel safe and included in educational contexts. Mission and values statements typically reflect this sentiment, but national, state, and local surveys indicate that some student groups continue to experience marginalization. Through these surveys, LGBTQIA+ students report that they perceive the school environment to be hostile. They do not experience equitable access to education. In recognition of this inequity, one public high school district in California initiated a task force to develop greater inclusivity in its schools. This paper analyzes their efforts from an ethical perspective and a focus on leadership.

Keywords: LGBTQ, LGBTQIA+, Inclusivity, Ethics, Leadership, Education

### **Introduction**

Every student deserves to feel welcome and safe in the educational environment. This belief is commonly reflected in schools' mission and values statements, which express commitment to creating inclusive, equitable, and welcoming environments for all students. Slate et al. (2008) identified fifteen themes typically found in schools' mission statements, ten of these broadly having to do with the socioemotional well-being of students. Nurturing productive citizens with a high moral character who collaborate and partner respectfully with others is the essence of these statements, indicating that schools value more than just academic success and rigor.

Purposeful and well-written mission statements are linked with positive educational outcomes in higher education (Kuh et al., 2005). Because they reflect both the quality and the values of the institution, they should inform policy, local decision-making, and broader organizational change. Kuh et al. advocated for a collaborative approach in creating mission statements to maximize buy-in and familiarity for all stakeholders in education. Despite the widespread use of mission statements in educational contexts, some student groups continue to experience marginalization.



These groups include demographic descriptors such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, and dis/ability.

In the following pages, I will begin by discussing the important role of ethics in educational decision-making. Next, I will describe the educational experiences LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, ally or asexual, and others) students as reported in local, state, and national surveys. Following this description, I will explain how a public high school district in California recognized that it had a problem and decided to respond.

### **The Ethic of Critique**

If ethics is the study of right and wrong, then this subject is and should remain central in all educational settings. Even within a secular environment without religious context, educators are expected to teach and behave with morality, and the institution is similarly tasked with establishing and maintaining an atmosphere that reflects agreed-upon social norms and values.

The ethic of critique exposes the inequity of marginalization by redefining and reframing “other concepts such as privilege, power, culture, language, and even justice” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016, p. 14). Simply stated, it is unethical to allow some groups a place at the table while denying other groups the same level of access. Leaders in education who are guided by a strong sense of ethics do not consider it acceptable to allow policies and practices to perpetuate inequities. They disrupt the status quo by challenging such policies and working towards greater inclusivity. These are the leaders who take risks by pointing out flaws and challenging those who resist acknowledging the necessity of change. These are the educators who prioritize democratic values over self-interest. These are the people who advocate for the well-being of all students.

Critical theory informs the ethic of critique by helping educators recognize policies which benefit the majority group to the detriment of those who have been historically marginalized (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). “By demystifying and questioning what is happening in society and in schools, critical theorists may help educators rectify wrongs while identifying key morals and values” (p. 15). Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a classic example of critical theory in education. Freire (2000) explained that increasing equitable access to education empowers students. From a critical standpoint, education can help equalize the distribution of power in society. Inclusive education counteracts systemic marginalization.

### **The Ethic of Care**

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) advocated “turning to the ethic of care for moral decision making” (p. 16). It is not enough to simply recognize a problem from a critical perspective; educators must use their internal ethical compass to drive decisions and initiate change. Infusing educational policies with greater inclusivity is only possible when policy-makers begin with the institution’s mission statement, which is a public declaration of commitment to shared values. When new policies align with these values, it sends a message of cohesion and purpose to all stakeholders of the organization.

Organizational change is often accompanied by resistance from those who benefit from the status-quo (Kotter & Cohen, 2002). Put simply, some teachers may prefer to continue doing

things a certain way because it is easier not to have to develop new lessons and implement changes to existing policies and practices. To give a concrete example, students who identify as LGBTQ report higher levels of school engagement when they are exposed to an inclusive curriculum (Kosciw et al., 2018). Teachers may resist implementing such a curriculum for a variety of reasons. They may feel unqualified to do so, or they may fear the increased workload and potential push-back from students and parents. Educational leaders, interested in embracing inclusive policies, can dissolve this resistance more easily by revisiting agreed-upon values such as caring for all students' well-being. Once teachers realize that they can demonstrate care for their LGBTQ students by embracing an inclusive curriculum, they are more likely to welcome rather than resist change.

Noddings (1995) explained that the ethic of care is a central component of moral education. Some leaders in education may advocate for critical thinking in making difficult decisions, avoiding interference from emotions and feelings. Noddings suggested reconciling the two by concluding that “critical thinking guided by an ethic of care encourages us to stay in touch with our own feelings” (p. 195). From this perspective, the ethics of critique and care can function as complementary forces in guiding educational policy-makers. According to Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), a strong ethical foundation paves the way for creating a more collaborative decision-making model in education.

Educational contexts rely on leaders to make difficult moral decisions guided by a strong sense of ethics. If this is true, “then there is a need to revise how educational leaders are prepared” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Instead of relying on models based on successful leadership in the world of business, the ethical paradigm requires leaders to incorporate a variety of perspectives and diverse voices. In the paragraphs that follow, I will outline how educational leaders in a public high school district in California applied the ethics of care and critique and the organization's common values to create and implement a task force to encourage and support greater LGBTQIA+ inclusivity.

### **LGBTQIA+ Youth in the United States**

National surveys have indicated that LGBTQIA+ youth struggle in the school environment. The Youth Survey Report conducted by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) found that over half of LGBT youth experienced verbal harassment in the school environment, which is twice as high as the general population (HRC, 2012). According to the most recent National School Climate Survey (NSCS), almost 60% of all LGBTQ students represented felt unsafe at school due to their sexual orientation. Although almost all LGBTQ students heard homophobic comments at school, only 55.3% of these students reported these to school staff. This was because they did not think that anything would be done. Over 60% of those who did report discrimination indicated that they were told to ignore the harassment. LGBTQ students are more likely to skip school, and therefore less likely to graduate and pursue higher education (Kosciw et al., 2018).

The CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) reported that sexual minority youth are more likely to experience violence, engage in substance abuse, and participate in sexual behaviors deemed to be risky. They were also more likely to experience mental health issues, and 17.2% reported that they had seriously considered suicide (CDC, 2019). From a critical perspective, LGBTQIA+ students appear to perceive the school environment as hostile and this likely

contributes to a lower sense of emotional well-being. Because educators care about all students, change is needed.

### **California Healthy Kids Survey**

Only twenty years ago, little was known about the LGBTQIA+ student demographic (Kosciw et al., 2018). The only data available came from voluntary studies such as the NSCS and the YRBS, each with relatively small sample sizes compared to the population of students in United States public schools. It is difficult to advocate for greater inclusivity in the absence of strong statistical data. Failing to advocate for marginalized groups may send the message that the education system does not care about this demographic.

Recent legislation may help address some of the disparities in educational research. In February 2018, Assembly Bill 677 was signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown. This law requires public institutions in California to collect SOGI (sexual orientation and gender identity) data in voluntary and anonymous contexts. The same year, just over 40 school districts participated in the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS). Of the approximately 15,000 students participating, 75-87% of students in grades 7, 9, and 11 reported that they identified as heterosexual. Just under 10% reported that they were gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and around 1% identified as transgender. The data collected through the CHKS allows educators to study the LGBTQIA+ student population more accurately and determine how to better serve their needs.

In 2018-2019, the public high school district “Playa Vista” in Southern California surveyed 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders. Playa Vista concluded that the findings were largely consistent with the state-wide results. Over 10% of its students identified as LGBTQ (Austin, Polik, Hanson, & Zheng, 2018). Between 20 and 40% of students reported that they heard homophobic and other negative comments about LGBTQ individuals “sometimes or often.” Just under 10% reported that they experienced harassment for these reasons. Up to 30% of the students felt that the school is not safe for students who do not behave or appear the way mainstream society defines as *masculine* or *feminine*.

Playa Vista’s CHKS data mirrored NSCS results in that only about 30-40% of students reported LGBTQ victimization when they witnessed it. Teachers attempted to help or solve a problem only 40% of the time when it was reported. Students reported that they were more likely to receive help from peers than from adults. Ten percent indicated that they heard negative comments from teachers and staff either “sometimes or often.” Only about half of the students reported that they knew where to access help with LGBTQ issues, and many were not aware that the district had policies in place against discrimination and harassment on the basis of sex, sexual orientation, and gender. The majority of students answered that they were not convinced that adults at the school valued fairness and diversity. State-wide CHKS data were similar; about 20% of students reported that teachers do not treat students fairly or with respect. Educators at Playa Vista concluded that something needed to change.

### **Playa Vista’s Inclusivity Task Force**

In 2018, the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA, also known as Gender and Sexuality Alliance) at two of Playa Vista’s high schools reviewed the CHKS data and expressed concern to district administration. When presented with the survey data from the CHKS, NSCS and YRBS, Playa

Vista's superintendent "Dr. Peña" agreed to create and implement a task force aimed at providing a more inclusive educational environment for its students and professional development programs for the district's teaching staff. Dr. Peña was known for her commitment to students' emotional well-being, and her efforts to amend existing board policies regulating the district's graduation ceremonies had been successful.

According to Michael Fullan (2001), leadership is key during periods of intense emotions which can arise from change. Leaders can help all stakeholders adjust to new cultural norms in terms of LGBTQIA+ issues by providing needed support. This reflects *adaptive leadership theory* presented in Northouse (2016). Leaders profit from a wide perspective because they can understand and perceive the emotions around them. Through intentional communication and active listening, they can help individuals and groups feel better and able to cope with change. According to Burke (2018), an understanding of *transformational leadership* is helpful because it allows leaders to identify and counteract resistance from a variety of sources. Dr. Peña applied elements from both adaptive and transformational leadership theory in assisting all stakeholders of Playa Vista embrace the changes that the task force would promote.

A small group of volunteers attended a planning session in Dr. Peña's office in early January 2019. This planning committee decided to meet monthly to plan the larger task force meeting open to all district stakeholders. Dr. Peña invited all those interested, offering compensation at the contracted hourly rate. In mid-January, the first inclusivity task force met at the district office. Each school site was represented. Facilitators established norms, expressing commitment to establish an inclusive, safe space for all participants. After engaging in community-building exercises, the group outlined its goals for the remainder of the school year. Facilitators from the planning committee encouraged a collaborative approach in establishing the agenda for future meetings.

In February, the task force organized a LGBTQIA+ student panel who volunteered to participate in district-wide professional development slated for the following month. The panel of current and former Playa Vista Students was made available as an optional session for all teachers and administrators. It was well-attended, and participants interacted with LGBTQIA+ students and graduates who spoke about their experiences with discrimination and harassment in the school environment. There was every indication that Playa Vista teachers were open to hearing about students' perspectives and interested in learning about how to serve their socioemotional needs more effectively.

In April, shortly after the professional development program, Playa Vista's task force decided to ensure that all schools had a vibrant and active GSA. This was because GSA advisers brought research studies which demonstrate that LGBTQIA+ students benefit from a sense of community and school connectedness (Diaz, Kosciw and Greytak, 2010; Kosciw et al., 2018). Task force participants questioned why some district schools' GSA advisers had not committed to attending the monthly meetings, and agreed to reach out to their peers directly, inviting them to future meetings. By April, attendance at the task force meetings was noticeably reduced, but regular participants indicated a desire to promote the committee during the next school year.

In May, members from the task force planning group created a virtual space on the district's learning management system. This would be an online toolkit where educators could find informational videos, pedagogical strategies, and lists of terminology and resources. Planning committee members suggested that representatives from each school site present the online toolkit at their last remaining faculty meeting in June. Some participants indicated a lack of confidence about the new technology. The task force decided to present the toolkit to a district-wide meeting of department chairs instead.

### **Discussion**

Efforts to initiate systemic change are often met with complacency, immobility, or outright resistance (Kotter & Cohen, 2002). In addition, schools tend to be bastions of (false) positivity, and stakeholders of these institutions may disbelieve that a problem even exists, especially when they do not identify with the marginalized demographic. In the case of Playa Vista, leadership indicated a willingness to create and encourage systemic change by implementing the inclusivity task force. Teachers demonstrated that they wanted to participate in the task force by attending monthly meetings and participating in the student panel discussion with obvious emotional engagement.

After a few months, attendance at the monthly task force meetings had dropped off. Although the group had collaboratively established goals, buy-in appeared to fade when members were asked to take on a leadership role at their individual school-sites. According to Kotter and Cohen (2002), successful organizational change depends on reliable buy-in. Bringing in those that may resist initial change efforts can increase the efficacy of the change process (Burke, 2018). In the case of Playa Vista, teachers and administrators communicated their intention to creating greater inclusivity and openly displayed a high level of caring for students who had experienced marginalization. This did not, however, predictably translate to representatives who were willing to communicate the task force's goals and objectives to their peers at individual school sites. This was complicated by impacted school and district calendars. End of school year procedures such as standardized testing and graduation took center stage in April and May, leaving little time to develop systematic training for how to use the online toolkit. It appeared that there were emotional as well as logistical barriers to implementing successful systemic change by the end of the school year.

### **Limitations**

The relatively small sample size of the national, state, and local surveys described in this study present a clear limitation. Educational research must continue to expand to ensure accurate and reflective data. Only one school district is described as creating an inclusivity task force, and the discussion of their effort is limited to this single case. In addition, this study portrayed only the first few months of Playa Vista's inclusivity task force; there is much room for improvement, not only with respect to the continued growth of the district's task force, but also with respect to an expanded study with more generalizable findings.

### **Future Research**

There is much room for growth in terms of future research. An increased sample size would lend depth to this study and reflect a wider variety of schools and school districts. Longitudinal studies about the efficacy of the inclusivity task force would likely yield useful information and

could possibly incorporate comparisons of a variety of schools and school districts. Studies such as these could take on components of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Conducting research with a narrative study design and methodology may lead to greater depth of understanding. It would be valuable to interview teachers about their perspectives. How do they feel about inclusive policies and practices? What types of supports do they perceive that they need? Similarly, it would be helpful to query students about their viewpoints and experiences, and could possibly begin with the students of this same school district.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This has been a dynamic decade in terms of LGBTQIA+ awareness. Increasing visibility in pop-culture and the media brings some issues to the forefront, and school climates reflect these changes. Moving towards greater inclusivity in the educational environment is not a task that is easily accomplished, nor is it likely to be effective without buy-in and involvement from a wide array of stakeholders. School mission statements are a good starting point, because individuals are more likely to embrace change when it reflects shared values, in this case a commitment to demonstrate caring for all students.

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## **Could More Holistic Policy Addressing Classroom Discipline Help Mitigate Teacher Attrition?**

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### **Abstract**

Schools across America are losing teachers at an alarming rate. Changing workforce demographics forecasted some level of loss decades ago. More recently, however, it has been noted declines are now reaching a crisis level across parts of the United States for a variety of reasons. Today the prevailing professional literature addressing public education largely identifies financial limitations as the primary force behind these teacher shortages. Research has only recently started to include other alternative factors such as working conditions and personal satisfaction in the conversation surrounding potential reasons for the ongoing loss of teachers. This article introduces findings from a newly completed study in Arizona that confirmed classroom conditions, and most notably student discipline concerns, appear to be important considerations for teachers who are contemplating leaving their current positions. These findings contribute to the scope of the existing literature. They also advance practical implications about implementing initiatives to advance school improvement and in particular to combat teacher

attrition. Finally, the article advances possible policy considerations and modifications in professional practice that could be targeted to improve classroom climate and contribute to teacher recruitment and retention successes.

**Keywords:** teacher attrition, holistic policy, classroom climate, student discipline

### **Introduction**

Teacher shortages are not new to education. Primarily considered early on to be an outcome of anticipated demographic changes with an aging population, the demand for “highly qualified” teachers as a result of No Child Left Behind provided early added complications for schools to overcome (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006; Hughes, 2014). By the start of the 2015-2016 school year, severe and even crisis-level teacher shortages were being reported all across the United States. The shortages, though already common for Arizona, were suddenly being felt in places including appealing parts of California, Pennsylvania and Nevada (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Of further significance, these same authors noted that the severity of this situation was rapidly becoming so critical it was actually receiving increased mention within the general press. In fact, they reported that headlines and news articles on the topic of teacher shortages appeared 13 times more frequently at the start of the 2015 school year than they had been just the year before in 2014.

In keeping with the majority of the literature on this topic, Darling-Hammond and Berry (2006) as well as Sutcher, et al., (2016) have documented the areas of critical shortage and provided dire statistics concerning shortages in special education in general and especially for students in disadvantaged circumstances. More recently, and only exacerbating the situation, it was also reported that enrollments in teacher preparation programs decreased by 35% nationally in the preceding five years. Further, Sutcher, et al., (2016) have listed common approaches to navigating through shortages including increasing class sizes, filling vacancies with underqualified staff, and eliminating classes including electives. Finally, this dilemma has also resulted in widespread adaptations of policy and legislation that have systematically softened teacher credentialing and licensing across a growing number of states (Sutcher et al., 2016).

Arizona has frequently been referenced as a hot spot for frequent departures while the ongoing staffing crisis has evolved. According to Sutcher et al., (2016) at the time of their article, 62% of Arizona school districts reported having unfilled positions three months into the school year, and over 1,000 classroom instructors were only possessing substitute credentials. Further, these authors reported the state had one of the highest turnover rates of any state at the time. These figures corroborate reports in the daily news and establish that teacher retention is a critical concern in the state of Arizona where the primary policy conversation has focused on the topic of compensation and alternative licensing.

### **Overlooked Dynamics**

Though it is common knowledge teachers are in short supply, some of the dynamics leading teachers to leave the classroom may continue to be overlooked and contribute to the narrow financially-motivated policy focus that has long been in place. The prevailing paradigm maintained by the professional literature including the recent article by Sutcher, et al., (2016) characterizes teacher attrition as being almost entirely driven by financial limitations. While

there is credible evidence to strongly implicate finances in the emerging crisis, there is also legitimate reason to question the near totality of the prevailing financial “position.”

Fully trained and credentialed teachers have made a tremendous investment in their education and often also in terms of their personal collection of classroom resources as well. In Arizona teachers typically already know up front that in comparison to other states their compensation will be limited when they accept jobs and sign their contracts. Still, the news media in Arizona frequently reports on teachers leaving their classrooms mid-year and even mid-week without any warning. According to Ramos and Hughes (2019) these sudden departures typically also take place without there being a different job to head to. They have further suggested that it is highly unlikely these departing teachers suddenly realized they were underpaid compared to teachers in other states. Quite likely, instead, there are factors besides compensation and living expenses that may have contributed to their decisions.

Still, the financial-challenge paradigm that dominates this topic contends that lagging compensation is the dominant reason for teacher shortages (Lasagna, 2009). This paradigm is so widely embraced in the literature that it has left little room to consider other contributing causes for teacher attrition. Recently De Stercke, Goyette and Robertson (2015) as well as Schaffhouser (2014) advanced the possibility of more personal motivators for teachers leaving their classrooms. Ingersoll (2003), reported that discipline challenges in the classroom, and the effect they have on classroom climate and teacher morale should be viewed as evidence of said personal motivators. Though often overlooked within the literature, stresses placed on teachers also present a challenge to classroom stability (Educator Arizona Retention and Recruitment Report, 2015). These overlooked dynamics serve as the foundation of this study and resulting article which ultimately advocates for an expansion of policy to include some of the overlooked dynamics just referenced.

### **Review of Literature**

As already written, the urgency surrounding the topic of teacher attrition is only increasing. As offered earlier, Arizona, which is the setting for the study, has been reported as having the highest turnover rate of any state in the nation, with as much as a reported 24% gap resulting each year (Sutcher, et al., 2016). Ahead of exploring potential non-financial considerations contributing to the classroom staffing in Arizona, a review of the prevailing thought on the subject is warranted. Said review will first examine the financial costs associated with teacher attrition, then consider impacts upon student learning. Next, it will draw upon the prevailing paradigm upon which the topic is addressed. And finally, it introduces alternate considerations that hopefully positively contribute to teacher attrition challenges in ways not currently considered because of the dominant financial deficit paradigm already in place.

### **Financial Costs**

Teacher attrition is a high stakes issue and as such estimated financial costs associated with teacher losses have long been studied. Almost 20 years ago, Breaux and Wong (2003) estimated the potential local costs in excess of \$50,000 per teacher departure. Five years ago, cost estimates to replace teachers across the United States ranged between \$1 billion to \$2.2 billion per year (Haynes, 2014) and even to as much as \$7.3 billion according to some calculations

(New York University, 2015). In 2016, Sutcher, et al., estimated the annual financial costs with problematic teacher attrition to be up to at least an estimated \$8 billion nationally.

### **Student Learning**

Ongoing teacher attrition not only stands to initiate a spiraling jumble of increasing hiring costs, but often also results in decreased student achievement as well. The Arizona Department of Education (2015) reported that it takes from three to five years for teachers to become effective, and cited the high rate of teacher departures for contributing to student discipline issues and ultimately to diminished academic performance in schools across the state. Schools that keep hiring and replacing novice teachers on a regular basis are not providing their students with the level of effectiveness their parents are likely hoping for. Further, Ramos and Hughes (2019) indicated that underqualified personnel in the classroom actually often increased the stress placed on certified teachers who often had to take on responsibilities outside their own classroom as result of teacher shortages.

Furthermore, instead of being able to invest in professional development and continuity for a high-quality staff, dollars have to be allocated instead to starting over with teacher searches, again and again according to Lasagna (2009). This negative cycle stands to become self-perpetuating as teacher replacement efforts continue to eat away at financial and staff resources that could better be directed toward addressing other needs including professional development to deal with other challenges (Sutcher, et al., 2016).

### **Financial Motivations**

Traditionally scholars, practitioners, and policy makers have collectively held a very narrow financially-centered view concerning motivations responsible for teacher attrition in the United States (Ramos & Hughes, 2019). Even in the recent article by Sutcher, et al., financial considerations continued to stand out as the primary, secondary and even tertiary factors considered for future remediation of the attrition challenge. Financial considerations are important factors. In the school district where the study was conducted they were the third most important area staff identified for improvement behind time constraints (first) and local culture (second) according to the locally commissioned study.

This local reality, which advances other causes as reasons for attrition, agrees with findings reported by Haynes (2014) and Ingersol (2003) who both related how teachers regularly leave challenging locations once they secure enough experience to make their move regardless of financial realities. Adamson and Darling-Hammond (2011) further contributed that these departures from stressful surroundings typically take place despite districts incentivizing decisions to stay put by paying upwards of \$7,500 more per year in salary. Local conditions and the literature both suggest there are alternate considerations worth exploring when it comes to motivations teachers might have for leaving their current positions - especially in struggling high poverty schools like those in the host district for this study.

### **Alternate Considerations**

Multiple recent research efforts have been undertaken in order to identify a broader spectrum of possible reasons for increases in teacher attrition (De Stercke, Goyette & Robertson, 2015). The focus of these studies has included attempts to increase understanding of the role played by

personal motivations (Prather-Jones, 2011; Schaffhouser, 2014; Thibodeaux, Labat, Lee, & Labat, 2015). Ingersoll, Merrill and May (2016) have even examined teacher attrition from a management perspective and discovered that bureaucratic approaches to implementing accountability-focused measures actually impeded staff effectiveness, diminished job satisfaction, and ultimately negatively impacted staff morale.

While undesirable working conditions have gained standing as potential motivation for teacher departures (De Stercke, et al., 2015; Prather-Jones, 2011; Schaffhouser, 2014; Thibodeaux, et al., 2015), issues with student discipline and classroom management in particular have begun to stand out as significant sources of conflict and internal career dissonance for educators. Schools with greater discipline issues reported higher teacher turnover rates (Ingersoll, 2003), while Tsouloupas, Carson, Mathews, Grawitch, and Barber (2010) tied this phenomenon directly to the burnout teachers experienced daily in challenging classrooms.

Buchanan, Prescott, Schuck, Aubusson, Burke and Louviere (2013) identified these behavior challenges as a top cause of concern particularly for beginning teachers. Further, they noted that apprehension and inconsistencies in approaches to dealing with discipline only contributed to generalized anxiety and ineffectiveness among teachers. Finally, according to Thibodeaux, et al. (2015) teachers indicated that student discipline is a top reason for their leaving. Again, similar sentiment about classroom stresses was advanced in locally collected information sought from first year teachers as part of a district-wide effort to better understand the motivations for teacher attrition.

Every day tremendous effort is directed toward improving discipline in classrooms all across America. Sometimes the more bureaucratic approaches often utilized have actually been known to negatively impact a healthy school climate (Ingersoll, Merrill & May, 2016). Instead of speculating on the impacts these efforts make on classroom climate, this research sought direct input from the Arizona educators who are already experiencing the growing feelings of burnout, disillusionment and internal dissonance that threaten the longevity of their careers (Ramos & Hughes, 2019).

Teachers across America leave their positions every year. Many leave for family or other assorted personal reasons not addressed in this review or this study. There is nothing new about this reality, though there is also no indication that these types of reasons have helped to create the sharp increase in teacher departures either. The purpose of this study is to contribute to the general understanding of ways classroom discipline challenges may directly fuel the struggle to retain quality teachers by creating hostile working conditions that ultimately drive them away.

### **Focus of the Case Study**

Teacher attrition is a challenging issue in high-poverty settings. It has also been reported to be especially challenging across the state of Arizona (Sutcher, et al., 2016). The setting for this case study was a low-income inner-city public school district in Arizona. To its credit, the cooperating district was not taking its many challenges lightly leading up to this study. It had already undertaken steps to enhance its comprehensive school improvement efforts by teaming with noted consulting organization WestEd to transform leadership and instructional delivery across the district (Dueppen & Hughes, 2018). It had also already commissioned a private

agency to conduct a local study to document attrition levels and investigate possible reasons for them. At the point of this study, however, the district had not yet established any policy to address its findings and their impacts on teacher attrition challenges.

Local investigative efforts documented that 19.5% of the certified staff resigned in 2015. The district then saw departures climb to 26.5% of the local teaching staff the following year despite the noted organizational improvements already introduced earlier (Dueppen & Hughes, 2018). Of further note, two-thirds of the decisions to leave were made by teachers in their first three years of classroom experience. And, compensation was not the primary concern identified by the staff. Instead, as already referenced, it came in third behind being over-burdened with work which was followed by school culture concerns that included classroom climate.

A locally administered survey of new teachers from 2015-2016 school year also uncovered that 35% of those responding identified classroom management as their greatest challenge. This concern continued up to the time of this study despite district efforts to implement Positive Behavior and Instructional Supports (PBIS), restorative justice practices, and social emotional learning programming across the district following the partnership with WestEd. Despite the many efforts already underway with the guidance, cooperation, and support of noted outside resources, the local setting provided the researcher with an active source for studying the dynamics associated with teachers' decisions to leave their positions.

This article delved into this situation and setting by examining the perceptions of administrators, faculty, and parents as they reflected on the impact classroom conflict and interpersonal dissonance have had on teacher stability in their school. Further, it examined attitudes toward local efforts to address classroom discipline concerns, and considered how approaches and efforts spearheaded by district leadership were perceived by different stakeholders. Ultimately, the study sought to contribute to the overall understanding of motivating forces that impact teachers' decisions to remain or leave their current work setting and generate recommendations for future success with this topic.

### **Research Methods**

A descriptive case study approach using mixed methods was utilized to investigate the following questions:

RQ 1: How do local disciplinary practices contribute to promoting a positive classroom climate?

RQ 2: How does the current climate affect teacher satisfaction and motivation to remain in their existing assignment?

RQ 3: How does leadership directly address teacher retention through managing students' discipline, and what impact does this effort have on retention success?

RQ 4: When it comes to the impact that student discipline has on classroom and ultimately teacher stability and retention, what are the perceptions of school employees?

RQ 5: When it comes to the impact that student discipline has on classroom and ultimately teacher stability and retention, what are the perceptions of parents?

This approach was utilized as it has been proven to effectively investigate real-life situations impacting social relationships (Yin, 2014), while involving a wide variety of resources (Creswell, 2013). Open sampling was employed to survey all available classroom participants and parents, whereas purposeful sampling was employed in the selection of principals to interview. The population for this study came from an urban Arizona school district where students with a very low socioeconomic background are enrolled in eight of nine buildings. In recent years the district has struggled with increasing teacher departures and has even commissioned a local study in an attempt to learn more about the underlying problem.

The outcome of the locally commissioned study revealed that the cooperating district faced increasingly common challenges for a low-income urban district in its geographic area. It was not unheard of for as much if not more than 20% of the district's professional teaching staff to turn over in a given year, which is consistent with reported state-wide trends (Sutcher, et al., 2016). In as much as the district was just initiating its efforts to better understand the underlying mechanisms to the staffing challenges it faced, no working hypothesis or policies concerning attrition had been developed as of the time of this study.

Given the fact that Arizona has been identified by Sutcher et al. (2016) as being a leading state for struggle with the topic of teacher attrition, there are recognized limits to the applicability of the findings provided here to other settings and other circumstances. The intent of this study and subsequently this article was not to establish classroom discipline and classroom climate as the primary considerations behind teacher attrition challenges. Rather, the study and findings have always been intended to lend credence to the argument that there are in fact non-financial considerations that need to be factored into the research, literature and discussion surrounding this topic.

### **Instrument Development**

In all a total of 206 teachers from all grade levels within the district and 35 parents from across the district were surveyed. As the researcher was not able to find existing data collection instruments that directly examined the research questions, a more grounded approach was employed wherein the researcher took steps to develop and refine a protocol for the study. Based on the literature and input from professional contacts outside of the cooperating organization, initial questions were developed for consideration in the survey instrument. These were then reviewed by an expert panel including three cooperating college professors with expertise in research methods, survey development, program evaluation, and school improvement. The refined instrumentation was then piloted with eight volunteer teachers and five volunteer parents not affiliated with the cooperating district, with feedback again being shared with the expert panel and final revisions being approved. Finally, the survey provided to parents was made available in both English and Spanish to better meet the communication needs of those agreeing to participate in the study.

The surveyed teachers and parents were joined by five principals who agreed to be interviewed in person by means of a structured one-hour session in order to provide additional insights into

the approach the district was utilizing to address classroom discipline issues and how administration viewed any potential links between classroom climate and teacher staffing patterns. Principals were asked to respond to the following questions which were similarly developed with the assistance of the expert panel and three volunteers from outside the district who served as a pilot group:

1. How do you support and motivate teachers at your site in order to avoid teacher turnover?
2. What is your opinion about the importance of student discipline and the impact this has on classroom climate and teacher turnover rate?
3. What is the impact that student discipline has on the MHSD measures to reduce teacher turnover rate?
4. According to you, what are the main factors that produce high teacher turnover rate within the district?
5. What would be a solution to improve the district's teacher turnover rate in regards to teacher motivation and student discipline?

### **Analysis**

Quantitative data obtained from survey data was analyzed utilizing tools available through the electronic survey platform. Written and qualitative information provided by the participants was analyzed manually, identifying codes, and posteriorly collapsing the codes to obtain categories. Findings will be discussed next, and will be organized according to the research questions (RQ). In instances where information from teachers is particularly noteworthy, tables have been provided to further illuminate the information obtained through that research question. The questions included within the tables are denoted as Teacher Survey Questions (TSQ). The remaining information is provided in narrative format, including the parent information when available, and insights provided by cooperating school administrators.

### **Findings**

**(RQ1) How do local disciplinary practices contribute to promoting a positive classroom climate?** The cooperating local school district was already well into efforts to address classroom climate concerns at the time of this study. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), restorative practices, and strong efforts in the area of social-emotional learning were already well underway for several years. Therein the ratings provided by teachers who completed the survey were not based on a speculative reaction to how things “might work.” They were based on local experiences with extensive implementation of each of the listed approaches.

Table 1 shows teachers consistently rated their own individual ability to manage student behavior as a strength. Over 70% responded as such, while almost 50% also questioned the efficacy of organizational discipline approaches and supports. Not included in the table, parents also believed teachers were able to maintain a healthy classroom climate with 77% indicating that sentiment and only 6% of parents disagreeing.



Principals’ narrative comments reflected their belief that the district did a strong job of supporting disciplinary practices through research-based initiatives, and attributed success to those decisions and implemented efforts. There was also expressed concern that teachers would merely “recite” student expectations as designed by programming, doing so “without actually teaching students” how to do what was expected of them. Though they did not ultimately attribute attrition to classroom behaviors these administrators did express the belief that climate was incredibly important. One principal even went on record noting “you can have the very best planning in place but absent rapport and positive relationships even the best lessons won’t succeed.”

Table 1  
*Teachers: How Local Disciplinary Practices Contribute to Promoting a Positive Classroom Climate (TSQ5, TSQ8, TSQ11)*

Teacher Survey Questions	SA		A		Neither A/D		D		SD	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
5. I feel well prepared to manage student discipline issues in the classroom. (213)	45	21.13	107	50.23	31	14.55	24	11.27	6	2.82
8. The management of students’ discipline in my classroom is effective and I can engage my students in highly rigorous lessons. (213)	32	15.02	110	51.64	42	19.72	25	11.74	4	1.88
11. The official students’ discipline programs at my school are effective. (211)	15	7.11	35	16.59	57	27.01	64	30.33	40	18.96

Note. SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree.

In all, there was agreement that attempts to improve behavior were meeting with success. However, there was strong disagreement as to what the basis of that success was. In theory one would expect it to be important for a combination of effective leadership, individual strengths, program strengths, and responsive professional development to all come into play in order for success to be realized. The responses provided for RQ1 suggested that strengths appeared to exist and even realize some level of success. However, a theme that will continue to present itself indicated that cohesiveness, and a shared understanding of purpose perhaps did not exist as would be expected.

**(RQ2) How does current climate affect teacher satisfaction and motivation to remain in their existing assignment?** Information presented in Table 2 confirms student discipline negatively impacts teacher satisfaction according to 76% of responding teachers. Almost half (42%) strongly agreed. Parents also agreed that behavior is a strong motivator with 76% also indicating as such. However, 87% of parents reported that their child’s teacher appeared satisfied with their circumstances. This observation corresponds to a generally positive viewpoint about conditions at school but also suggests that teachers are used to keeping their feelings to

themselves. The later possibility is supported by teacher statements citing the feelings of disapproval they experienced if they came forward with a problem and their motivation not to share their true feelings. Some teachers, in fact, indicated that the dread of coming forward to go on record might in fact “contribute to their inclinations to leave.”

Principals strongly voiced the view that discipline did not impact teacher retention, though two of the five acknowledged their district did have ongoing teacher turnover issues. The expressed administrator position was consistently along the lines that “we give them the tools they need” while referring to PBIS and restorative practice initiatives. Realizing that teachers were often facing personal challenges that could be draining despite the organized interventions, it was voiced that as classroom leaders teachers needed to remind themselves “they are the adults” and continue to persevere.

Curiously, and foreshadowing the possibility that the administrators were perhaps a bit more unsure of their position than they wanted to appear, came the comment that while student discipline was certainly not the reason for leaving “hopefully a departing teacher would share that information in an exit interview” if their assumptions were incorrect. A statement like that suggests a certain amount of internal acceptance that perhaps administration might not really have an accurate pulse on what is happening in their buildings. This lack of connection will show itself again in an upcoming research question.

Table 2

*Teachers: How Current Climate Affect Teacher Satisfaction and Motivation to Remain in Current Assignment (TSQ6, TSQ7, TSQ9)*

Teacher Survey Questions	SA		A		Neither A/D		D		SD	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
6. Student behavior issues in the classroom make me feel discouraged at the end of a teaching day. (213)	40	18.78	70	32.86	44	20.66	46	21.60	13	6.10
7. Student discipline issues affect teachers’ decision to leave the school/district. (213)	89	41.78	73	34.27	29	13.62	17	7.98	5	2.35
9. The climate I have created in my classroom motivates my students and I to teach/learn every day. (213)	61	28.64	120	56.34	27	12.68	5	2.35	0	0.00

*Note.* SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree.

**(RQ3) How does leadership directly address teacher retention through managing students’ discipline and what impact does this effort have on retention success?** This research question did not draw from parents because they were not regularly in school and able to experience the daily efforts and actions first-hand. Teachers largely viewed principals as being

supportive personally (57%) but many viewed formal actions and organizational efforts with less favor. In all 44% took negative issue with school efforts while 66% took negative issue with district efforts. In contrast, administrators consistently reported that Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) and restorative practice combined to form a successful theme, and that professional development was both successful and well embraced.

An interesting point raised by administration in response to RQ3 was that the students “needed to learn how to relax.” Though the questions were directed at their efforts to support teachers, it was voiced that many students had too much of a “past” to contend with to be able to learn anything without doing a better job of relaxing. They held that teachers would do well to come to terms with this need instead of robotically expecting students to learn. So instead of responding to how they manage discipline, responses like these point to the principal’s role in maintaining appropriate delivery of instruction.

Staying with instructional approach it was voiced how they “try to honor teacher individuality in their instructional delivery, and do not encourage the use of robotic responses” that might be offered in professional development opportunities. And finally, from a disciplinary standpoint it was added collectively that “we should be the ones to deal with the extreme behaviors,” especially with new students who might be unfamiliar with the process in place.

Taken together, in response to RQ3, teachers were clearly less inclined to credit leadership with making a strong contribution to managing student discipline whereas administrators commonly suggested they needed to be the ones providing perspective to the overall effort. While they acknowledged their place in dealing with extreme behavior, there was more administrative concern expressed about student stresses than challenges which motivate teachers to leave their positions.

**(RQ4) When it comes to the impact that student discipline has on classroom and ultimately teacher stability and retention, what are the perceptions of school employees?** Table 3 focuses on information obtained in Teacher Survey Question 18 from RQ4, which was particularly revealing in how it underscored the importance of this topic in the eyes of teachers. In all, 59% of responding teachers viewed student behavior as interfering with their instruction. One response was very telling in how it tied these stresses to their future, stating:

I have thought about quitting more than once. The behaviors that students have are extreme and I have never felt so degraded and harassed. If it were not for the support of my admin and coach, I would have quit in the first month. I do not know how much more I can withstand, but as long as they are trying, I will try as well.

Table 3

*Beliefs about Items that will Reduce Teacher Turnover Rate (TSQ18) (200 Answered)*

	N	%
More resources to help manage student discipline.	151	75.50
Full implementation and sustainability of the school discipline programs.	137	68.50
Improve school working environment	116	58.00
Mentoring programs for classroom management and student discipline.	110	55.00
PLC trainings focused on managing student discipline issues	105	52.50
Monetary bonus for fewer classroom management and discipline issues.	64	32.00
Teacher recognition/rewards based on student discipline.	56	28.00
Academic mentoring programs.	50	25.00

Teachers were asked to select any listed strategy they considered capable of assisting in reducing teacher turnover at their district. As shown in the Table 3, from eight choices provided, the highest option selected by 151 teachers (76%) was to have more resources to help manage student discipline. This response is consistent with teachers' stated view that classroom climate was a concern, that it contributed to low morale and potential attrition. Some 137 teachers (69%) identified having full implementation of the school discipline programs. Two of the three lowest rated options had to do with personal recognition, rewards or financial compensation for being successful with challenging students and challenging situations.

Administrators again had an opposing point of view and indicated belief that organization efforts to intervene in the area of student discipline were effective. They were especially locked in on the role of the behavioral coach when stating that this resource had to intervene quickly and effectively. Or "it could be too late" by the time administration realized there was a problem "months later." Though there is obvious truth to the need for effective intervention with the challenging situations a teacher could face, the fact that administration might be unaware of a struggling teacher "for months" and not until "it is too late" is an interesting admission on the part of school leadership. Just as was the case with findings from RQ2, it once again suggests their possible and unfortunate lack of connection with the climate developing within their own classrooms and across their schools.

**(RQ5) When it comes to the impact that student discipline has on classroom and ultimately teacher stability and retention, what are the perceptions of parents?** Parents were the exclusive focus of this question, and indicated awareness of a teacher retention problem, but did not link this to classroom discipline or any perceived form of discord. The positive viewpoint without critical understanding of underlying context is not unique. Gallup Corporation has documented information that parents regularly hold more positive viewpoints toward their own schools and staff than they have towards education on a whole (Lopez, 2011). In all, their responses are supportive but lacking insight as evidenced by statements of expectation that there be a completely qualified teacher on hand and already poised "and ready to go" whenever a vacancy were to take place.

### Discussion

Results from this study raise multiple important points. First, each stakeholder group (teachers, parents, and administrators) agreed that classroom discipline in and of itself is important. In other words, behavior matters. While teachers and even parents clearly recognized student

behavior's negative impacts on a teacher's commitment to stay put, principals came across as being less willing to acknowledge it. What makes administration's response all the more surprising is that existing data from the district's own private studies affirmed that there were growing local problems with teacher retention and new teachers (who were identified as the most likely to leave) had clearly expressed concerns over classroom discipline. Principals even spoke to the damaging effects that "one single challenging student" could inflict while "taking the entire classroom" with them.

It is highly unlikely that administration would be completely unaware of the findings from local action research being carried out on a critical issue already identified by their own school district. Therein, the responses offered by principals provide cause for additional speculation. Whether the responses offered by principals were motivated by an honest perspective, a possible position they were deliberately taking, or perhaps was prompted by a lack of genuine connection to the happenings in their own schools is difficult to discern. Perhaps they were based on a combination of these influences. Such a possibility warrants extended consideration due to the critical leadership role held by building leaders and as result of the various perplexing responses they provided in their interviews.

The point raised about overlooked information from the locally commissioned research stands out. In addition, there are multiple comments principals made suggesting a lack of general awareness concerning disciplinary struggles in their classrooms. Added to this is their expressed viewpoint that discipline was really the responsibility of the behavior specialist to monitor and respond to. Taken together this line of thinking suggests a certain level of detachment from the discipline topic in general. Further, it could explain their "not knowing for months until it was too late" when one of their teachers was struggling or even failing in their classroom management efforts. Finally, openly acknowledging that an exit interview from a departing teacher might reveal their position on the impacts of classroom climate was incorrect was further affirmation of possible disconnect. Taken together these responses create an opening for speculation that administrators were in some manner "removed" from ownership of this issue at least in comparison to the ratings, feelings, and motivations expressed by teachers.

A second important if not also somewhat surprising point has to do with teachers seeing themselves as being more capable individually than "the system" appears to be to them. Considering repeated statements from principals voicing how they needed to be the ones to consistently coach and lend perspective to their "robotic" teachers, it is highly unlikely that the response provided by teachers was the result of being "built up" in their own eyes by their administration. Following the reasoning of Rice (2014) it is instead possible that their heightened sense of self-efficacy stems from the success they are experiencing in dealing with difficult classroom behaviors. The nagging misfortune suggested by this possible point of view is that instead of coming across as a cohesive team, principals fail to recognize the impact of committed and qualified teachers and in turn teachers fail to see the benefits (resources and training) provided by "the system." This conundrum leads directly to the final important point.

The third and final important standout point is that "the system" needs to function more holistically in order to bring about success. If channeled effectively, the apparent sense of self-efficacy growing within the teaching ranks could be a positive development. If dealt with

poorly, and perhaps even dismissed by administration, it likely leads to continued acrimony and hastened teacher departures. At the time the study was completed, the cooperating district had invested tremendous time, effort, and resources into creating sustainable advances in programming, instruction and leadership (Dueppen & Hughes, 2018). Based on the insights obtained through this research, there is little to suggest that the very important topic of classroom discipline demonstrated the improvements that the joint efforts with WestEd were attempting to help bring about.

Despite tremendous investment into an incredibly important aspect of the educational operations in the district, there was more evidence of dissention than shared purpose. The pieces appear to remain separate instead of becoming part of a bigger and better whole. Therein, it is evident that policy needs to be developed in house to make it impossible for the parts of the solution to remain individual pieces instead of uniting stakeholders to create a stronger and more successful whole. Though the wording of any policy is important, in this instance establishing the unmistakable expectation that all parties will become actively invested in achieving the same solution - instead of passively “buying into” conditions as they already appear to exist - would represent the master stroke of effective leadership.

### **Conclusions**

Findings from this study support recent literature linking teachers’ decisions to leave the classroom to more personal variables like disruptive student behaviors. Though the responses in this study and information from a preceding local study shared in this article suggest financial considerations came in third in terms of significance for teacher decisions to leave, it is not the position of this article to assert that classroom climate is always a more impactful issue than financial matters. However, it seems clear that personal variables including student discipline and classroom climate need to be more actively considered among the important variables that are already part of the teacher attrition conversation.

Added to the validation of personal factors offered by this study is evidence of internal dissonance being experienced by teachers who are struggling to decide whether or not to risk being open about their frustrations at work and whether or not to stay with their chosen profession as result of multiple stressors they are encountering. There were clearly delineated differences in viewpoints between teachers and administrators concerning classroom climate and its impact on teacher satisfaction. Differences demonstrated through this study likely underscore why, in this instance at least, teachers report that they like their administrators more so personally than they feel they can rely on them professionally.

As stated earlier, there is ample reason to speculate why cooperating administrators seemingly failed to draw upon district collected data that confirmed teachers’ classroom concerns. Instead principals responded that they themselves saw no connection between student discipline, classroom climate and teacher inclinations to leave their positions. In contrast to principals, parents were more sympathetic to the teachers they traditionally support. However, unless they individually opt to become candidates for the local governing board, parents typically do not prove to be a viable catalyst in efforts to improve classroom conditions or teacher retention, at least in ways that principals are expected to be.

This study focused on dynamics as they existed in an urban low-income district in a state that has been recognized as having the greatest struggle with teacher attrition (Sutcher, et al., 2016). While the information resulting from the study and advanced by this article is meaningful, it cannot be assumed the findings offered here translate uniformly to other locations and situations. That said, there is sufficient reason to advocate on behalf of developing policy that more directly and holistically addresses this broader topic and takes personally linked dynamics such as classroom climate into consideration.

### **Implications**

Though there are limits to the transferability of results from any study to the broader whole of education, at the very least this one contributes confirmation that there are more facets to the teacher retention challenges than solely the financially linked realities that have long dominated the topic of teacher retention. Further, there were multiple instances within this study where sources of dissonance were uncovered including teacher disagreements with administration, lack of confidence in district initiatives, and finally, genuine concern about teachers being able to offer honest feedback let alone be viewed as making criticisms of existing practice.

Ingersoll, Merrill and May (2016) spoke to the discord and potential disruption that can often unintentionally result from accountability-oriented school improvement efforts. Their cautions seem reasonable on a whole. They also appear to be borne out in findings from this study where some level of discord appeared to result from long-term attempts to implement research-based interventions like PBIS or restorative programs to fidelity (Dueppen & Hughes, 2018; Ramos & Hughes, 2019). These two critical points lead to the key recommendation that needs to be made - schools need to respond to classroom and attrition challenges more holistically through policy that invites and respects teacher inputs as much as hard data on student behaviors.

The cooperating school district in this study got off to an excellent start by proactively investigating local teacher attrition issues and uncovering classroom concerns held by new teachers. That administration did not appear to realize let alone embrace the information resulting from these actions points to the type of systemic challenges that were identified by Dueppen and Hughes (2018) and need to be addressed in places attempting to undertake significant change. Instead of seeing teachers quietly leave in frustration, and only then rely on repeated exit interviews to turn things around as espoused by an administrator, schools need to develop proactive policy that more comprehensively addresses overall working conditions within the organization. Perhaps helping leaders to see the connection between classroom dissatisfactions and teacher attrition will help motivate them to take steps in this direction. Were such a policy in place in the cooperating school district at the time this study was conducted, it is more likely that the viewpoints of administration would have been more consistent with those espoused by teachers and parents and may have helped realize a decrease in teacher departures as opposed to the increase that was actually reported.

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## **Is Innovation Outpacing Insight: Why Schools Need Policy to Address Communication Practices with Parents**

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### **Abstract**

While the bond between teachers and students continues to remain at the center of any quality education, of late technology has played an expanding role in reshaping instruction, daily operations, facilities management, as well as communication within and outside of schools. As it would happen, much of the innovation education increasingly relies upon is actually driven by designers and distributors largely responding to market forces more so than educational pedagogy, research or policy. This research-based policy-centered article concerns itself with how well educational leaders have kept up with technological innovation, including how communication has or has not been addressed from a school governance standpoint. Specifically, it presents direct findings from a newly completed study in Arizona that focused on parent perceptions and the implications of digitally-based communication efforts between schools and home. This original research was limited to Arizona, though it revealed multiple areas where policy may easily overlook important elements of the bond between educators and parents in addition to legal requirements tied to federal funds. Ultimately this article advances important policy and practice considerations aimed at helping to ensure a quality working relationship with parents and guardians.

**Keywords:** school policy, Title One, ESSA, communication, technology, parents,

## **Introduction**

It has been almost 50 years since the final Apollo lunar mission captured the spirit and imagination of mankind by harnessing technology to deliver American astronauts to the moon and safely return them home. Since that time space travel has taken a back seat to other endeavors, but technology has continued to catalogue important advances in countless aspects of our daily lives. We may not be traveling in flying cars as forecasted by popular depictions during the 1960s, but self-driving cars appear to be becoming a reality. The jury is still out concerning wide-spread acceptance of these smart-cars (Nees, 2016), but on a whole American society has freely embraced a tremendous amount of innovation, and will likely continue to do so in the future.

The way Americans prepare meals, purchase goods online, and plug almost everything they own into an overnight charger highlight ways technological advances have shaped our lives in 2020. Most notable, perhaps, is the way technology has revolutionized communication, where portability, convenience, speed, and power have combined with a never-ending innovative supply of “apps” that not only allow us to communicate world-wide but have even also come to dominate the way we interact with the people physically nearest to us. Americans’ connection to their cell phones is rooted in a history of excitement and acceptance. In 1983, Time magazine named the computer the “Man of the Year,” and communication has not been the same since (Purdue University Online, 2018). Unlike acceptance challenges for self-driving cars raised by Nees (2016), there has been little recent evidence of questioning associated with digital communications advances. That said, perhaps it is time to start raising a few.

High quality communication, in any and all of its forms, has long been considered vital for effective leadership (Spinks & Wells, 1995), as well as productive and sustainable relationships with all stakeholders including parents and guardians. Increasingly, technological tools have been designed to get the “intended message” sent out from schools. In this one-way approach it becomes the responsibility of the parent or guardian to follow up with regard to those announcements or situations that concern them enough to prompt them to act. One of the many emerging issues within communications has to do with the migration from more traditional two-way communication such as phone calls or face-to-face conversations, to increased reliance on one-way communication.

There are actually federal regulations (The Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2016) that identify a school’s responsibilities to effectively communicate directly and meaningfully with parents and guardians. These requirements are well documented and have long been available to all schools. Still, there may be reason to question how frequently many schools even think about the direction digital communication is heading in and the implications of increased one-way contacts. How well schools evaluate and attempt to improve their current communication approaches with parents is another question onto itself. Policy development is a critical component of school operations. Perhaps schools would do well to develop policy that clearly defines leadership responsibilities for addressing and ensuring effective communications.

In an environment where one-way communication trends continue to outpace more traditional means of interaction, policy and dissemination become of paramount importance. In places like Arizona where a tremendous number of schools are dependent on Title One dollars for a

significant portion of their budget, the stakes of securing sustainable collaboration with parents and guardians is only greater. This article addresses this situation by reviewing relevant literature, and then addressing local dynamics that factored into the recently completed case-study. After delineating the research methods which were employed, findings are shared and followed by discussion including implications for policy, practice and future research.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Effective collaboration is a critical component of the partnership between schools and the home setting. Communication has never been more important than it is now, with an increasingly complex society riddled with competing demands and escalating daily challenges impacting the lives of educators and families alike (Hughes, 2014). Whereas digital technology has made tremendous strides toward connecting the world with a 6-ounce smartphone, there are other communication implications that are likely being overlooked as result of an absence of any policy outlining expectations or assessments to ensure the needs of parents and schools are being met. The need for effective communication is already tied to Title One legislation. The original research this article is based on set out to identify, then illuminate the experiences, needs and perceptions of the parents who are served by schools and the digital tools that prevail today. Though there are limitations to the ability to generalize findings from any study to other settings, this was an important topic of study. It was initiated in an effort to help advocate for the development of focused policy that better establishes and monitors effective communication practices between our schools and the parents they serve.

### **Discussion of Literature**

With so much communication being channeled through digital mediums, it is somewhat surprising that there is so little information concerning overarching policy or guidelines, or at the very least acquisition decision-making practices within the literature. Awareness of this inattention prompted the original study into practice apparently without benefit of policy guidance. Due to the lack of literature on any of these driving forces per se, the review of relevant background information for this article will begin by addressing federal regulations, then work through policy considerations, as well as ways this topic plays out in practice. In as much as the research was policy specific from the outset, this pathway seems fitting. Finally, after touching on how communication practices are actually driven effectively as well as problematically, it concludes by questioning how schools truly know that their communication efforts are as effective as they should be.

### **Federal Regulations**

Provisions for parent, guardian and family engagement within the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) specifically set forth expectations that schools ensure effective communication and involvement of parents, and further, support the establishment of a viable collaborative partnership comprised of the school, parents, and the community. Finally, the law requires schools to provide parents and guardians with the means for monitoring academic progress and approaches that enable teachers to work with the family member as equal partners (The Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2016)

Specifically, as it pertains to the low-income situations addressed by Title One, the same ESSA legislation outlines additional responsibilities for schools to jointly develop a working and

meaningful school-parent compact that calls for joint investment and development of an effective and sustainable partnership (The Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2016). Though the specific language cited in ESSA may differ from preceding legislation, its intent and overall spirit of effort reaches back to 1965 and the original authorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Therein, considering the scope of Title One funding and the length of its mission, these are some highly significant expectations that have long impacted schools in one way or another. It would seem that the intent should be understood, honored and carried out.

### **Policy**

In combination, the original ESEA and succeeding revised legislation leading up to ESSA have been in place for the past 45 years. Many of the actual provisions schools must address, along with flexibilities they can pursue, are cited directly within the legislation (US Department of Education, 2015). Some would consider it to be highly redundant for schools to craft, approve and then implement policy that merely duplicated the legislation and its provisions word for word. That said, and as was addressed in the preceding section, there are specific provisions calling for a local development of communication and collaboration compact with families. Policy development may not be the norm for all of the regulations, but would seem to be especially important if this more critical provision should prove difficult to implement or were not receiving parental support.

With advances in technology and its widespread utilization, the entire community including parents now largely have opportunity to gain access to school district policy directly through the local school website or through other means. In Arizona online access for almost every district is provided through a “Policy Bridge” portal which is maintained by the Arizona School Board Association (n.d.) One of the reasons access exists the way it does is result of the strong role the ASBA plays in developing and distributing model policies (Hughes, 2018). Though there is no requirement that individual districts wholly adopt model language word for word, in Arizona there is typically relatively little deviation from the up-to-date models provided by the association.

Through the aforementioned portal anyone, including parents, has opportunity to access district policy. In essence three considerations stood out from examination of policy. First, there was no evidence of local nor model policy directly relating to the “communication provisions” set forth in ESSA. Second, with the exception of policy directly articulating the need to educate students in today’s digital environment, technology tended to be frequently cross-listed with other existing policies. This “add on” approach would suggest a lack of prominence in policy development for this area. Third, absent any identified connection to ESSA or preceding ESEA legislation, there are commonly existing policies that designate the superintendent of schools to establish practices for involving parents and guardians in a collaborative effort.

The existing policies just referenced are extremely general and limited. Again, making no general reference to federal legislation let alone specifically to ESSA or ESEA, the provisions in adopted policy simply designate “it shall be the role of the superintendent” to develop ways for parents and guardians to be included in the educational process in a meaningful way. Said policy lacks timelines, specific steps, or any type of evaluative or reporting component (Arizona School Board Association, n.d.). Therein, the direction for the already important relationship heightened

by ESSA requirements (The Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2016) do not appear to drive policy at least in the majority of school districts in Arizona. Nor, in fact, is there even any cross-listing linking the topics to each other. This lack of policy does not prevent proactive practice, but it certainly does not encourage, support or sustain it either.

### **What Is Driving Practice?**

Whereas communication efforts appear not to have been guided by policy, they have long instead been heavily influenced by developments within the commercial marketplace of which education is merely a part of a larger whole. This “outsider” orientation has been thought, at least in part, to help explain why so many teachers and parents did not initially appear to embrace digital communication technologies as readily as imagined (Rogers & Wright 2008). It is also likely that there is some methodological bias that needs to be addressed concerning much of the research that has been attempted on digital communication. As they further reported, even in 2008, the vast majority of studies which in any way focused on this topic relied almost exclusively on internet-based survey approaches to reach potential participants. It is difficult to deny the possibility of underrepresenting the views of those who are digitally challenged in some way, when the instrument of data collection almost universally internet-based.

The bias that is inherent in said approach to collecting data was a consideration in the development of this study - both in terms of focus and design. Further, with the rapid pace of changing technologies, there is always need for additional work in terms of assessing and updating the impacts of the latest innovations being introduced to society. Put another way, it has proven to be difficult to really know how communication is progressing and whether consumer “need” is prompting innovation, or how much the marketplace is driving practice as well as acceptance instead. Again, while favored approaches seem to function well under test conditions, that does not mean the newest communication trends work everywhere, or for everyone.

Anderson (2017) as well as Heath, Maghrabi and Carr (2015) confirmed that there are in fact access issues, most notably for low-income schools and parents. Further, Anderson (2017) and DiJohn (2015) reported that these accessibility differences create divisions in society that are not being considered while the tools and approaches we rely upon are advanced by developers from outside of education. Instead, schools in recent years have tended to adopt tools and methods that are largely purposed at least initially for other applications within commercial settings where a very different relationship and set of expectations exists between consumers and service providers than is expected to be the case in educational circles.

As business and government combine their efforts to reshape education into more of a business model, perhaps it is no accident that schools have succumbed to marketplace influences, and found an attraction to similarly adopting one-way communication strategies. That said, one-way efforts including mass distributed announcements, or merely providing access through online portals likely fail to meet the expectations dictated by best practice let alone satisfy the intent of referenced sections of ESSA. These considerations may not stand out all onto themselves, but in combination with other issues raised here, seem to perhaps justify a call for greater attention to this topic.

## **Practice Good and Bad**

Filmore (2000) reported that technology-based translation tools were proving to be instrumental in overcoming language barriers even as far back as 20 years ago. Since that time, technology has certainly evolved, and familiarity with it has likely increased as well - though it is difficult to say whether or not comfort and satisfaction has kept pace. For years, though, there has been evidence within the literature that teachers prefer email for communication whereas parents often prefer phone conversations (Gestwicki, 2006; Ricke, 2015; Rogers & Wright, 2008). Those reported differences were linked solely to preferences, and did not suggest that one approach was effective or that the other was not.

The “good” in digital communication is so widely celebrated and even advertised, it is not so difficult to see. Still, there are some troubling issues that have appeared over the years that may or may not be resolved by market forces and new equipment or applications. According to findings from the United States Department of Education (US Department of Education, 2017) parents do not always have the same access to internet technologies. Some, particularly those in lower income situations, are not always willing or able to rely on digital technology to communicate with their children’s schools. Several years ago, Bagin (2011) reported similar findings to this, and at that time indicated that lower-income adults self-reported they were also less confident in their ability to use digital equipment.

Even if we were to assume that equipment has improved and confidence in it has climbed as well, Rideout and Katz (2016) reported that 30% of families across America still ran into data limits with regularity. Further, they reported that sharing devices was occurring with enough frequency that it was not possible to know who the school was communicating with at least 20% of the time when they accessed the designated parents’ phone number. Finally, let us not forget that prevailing online data collection procedures probably minimize numbers like those just reported. So, information along these lines leaves us with at least two questions. Is the marketplace going to take care of issues like these? And, how are we supposed to know our efforts are working in time to make the difference we deserve to expect with digital communication?

## **How Do We Know?**

This discussion of the literature is not intended to suggest that digital communication does not work. It is likely that the majority of consumers today are at least generally satisfied with it. Still, is it enough to just “trust” that communication is working for parents and guardians, or anyone else, until we hear otherwise? According to Thompson, Mazer and Flood Grady (2015) there does not appear to be a practical understanding of parent communication preferences in this new digital era. Already referenced policy typically did little more than say the superintendent would be responsible for developing approaches to engage parents in the education of their children. After accounting for local dynamics in the setting where the study was conducted, and describing the methodological approach which was employed, the balance of the article will report findings on school and parent perspectives and ultimately discuss the implications of the information being imparted here.



### **Focus of the Case Study**

As this article stems directly from original research, a review of the study methods and limitations are warranted. A case study based investigative approach such as the one documented here has tremendous value, particularly for under-examined topics that typically lack existing research and literature from which to draw. Every study has limitations. One of the limitations faced by this original research rests in the potential applicability of findings and insights generated at one location to other situations in other locations. Therein a brief description of the location of the research will be offered next. The setting for the study is an area located between two major metropolitan areas in Arizona. It is an area that is in transition because of its location and access to multiple forms of transportation with boundaries adjoining growing school districts on multiple sides.

The area is largely Caucasian but has a Hispanic representation of approximately 30 to 40 percent depending on which estimates are referenced. The district in this situation has worked hard to update infrastructure and respond proactively to growing needs through improved programming and equitable access. As is the case across much of the state, this district relies heavily on the state school board association for the development and delivery of district policy models. Finally, like most districts in the area, there is heavy reliance on the official webpage for providing information and access to assorted services such as making payment, enrollment as well as employment opportunities.

### **Research Methods**

This article examined the perceptions of parents as they reflected on the practicality and overall effectiveness of communication efforts between school and home in light of technological developments and legal as well as policy considerations already detailed. Acknowledging the fact that limitations always exist, the descriptive case study sought to contribute to the broader understanding of topic through use of a descriptive case study approach which investigated the following Research Questions:

RQ 1: What are parents preferred ways for communicating with school?

RQ 2: How do parent preferences differ based on different subject/topic areas?

RQ 3: How do parents perceive their preferences to be valued and prioritized by school practices?

RQ 4: How do opinions differ between ethnic and socioeconomic groups?

RQ 5: What efforts have schools made to recognize and respond to parent preferences and needs?

This methodological approach to conducting research was undertaken as Yin (2014) has indicated that it effectively investigates real-life situations and social relationships while also being able to consider a vast array of unanticipated factors (Creswell, 2013). Open sampling was utilized to take advantage of all interested parties in an effort to maximize participation. For the quantitative portion of the study, the researcher relied upon questions from a previously

published survey, the “Parent Communication Survey” instrument, with permission granted by originators Reenay R. Rogers, Ph.D. and Dr. Vivian H. Wright (Rogers & Wright, 2008).

### **Instrument**

The modified survey was pilot tested by 8 non-residents and run by an expert panel of 4 administrators and faculty advisors to help determine the final composition of the instrument. Finally, noting potential bias described within the literature, the survey was distributed on paper to attempt to reduce the bias of most recent studies that notably relied exclusively on web-based data collection methods. On one side of the document the questions were in English, and on the opposite side in Spanish, as many of the Title One parents speak Spanish as a primary language.

### **Validity**

Multiple steps were undertaken to eliminate areas of potential bias and threats to validity. Participants of all backgrounds and ethnic origins repeatedly referenced low income and second language concerns that impacted them or they were aware of. The data and interview responses did not highlight unique differences between English and Spanish speaking parties. As such the tables and findings section was not organized in such a way as to report out on data according to ethnic origin or primary language.

The subjects were residents of an Arizona school district that is closely located to major metropolitan areas. A total of 300 surveys were distributed to parents who identified as English speaking, and 180 were distributed to those who self-identified as Spanish speaking. This distribution approximated the local demographics of the district. A return of 220 surveys resulting in a return rate of 46% and was viewed as a workable sample size for this type of research. Of the 220 parents who responded, a total of 9 consented to participate in the qualitative portion of the study. Of the 9 who consented, 3 were non-English speaking and were interviewed with the assistance of an interpreter.

### **Analysis**

As this was a mixed-methods approach combining both qualitative and quantitative methods, multiple steps were carried out to complete the data analysis. Descriptive data analysis techniques were applied to the survey information, whereas data received from interviews and surveys were recorded, coded, and classified into themes. The researcher then made comparisons among coding labels, analyzed themes, and used the data to make sense of the qualitative information and ultimately the quantitative findings as well. Finally, the researcher reduced the codes to themes, which were ultimately used to interpret the data and develop a clear description. For this paper, the research questions will be used to convey the findings, then themes will be the focus for the discussion.

### **Findings**

**(RQ 1) What are parents preferred ways for communicating with school?** While 1.4% of the participants involved with this study indicated having no direct internet access of any sort, the overriding reality conveyed by parents in response to surveys and later in focused interview was that there was usually “some way” to communicate digitally with the school. It is just that “said approach” might not be as convenient or effective as one might perhaps prefer. There are growing numbers of digital options available to parents and guardians just like everyone else in

our digital society, and survey results yielded some anticipated responses in addition to some matters that might be in need of additional attention.

Table 1  
*Parental Attitudes Toward Electronic Enabled Communication with the Teachers*

Access Type	<i>Preferred Communication</i>		<i>Actual Communication</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Email	162	73.3	156	70.6
Text	87	39.4	60	27.1
Social Media	16	7.2	17	7.7
Electronic Portal	90	40.9	86	39.1
None	12	5.5	25	11.4

Much as is the case across society on a whole, and as illustrated in Table 1, email provides the backbone for electronic communication between home and school (Rogers & Wright, 2008). In all 73.3 of parents and guardians indicated that email was their preferred option for electronic communication, and 70.6 reported it actually proved to be a productive option for communication. Electronic portals were the preference of only slightly more respondents than texting, but results indicate that the portals proved to be a larger part of actual ongoing communication than was the case for texting. It should come as no surprise that a small segment of the sample would express no preference for this line of questioning. In all 5.5% indicated this sentiment. Still, seeing that 11.4% reported “None” for actual reported communication would appear to suggest that over 10% of the parent/guardian body had some reportable level of challenge with electronic communication.

As society has grown accustomed to digital communication and come to favor texting far more than actually talking over the cellphone, (Gestwicki, 2006; Ricke, 2015; Rogers & Wright, 2008) it is reasonable to wonder just how important different approaches including one-way as opposed to two-way communication between home and school have become. Table 2 presents findings associated with this line of questioning, and selected two-way communication as an almost 4:1 priority over one-way interaction, but ultimately participants most strongly supported the idea that the preference really rests in the purpose of the intended contact being initiated.

Table 2  
*Parent Preference Regarding Two-Way Versus One-Way Communication*

Choice	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
I strongly prefer – one way	6	2.7
I somewhat prefer – one way	13	5.9
It depends on the purpose of the contact	119	54.3
I somewhat prefer – two way	18	8.2
I strongly prefer – two way	54	24.7

Follow-up survey questions and resulting data not shown in Table 2 supplied additional information and insights concerning preferences from home. When given an option between email interaction and phone conversation, 16.7% of all who responded indicated they did, in fact, prefer email to some degree. Almost one-third did not indicate agreement or disagreement thereby expressing no preference. In all, 22% or only slightly more than those favoring email indicated a preference for direct phone contact. This result is markedly lower than the information shared by past sources (Gestwicki, 2006; Ricke, 2015; Rogers & Wright, 2008).

Perhaps these results should be viewed more as an indication of our general acceptance of the options we are provided with, instead of being viewed as confirmation as to what works best. This distinction between acceptance (preference) and effectiveness is offered because in response to questions about effectiveness as opposed to preference, these same participants indicated that 45.7% strongly agree and 34.4% agree (80.1% combined) that communication is better achieved over the phone than by means of email.

Numbers do not tell the entire story, and as introduced earlier, a subgroup of participants volunteered for follow-up interviews. Feedback gleaned from the added inquiry revealed that while the phone as a digital tool was overwhelmingly the most regularly accessed option for making digital contact, there were real limitations associated with use of the phone as portable computer. Screen size made it difficult to work with online portals or progress through any system that required parents and guardians to “progress” through screens. Three non-English speaking volunteers also reported that there was a language barrier to address. While perhaps some applications could assist in overcoming this area of struggle, there was limited success experienced by participants. As was pointed out, though the availability of applications to contact English speaking parents continue to expand, there is really little perceived indication of similar progress being made for non-English speaking parents and guardians.

**(RQ 2) How do parent preferences differ based on different subject/topic areas?** This question emerged as the next step in the overall focus, as opposed to investigating whether preferences differed according to grade-level. Such age-related differences concerning practice seemed to have once been a realistic consideration. Perhaps at least in the days of sending a note home with a student. This consideration appeared to have less relevance in an examination of digital communication. As was forecasted by responses to RQ 1, different reasons for communication appear to be linked to different preferences and perceptions. Table 3 presents data from a series of questions and focuses (academics, activities and discipline) which did not ask respondents to rate topics in a head-to-head fashion. For purposes of representing this information in a meaningful way, however, the presentation is offered in a comparative fashion with the belief that it provides a more holistic understanding response to RQ 2.

Table 3  
*Parental Communication Preferences By Topic*

Access Type	Academics		Activities		Discipline	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Email	60	27.1	97	43.9	11	5.0
Phone	109	49.3	8	3.6	201	91.0
Text	10	4.5	29	13.1	3	1.4
Portal	18	8.1	9	4.3	NA	NA
No Preference	19	8.6	73	33.3	1	.5

The data may not be all that surprising upon inspection in as much as it confirms the preferences described within the literature (Gestwicki, 2006; Ricke, 2015; Rogers & Wright, 2008). Still, it proves to be valuable data in that it offers insight and affirmation as opposed to reliance speculation, shared perception or old information. There was little preference concerning how best to contact home when the focus of topic for the ensuing contact had to do with ongoing events or activities. The only real preference that emerged was actually to send an email.

Matters having to do with student grades yielded a different reaction. Email was the second acceptable approach for contact, but phone contact was the clear preference among reporting parents and guardians. Finally, matters involving potential disciplinary implications yielded a very strong response. An overwhelming 91% of responding parents and guardians indicated they would prefer to be reached directly by phone were one of their children to be involved in a disciplinary situation. This strong response concerning a phone contact for discipline was not diminished in any way at younger grade levels according to parents who were interviewed, which confirms there would be little reason to examine this topic from a grade-level standpoint.

Further, as voiced by parents and guardians, it was expected that any contact about grades would come directly from the teacher, and not someone else. For both grade and disciplinary type topics, parents wanted to be able to learn specific information up front and also be able to make follow-up contacts to learn more. Therein the portal was not an overly popular choice for receiving information for either type of situation and represented an attempt to carry out the primary business of education through a one-way communication approach where they actually expressed difficulty finding workable ways to respond to the teacher.

**(RQ 3) How do parents perceive their preferences to be valued and prioritized by school practices?** This question was felt to be particularly important, but was beyond the scope of the original instrument the survey was based upon. It was therefore addressed in an open-ended fashion through follow-up interview. In response, the majority of participants clearly voiced a belief that parents' preferences or feelings were not valued by school systems or taken into consideration at any level of discussion let alone through policy development. Further, they clearly relayed the belief it was their responsibility as caregivers and guardians to make any two-way contact in response to any issue that might emerge, regardless as to how that information was originally shared with them by their school.

A common if not “default” perspective which was shared was that almost everything could be resolved upon contacting the office directly. In some instances, language barriers were said to persist beyond such a contact being made. While none of the participants complained about having to take the initiative to initiate a line of communication, their descriptions consistently painted a picture of the school shifting responsibility to the parents in ways that legislation and guidelines clearly identify as being less than satisfactory. Finally, it was indicated that the process of participating in the study in general, and even more so in the interview specifically, helped several of the parents to become more focused on the shift in responsibility for follow through just referenced.

**(RQ 4) How do opinions differ between ethnic and socioeconomic groups?** Questions related to this aspect of the study generated multiple insights. Members of minority populations, and especially those facing language limitations often spoke of being aware of who they could reach out to in order to make contact. The attendance secretary, for instance, could speak Spanish according to one parent. Ultimately, this person became a point of contact when it was truly necessary. There were other examples offered where parents in general were compelled to navigate the assortment of contact options available to them. In some instances, parents or guardians started out in one place but ended up on social media like Facebook, because that is where they found they got an actual response. Though there was little indication that parents wanted to complain, it was noted in direct reference to this line of questioning that it was very clear schools were not attempting to prioritize their efforts according to parent feedback or preferences. Essentially, parents indicated they often had to be the ones to look for someone to be interested in what was troubling them.

**(RQ 5) What efforts have schools made to recognize and respond to parent preferences and needs?** Information relative to this question was collected both through quantitative as well as qualitative means. From a quantitative standpoint, parents and guardians responding through the survey indicated that two-way communication is largely available to them in some manner after some level of effort on either their part or the school’s part. In all just under 64% of those responding either agreed or strongly agreed with this position. An additional 30.8% really offered no agreement or disagreement, meaning that the 4.6% who rated disagreement with their school’s efforts represented a comparably small response.

Qualitative interview contributions from parents and guardians shed additional light on the question. Overall, it was perceived that teachers were the ones who were more geared toward maintaining two-way communication with home. When talking about schools more from the standpoint of “the office” parents expressed that they felt that the standard operating procedure was that the school notified parents that there was an issue that needed to be followed up on. Then it became the parent’s responsibility to follow through with whatever the matter was and see it through to resolution. Nobody within the group offered a point of view that perhaps in the busy world we live in, that was the most practical approach to take. Sentiments, instead, were more along the lines that the schools to some extent were shifting responsibilities on to them.

A final theme that emerged in response to this question had to do with the overall approach taken by schools to ensure that effective communication was taking place. From the perspective offered by parents and guardians, it would appear that there is no active policy or consistent

approach being made to effectuate more effective communication and collaboration with parents. If there is such an effort taking place, parents clearly were not aware of it. Instead, their overall perception was that if need be, they could always complain to someone.

## **Discussion**

The combined quantitative and qualitative information obtained through this study was analyzed first within the structure of the 5 research questions, and was just reported in that light. In addition to the research question specific lenses already summarized, all of the information was further examined as part of one whole project. That effort resulted in the identification of three prevailing themes. These themes which include A. Communication, B. Intent, and C. Satisfaction, will be discussed next.

## **Communication**

Communication is the central theme of this study and has every reason to stand out first and foremost because of its vital impact on leadership. In the digital world we live in there is an ever-expanding supply of communication alternatives being developed, refined and marketed for world-wide consumption. It may be fair to say there is a less known but equally important list of problem spots to overcome. Especially when looking through the eyes and busy lives of parents and guardians who have a full-time job caring for their children, on top of their actual paid employment. In our mobile society people are on the go far more than they are sitting at a desk waiting to be contacted by their child's school. Some of the most impressive developments, such as webpage portals, are still too complex and challenging for the very best smartphones to access efficiently. Plus, let us not forget that a lot of parents do not have the latest and greatest hardware in their pocket or on their desk.

Perhaps the struggles that were identified in this study should be considered to represent a society-wide challenge that families just have to accept and learn to work through. Maybe the federal requirements listed early on need to be adjusted or reinterpreted to allow for results something short of what they already call for. The bottom line would seem to be that communication is taking place, and no test or series of survey questions will decide whether currently available approaches are successful enough. Technology will continue to develop and conditions will change. Perhaps though, there is sufficient need to do more than hope communication is working the way it needs to - ahead of receiving complaints from parents.

## **Intent**

Intent is an important concept, and as it emerged through this study, it could be argued that it has a dual nature built into it. On one hand, the general intentions of the school system (intent) clearly weighed into the way parents and guardians perceived this overall topic. To know that communication was going to be possible - some way, somehow - mattered to parents and guardians. Perhaps at least in part as result of parents' faith in their schools, and the evident underlying trust that educators were working on their behalf to meet the safety and learning needs of all students. Parents view themselves as partners, so that intent or "attempt" coming from the school likely helps to establish some sort of buffer that makes it easier to accept some of the communication shortcomings that apparently keep appearing.

From a somewhat different point of view, and one that was a deliberate focus of this study, the “intent” of the message proceeding from school to home mattered a tremendous amount to parents. Public relations information and activities announcements that occupy prominent positions on district webpages were said to be a distraction by some parents. Many said they deliberately tune out that content, which at times seemed to make it difficult for them to locate the information and access points they were interested in. Ironically, these comprehensive front-page designs are often as costly as they are flashy. Some are even award winning. But they are not the priority to the parents who spoke through this research as two-thirds confirmed they rarely, if ever, accessed these features on the district webpage.

In only a few words, parents collectively indicated that they want less of the public relations information and more direct two-way access concerning the issues that matter most - their children and their safety, well-being and learning. When the “intent” of attempted communication has to do with one of those topics, parents and guardians have indicated that they are uniformly committed to ensuring it takes place despite any of the unintended challenges that might emerge. As it would happen, however, these types of contacts and the tools that are brought into play to make them take place, are not the flashy “award-winning” designer communication approaches that are constantly evolving and receiving the bulk of the attention.

### **Satisfaction**

Satisfaction represents the overall bottom line of this topic and this study. As has been reported already, everything comes down to access -when it is most important. This is not a topic that is well-addressed by recommendations such as having family member access the internet through the local library. Parents feel that the ability to be in touch with their child’s teacher when it involves, behavior, grades or really also safety, is their top priority. Data suggested and interviews confirmed that parents recognize there are established pathways for communication proceed. They also realize there are challenges. In all, roughly three-quarters of responding parents and guardians indicated that a phone call was the approach of choice for important communication that needed to take place, whether it was convenient for anyone (themselves included) at the time in question.

Referring back to the idea of a partnership, parents involved in the interview presented a point of view that collaboration was important, but perhaps not something that was thought about a tremendous amount. Some parents indicated that they at times were at a loss to know what they were supposed to do to make a difference when contacted by the school in the middle of the day. Feelings like those would suggest that a prevailing practice of “as needed” communication would benefit from the development of a better understanding of what the home-school partnership is really about. Or at least what it could be about. Finally, some parents offered that there is perhaps too much effort being put into making outreach quick and convenient. It was not uncommon for them to perceive their interests and needs of all parents and guardians as being secondary in the schools’ definition of success. By all appearances, that reaction did not seem to be all that satisfying.

### **Conclusions**

Though there are typically limitations inherent in any research, it appears evident that technology will continue to evolve. As such there will be a continued need to review decision-making



practices tied to innovation. Though there is no direct call within Title One legislation to evaluate the communication impacts resulting from digital technology, it is difficult to argue that parents should automatically “trust” that important communication will always just work the way they hope. This article reports out on original research. Both the article and the research it was based on, were originally founded upon the perceived need and resulting vision to better address communication effectiveness through policy. In all, the findings from this study indicate the current digital communication system “works,” but there is evident room for improvement.

Specifically, preferred and most effective approaches to communication appear, at times, to fall by the wayside in favor of convenience. Further, almost 5% of the parents that responded indicated a belief that their best option was to complain as necessary. A number like 5% does not seem to be all that significant in a table with numerous variables and other results displayed within it. In a school with 500 parents, however, that would represent 25 deeply frustrated parents. It is unlikely that any school leader would want to be made aware that 25 parents or guardians are of a mind that their feelings do not matter to the point that the only option they have is to complain or give up.

From a legal standpoint, as well as a data-driven one, there is strong indication that there is room to do better with this topic. Instead of being on the receiving end of unexpected criticism, school systems would do far better to be advocates for the most effective communication whenever possible rather than be perceived as the champions of convenience. Policy that is more specific than saying “the superintendent will be responsible” for a list of 10 to 20 items would seem to be preferable to continuing to overlook communication challenges.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

- Schools and school systems would do well to determine if they are subject to and ultimately in compliance with federal regulations concerning communication and collaboration with parents as described in Title One legislation.
- Acknowledging that many schools may prefer not to duplicate explicit federal or state laws with local policy, there are multiple reasons why communication between home and school exceeds the threshold of normal practice. Parental support, student learning, and finally both student and school safety are all factors that cannot afford to be overlooked. Recent shootings and other assaults on school safety have brought these considerations to the forefront. With nation-wide pleas for improved communication, it is troubling that schools would elect to consider this topic to be one of the 10 to 20 non-specific items on a superintendent’s “to do” list, instead of making effective home-school communication a policy priority?
- After writing policy to address this topic, schools need to make it authentic and meaningful by engaging parents, guardians and other consumers in a meaningful dialogue about how to best improve practice in this area.
- Many school software and technology vendors have user groups. Districts need to become actively involved in these and help shape the services and products that are being developed in the future.

- Some states have school communication associations. Many provide consulting services that stress improvement of customer service and more effective two-way communication. Schools in need would do well to seek these services out and employ them where beneficial.
- As this study was limited to a specific area within Arizona, there are limits to its applicability. Additional research is warranted to strengthen the ability to generalize findings and to address added perspectives. Future research concerning this topic should be considered from the school's standpoint. Legislation describes the need to address communication. Parental response supports such need. Better understanding the interpretations and intended response of school systems would stand to add significant insight to this topic as a whole.
- This topic would appear to be a worthy subject for longitudinal study. Just as there was reason to expect personal adaptation to recent innovations, there would be equally justified cause to explore reactions to future advances.

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## Book Review

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**Keywords:** English language learners, strategies, advocacy, equity, collaboration, accessible

Every day, teachers are tasked with providing an equitable education to all students which is engaging and relevant to their lives. As teachers plan their instruction, they need to consider the needs of their students, and differentiate lessons that make content comprehensible. *Unlocking English Learners' Potential: Strategies for Making Content Accessible* (2017) stands out as a strong resource to promote collaboration between content teachers and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers. It also provides insight into how teachers can advocate for English Language Learner (ELL) students and provide them with the instruction needed to foster success. If you have not yet read this important volume, I would recommend it as a resource for ESOL and content area teachers of all grade levels.

With the passage of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, ELL students are required to meet the same rigorous content standards as their native English-speaking peers, while also acquiring the English language. Due to the increased level of challenging content, it is crucial that content teachers obtain the skills necessary to support language development. All teachers must have knowledge of tools and strategies that can effectively support ELL students, as one in four students across the United States is from immigrant families (Samson and Collins, 2012). All teachers must also be able to create an environment where ELL students feel welcomed and

valued. Unfortunately, many teachers of ELL students do not receive second language acquisition training, and do not have a tool-box full of research-based strategies to help their students who are at various levels of language proficiency.

Within this book, Dr. Diane Staehr Fenner and Dr. Sydney Snyder set out to provide this toolbox for teachers. The purpose of this book is two-fold: to provide teachers of ELLs with the ability to develop their own advocacy and leadership skills. It also provides educators with research-based strategies, modeling and examples, and application activities that can be implemented across content areas and grade levels.

One of the highlights of the book are the suggestions for collaboration between ESOL teachers and content teachers. There is a growing trend in schools across the United States to integrate ELL students into mainstream classrooms, rather than have students pulled by the ESOL teacher (Samson and Collins, 2012). This provides an opportunity for ESOL teachers to work alongside content teachers. *Unlocking English Learners' Potential: Strategies for Making Content Accessible* (2017) provides excerpts at the end of each chapter that suggests how the two teachers can work together to provide mutual support. For example, at the end of Chapter 6: Vocabulary Instruction and ELs, the authors include a section titled, "What is the Role of Collaboration in Teaching Academic Vocabulary to ELs?". This section details how content and ESOL teachers can share their expertise with one another and select appropriate vocabulary together. The authors suggest that the two teachers can work together to select and implement appropriate activities and strategies. There is an emphasis upon the idea that content teachers are not alone in the planning and instruction of ELL students. There is support within the school setting, and positive relationships with the ESOL teacher can strengthen the learning environment and learning experiences for ELL students.

Another highlight found within the book are the suggestions provided by the authors to inspire content teachers to advocate for ELL students within the school and classroom. Advocacy and equity in learning are important features of ELL instruction, and those features may get overlooked as content teachers strive to educate ELL and non- ELL students alike. The authors stress that content teachers must leverage the strengths of their ELL students, as well as learn all they can about the students' culture and background. There is also an emphasis on establishing an asset-based approach with students, rather than a deficiency approach. The asset-based approach promotes inclusivity and encourages ELLs to share what they know in a safe and respectful environment.

There are a variety of elements that content teachers need to consider when structuring a productive learning environment for ELL students. *Unlocking English Learners' Potential: Strategies for Making Content Accessible* (2017) is structured in a way that any content teacher at any grade level can find strategies to incorporate into their classroom, and they do not have to follow the book chapter by chapter. For example, if a teacher is struggling with constructing formative assessments, they could skip to Chapter 9: Formative Assessments for ELs and focus on the content that is relevant to their needs. The authors provide background information on this topic, indicate the research that supports the strategies, and incorporate application activities that are relevant across content areas, grade levels, and varying language proficiencies. It is a

one-stop-shop for educators that need advice, but do not want to scour through a variety of books and resources.

Dr. Diane Staehr Fenner and Dr. Sydney Snyder have provided strategies to help educators in areas such as scaffolding instruction, teaching academic language, and constructing formative assessments that are supported by research. For example, in Chapter 3: Scaffolding Instruction for ELs, the WIDA Consortium's Categories of Scaffolds is presented as a resource to help educators as they plan how to differentiate instruction for their students. In Chapter 7: Teaching ELs Background Knowledge, the authors reference Marzano (2004) and his claim that what students already know about a topic will indicate their success with learning new information regarding that topic. The authors also reference Echevarria, Vogt, and Short (2004) as they describe how jump-starting students' background knowledge will result in greater understanding. The list of references that are provided at the end of each chapter further support content and ESOL teachers with gaining additional research-based information.

As a middle school ESOL teacher, and doctoral student focusing on Educational Leadership, this text has provided me with many useful strategies to work with my colleagues and support students. While I have studied and read many texts that discuss advocacy, and strategies that will support ELL students, this text helped me integrate strategies that will help me to more effectively collaborate with my peers. For instance, when working with my colleague, we discussed practices that would support Non-English Proficient (NEP) students within our classroom. Our goal was to encourage them to share their perspectives and develop critical thinking skills. Through an exploration of the strategies found in *Unlocking English Learners' Potential: Strategies for Making Content Accessible* (2017), we determined that primary language support would be an effective strategy. We also decided that integrating small group instruction would allow our students to help one another and improve their oral language skills. Alone I am one voice advocating for ELL students, and after using this volume, I have gained skills to help others create an educational climate that benefits all students.

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## Book Review

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**Keywords:** School Administrators, minoritized students, community-based epistemologies, exclusionary practices, systemic issues, oppression, cultural responsiveness.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) is a six-chapter book by Muhammad Khalifa that aims at aiding school leaders in the instruction of indigenous, black, brown, and other minoritized students in urban schools. Instructional leadership and other traditional leadership models fail to adequately guide the treatment of urban youth. CRSL considers state policies like housing and unique community experiences such as settler colonialism and incarceration rates in the pedagogy of underrepresented groups. The book is an ethnographic study of the data of an African American school leader, Joe, whose persona and setting uses pseudonyms. Joe labored for over forty years at Urban Alternative High School (UAHS) in Davistown, Michigan exploring student experiences inside and outside the classroom. Khalifa articulates how school leaders can implement principles, curriculum, pedagogy, and programs that promote inclusion by critiquing assumptions, biases and stereotypes. The book recommends earnestly that school administrators and teachers should replace school-based epistemologies with community-based epistemologies. Khalifa stresses that complicity, neutrality and orthodoxy on the part of school administrators propagate and reproduce oppression. School leaders become accomplices of oppression when they remain passive and choose not to challenge the status quo.

The book is in the Race and Education Series edited by H. Richard Milner IV who also wrote the series foreword. Milner opines that “racial justice is arguably the most important educational



imperative of our time” (Khalifa, 2018, p. viii) and proceeds by affirming that critiquing assumptions is an arduous endeavor. Lesa Delpit, a distinguished professor of education gives a foreword for the book. She proposes that schools fail students by being enemies of the communities they serve instead of embracing students’ lived realities. Culturally responsive schools embody the values of respective communities of the students.

Khalifa, in chapter one uncovers disconnections that exist between schools and communities. Schools interpret student behavior using school-based epistemologies while students and parents use community-based epistemologies. Khalifa alludes to a case whereby a superintendent decided to close a school after consideration of low enrollment and low academic performance. Community members interpreted the school closure with the lens of community-based epistemologies after consideration of the central role of race and averted the closure. Such a case illustrates the deficiencies of school-based epistemologies to make a compelling argument for culturally responsive school leaders.

In chapter two, Khalifa explores critical self-reflection. The metrics at UAHS like graduation rate, standardized testing data, retention rate, referrals to special education, and suspension rate confirm oppression of underrepresented students. “For example, in recent data for the district, black students made up only 18 percent of students overall, but nearly 60 percent of out-of-school suspensions” (Khalifa, 2018, p. 62). Through critical self-reflection, culturally responsive school leaders identify oppression in the school by analyzing current practices and available data. Khalifa explains that Joe used rap sessions as a source of data. The data helped Joe to challenge and encourage students and confront teachers formally and informally. In addition to that, the data also informs administrative decisions pertaining to resource allocation and employment. The rap sessions revealed exclusionary practices such as making fun of a sleeping student in a classroom. A culturally responsive teacher instead works with other staff to help the student get enough rest at home. The objective of critical self-reflection in CRSL is to create an environment of fairness and a sense of belonging for students, parents and teachers. Khalifa recommends equity audits to lay bare oppressive practices. Equity audits include research-based surveys as well as data and policy analysis functions that help those in privileged positions to recognize stunning disparities in funding, race and opportunity gaps.

Chapter three postulates how CRSL promotes inclusionary school practices and policies by focusing on spaces. Spaces connote the physical space together with bodies and everything associated with space. Artifacts, languages, people and behavior must be inclusive. An example of this is, instead of removing an underage student smelling like marijuana from the school, a teacher can work with staff to ensure that the student accesses substance treatment programs. Here, Khalifa joins other educators like Shields (2016) in analyzing the complex dynamics of public education and prison in the infamous school to prison pipeline. Minoritized groups benefit when schools maintain high expectations, open discourses, mentor teachers, and apply modeling before challenging exclusionary practices.

Chapter four discusses ways that CRSL can embrace the expressions of student identities and voices through *identity confluence*. All student identities should be welcomed and protected in school to avoid the creation of a subhuman status of minoritized students. Embracing student identities and voices comports with the notion of humanization of learners, advocated by the

great 20<sup>th</sup> century Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (2001). Khalifa underscores that nothing must inhibit a two-way accessibility between principals and communities. School leaders must establish social capital networks for minoritized families by encouraging activities like National African American Parent Involvement Day, parent breakfast, delivering report cards personally and introductory interviews before admission (Khalifa, 2018, pp 118-121). The aim is to open doors of communication to obtain nuances of what parents and communities want to see changed. At the same time, social capital networks strengthen trust, rapport, authentic care, and credibility which are essential elements of leadership.

In chapter five, the author looks at how leaders foster culturally responsive teachers and instruction through rethinking leadership structures and lesson plans in schools. Teacher evaluation tools must not necessarily be about state standards but about what improves teaching and supports learning. Teachers and administrators should take collective responsibility for student performance. Moreover, teachers should take individual responsibility too for how their students do in class. The lessons must reflect the activities happening in society e.g. an upcoming hip hop performance provides an occasion to talk about dynamics of sound travel. CRSL utilizes equity teams as learning groups of practice and fosters academic identity and high expectations. Khalifa introduces an idea of a school leader as a warm demander who establishes a deep caring and loving relationship with students first, then leverages this relationship to hold high expectations.

Chapter six delineates caveats of the centrality of communities in school leadership. School leaders should go deeper into respective communities on the community's own terms. This chapter gives a checklist for a three-year school improvement plan of creating a culturally responsive school. The chapter proceeds to specify ways of negotiating challenges while promoting culturally responsive school environments. It is worthy to note that being an all-black or all-white school does not render CRSL irrelevant. Even black principals can dehumanize black students.

What Khalifa does excellently, in *Culturally Responsive School Leadership*, is shifting cultural responsiveness from the teacher in the classroom to the administrator in the office and insisting that schools should go to the communities. He seems to thrive on the premise that excellent leaders transform schools, which is plausible but misleading. Having an excellent school leader may be necessary but not sufficient. Readers must be aware of limiting factors like excessive entanglement of politics, hopeless teachers, disastrous school funding, and abject poverty. The world of education is murky, subtle and messy. School administrators and teachers face complex ethical decisions regularly (Levinson & Fay, 2016). What Khalifa has contributed to the literature is not a readily available panacea to educational conundrums afflicting minoritized students. In any case, it is a timely and relevant intervention to school principals serving minoritized students, who wish to take their practice to another level by addressing and redressing systemic issues. Khalifa's *Culturally Responsive School Leadership* is a *magna carta* whose objective is to aid school leaders in the teaching and learning of urban youths.

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