“A very small cog in the wheel”: principals’ perceptions of change and continuity in the wake of ESSA reforms

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Abstract
In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law, replacing No Child Left Behind as the statutory education policy of the federal government of the United States (US). Building on prior shifts in accountability policy at the state level, ESSA focused attention and resources on building school leadership capacities. Five years on, how has the implementation of ESSA changed principals’ perceptions of accountability? We compare state policy documents and principal interviews to elucidate the impacts of ESSA on school accountability and leadership in two states—Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Despite major differences in state support for principal’s capacity building found in ESSA plans, interview data suggest that most principals have little knowledge of ESSA policy and do not perceive the influence of ESSA on changes in their day-to-day work. We discuss the implications of this discrepancy between the ESSA policy and practice for researchers and school leaders.

Keywords Every student succeeds act · Accountability policies · Policy implementation

In December 2015, President Barack Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law, replacing No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and shifting the role of the federal government in the provision of K-12 education in the United States (US). Under ESSA, states develop their own accountability plans, which the US Department of Education (ED) then approves. While ESSA preserves NCLB’s trademark system of annual standardized testing, the legislation decentralizes that system by shifting accountability provisions from the federal government to state and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs, respectively). Touted as an opportunity for SEAs and LEAs to innovate, ESSA was praised by some for the flexibility and control over accountability policies that it offered to states and districts (Davis, 2015). However, others remained skeptical of the law’s potential to stimulate real change, noting the structural continuities between NCLB and ESSA, such as ESSA’s preservation of annual testing and reporting requirements (Saultz et al., 2019).

Recognizing the scholarly link between school leadership and various student outcomes (e.g., achievement, attendance, and graduation) (Grissom et al., 2015a, 2015b; Peck et al., 2013; Seashore Louis et al., 2010), ESSA includes a significant increase in the available resources to support principal development. To date, scholarly analysis has focused on broad accounts of ESSA implementation by, for example, synthesizing differences across ESSA plans (e.g., De Voto & Reedy, 2021 and New Leaders, 2018) and conducting national surveys of ESSA administrators (e.g., Rentner et al., 2017). Thus, researchers have paid less attention to the context and quality of school leadership in the wake of ESSA reforms, and specifically on the impact of ESSA policy on school leadership. Our study addresses this gap by examining principals’ perceptions of policy change and continuity during the early stages of ESSA policy implementation in two states—Pennsylvania (PA) and New Jersey (NJ).
We combine document analysis of state ESSA plans with interview data collected from nine public elementary school principals (six in PA and three in NJ) during the 2018–19 and 2019–2020 school years. For document analysis, although ESSA includes other provisions, such as a flexible block grant program for well-rounded education, we focus on accountability provisions and educator professional development, as these might be the most influential policy aspects in the everyday lives of principals. During the interview, we asked about the principals’ understanding regarding ESSA provisions; their perceptions of the influence of ESSA on their daily lives; and training, support, and communication with state and district officials. As we interviewed each participant twice, we also analyzed whether their perceptions and understanding of ESSA had changed. The entire interview dataset was transcribed, and we found that the principals reiterated the main points from the first interviews in their second interviews. For the document analysis, we analyzed the state-level implementation plans of PA and NJ. Based on this, we consider how differences in the policy priorities of PA’s and NJ’s ESSA plans have created divergent support structures and development capacities for school leaders.

Our findings suggest that the variable impacts suggested by broad analyses of ESSA policy are indicative of technical rather than substantive changes in school accountability policy. In fact, even when substantive changes did occur, principals rarely attributed them to the ESSA policy. Although we analyzed policy priorities based on how each state laid out its plans for resource allocation and the requirements that were imposed on local districts and schools, we were limited in our ability to compare principals’ lived professional experiences in relation to the plans due to our limited sample. In addition to the limited number in the sample, our sampled principals in NJ worked at relatively high-performing school districts where the accountability provisions might not be critical in their daily professional lives.

Given the effective defunding of public education over the past decade, it is critical to investigate the feasibility of ESSA’s accountability framework for helping every student succeed. Finally, we recommend that future studies embrace more participatory and flexible research models that can address—perhaps leverage—the political instability of the moment.

**ESSA policy history: change or continuity?**

More than half a decade has passed since the enactment of ESSA; the school-level accountability system, which uses student test scores from state-mandated standardized tests for identifying schools that need support, was largely established under NCLB waivers authorized during the Obama administrations’ Race to the Top initiative (Tienken et al., 2017). ESSA’s policy framework devolves the design and execution of accountability regimes but retains the test-based regime of these previous policies; notably federal mandates for annual and statewide testing and reporting. SEAs and LEAs have always been responsible for monitoring and supporting low-performing schools, but under ESSA’s “flexible” policy model, the “how to” can be determined with more flexibility at the local level. Specifically, SEAs and LEAs now plan and implement their own systems for many of the key policies that regulate educational accountability, including curricular policies that set academic standards and teacher evaluation protocols (Duff & Wohlstetter, 2019). ESSA also made changes to the way that states target schools for intervention. As with NCLB, a state must identify the lowest-performing schools in the state. Under ESSA, however, a state now sets its own academic goals and indicators of progress, but it must still submit these accountability plans to the ED for approval.

Some analysis suggests that the decentralization of accountability is a cosmetic change, representing a transformation of power over local educational autonomy rather than actually moving away from top-down interference in school processes (Duff & Wohlstetter, 2019). Although by explicitly limiting federal control, ESSA grants states more decision rights in comparison to NCLB (Duff & Wohlstetter, 2019), federal power is retained over the negotiation process for establishing state accountability regimes (Manna, 2006; Miller, 2005). On the surface, ESSA does appear to extend state and local control over accountability policy; however, new decision-making powers only grant them authority over largely technical matters. It is unclear whether there will be any fundamental changes to accountability practices at an institutional or ideological level.

Notably, ESSA’s devolution of test-based accountability is accompanied by the allocation of significantly more federal resources to build local leadership capacities (De Voto & Reedy, 2021; New Leaders, 2018; Riley et al., 2019). In contrast to prior iterations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), ESSA allocates funding to improve school leadership, representing a significant expansion in expenditure for principal development. More precisely, ESSA offers states the option to set aside 3% of their Title II, Part A funding allotment to underwrite investments in school leadership, including the preparedness, development, and quality of principals (UCEA, 2018). Whereas NCLB primarily focused on improving school quality and teacher competency, ESSA’s shift toward emphasizing capacity building for school leadership is consistent with research that shows principals are critical for educational outputs (see Liebowitz & Porter, 2019 for review). Emerging research on the impact of ESSA’s investment in leadership is varied and...
raises more questions than it answers. We present three key policy trends that frame ESSA policy development and its ongoing implementation regarding school leadership: devolution, austerity, and multiple measures.

Devolution of accountability

The devolution of accountability and teacher evaluation systems in ESSA has important implications for the principals’ work. The ESSA framework for evaluation and accountability departs from NCLB’s centralized model of federally mandated indicators. Under NCLB, principals’ roles was often constrained by bureaucratic imperatives, for example, prescribed evaluations of teacher performance (Murphy et al., 2013). The prescriptive guidelines for principals limited their professional autonomy and the flexibility needed to account for local factors when implementing improvement plans. Instead, with ESSA, states and districts may now take charge of delineating the major boundaries of their accountability policies.

ESSA provides expanded local control over both teacher development and evaluation and student learning and assessment and offers greater autonomy and flexibility to principals. ESSA also grants districts and states latitude in defining their educational content standards and what it means to be academically successful—a well-rounded education under ESSA may include programming or activities that reach beyond core subjects, such as digital literacy, environmental education, and foreign languages. Social–emotional learning and career education are also included as core elements of school accountability in some states, granting local authorities the power to redefine key performance indicators. ESSA’s reformed protocol for targeting schools for improvement is a notable consequence. During the NCLB era, schools unable to make “adequate yearly progress” were labeled “in need of improvement,” and states were required to intervene. However, under ESSA, states are responsible for setting annual goals for schools, designing a system for identifying schools that require improvement, and devising a plan to support those schools.

Resources for building leadership capacities

Many states across the US have already developed and implemented ESSA-era policies emphasizing on recruiting, preparing, and developing of school principals. According to a recent policy brief (New Leaders, 2018), 24 states plan to use the optional 3% of their Title II, Part A funding for school leadership development, and 21 states are using ESSA funding to improve and expand principal preparation. Additionally, 41 states emphasized school leadership in their plans to improve high-needs schools and educator equity; furthermore, several states are investing in specialized professional development (PD) for principals working in such schools. A noteworthy feature of ESSA plans is the variety of policies aimed at distributing school leadership and building principal pipelines. For example, states are experimenting with incentive schemes that reward teachers who assume leadership roles (e.g., Iowa), school leadership teams (e.g., Texas), and assistant principal programs (e.g., West Virginia). Broadly speaking, ESSA has codified investment in principal capacity building into the federal ESEA policy framework. Yet, solely based on these policy documents, it is still hard to know exactly how ESSA may impact principal quality in practice. The effects of ESSA largely depend on the details of state plans, especially in how states choose to allocate Title II, Part A funds; SEA and LEA implementation strategies; and existing state accountability infrastructures that are manifested during the policy implementation phase.

The policy shifts represented by ESSA allocate significantly more federal resources to build local leadership capacities, yet ESSA implementation entered the policy arena during a historical period of sustained austerity that started with the Great Recession of 2008–2009. In the face of serious declines in state and local budgets and major staff cuts, the provision of educational services appreciably worsened. Even a decade later, some states were still recovering and continued to provide less funding for K-12 schools than in the academic year of 2008–09 (Leachman, 2019; Leachman et al., 2017). In Florida and Arizona, for example, K-12 educational funding in 2017 remained more than 20% below prerecession levels. School staffing was significantly reduced, with support personnel such as librarians and counselors bearing the brunt of the layoffs. Meanwhile, teachers’ economic security and working conditions also substantially declined. Consequently, the US lost roughly 120,000 teachers between 2008 and 2010 and has seen a wave of teacher strikes in recent years in states where the most stringent austerity measures were implemented (Griffith, 2020; Leachman & Figueroa, 2019).

Many district officials are now sounding the alarm on the implications of COVID-19 for school finances, citing the deleterious effects of budget cuts on student learning (Jackson et al., 2018). States are already reporting serious declines in tax revenues, which provide more than 50% of the funding for schools in the US (Leachman & Figueroa, 2019; Turner, 2020). By way of federal legislation (e.g., the CARES Act), stimulus funding managed to blunt the initial economic impact of COVID-19 during the academic year of 2020–2021, which went toward unexpected costs such as buying technology for remote learning and sanitizing school buildings.
Expansion of data infrastructure

Plans to track and report multiple measures of student learning are prominently featured across state ESSA plans. The NCLB accountability model focused on standardized testing metrics and, more specifically, the adequate yearly progress of student performance on a standard assessment administered statewide; however, the ESSA framework expands the annual reporting requirements for states to include additional information about performance and progress. States are required to utilize at least five indicators to identify schools that need to improve: “Academic achievement in reading and math; another academic indicator, such as student growth in reading and math; four-year high school graduation rates, with the option to include extended-year rates; progress toward English language proficiency; [and] at least one measure of school quality of student success” (Batel, 2017, p. 2). States also plan to use multiple measures to target schools for intervention. The addition of new metrics into the existing accountability systems has introduced several complications for districts and schools; primarily, the gap in the existing capacities of local leaders to implement the systems of support needed to collect, monitor, and use the additional data.

More specifically, ESSA encourages states to use at least one noncognitive measure of student performance, such as assessments of socioemotional factors, and allows districts to develop their own metrics. Whatever the metric, districts and schools need to incorporate new data into their existing policy systems, including school improvement plans, reporting software, and decision-making processes. Many states have invested in sophisticated online platforms for collecting and analyzing student-level data, which are summarized into school and district “snapshots” for streamlining reporting requirements. Snapshots can also include other data like teacher retention rates, course offerings, and parent survey results. Nonetheless, principals require PD and investment in local infrastructure as they adapt to multiple measures of accountability systems.

Recall that ESSA was designed to correct the course set by NCLB in substantive and substantial ways by considerably scaling back federal involvement in educational accountability systems. This included explicit investments in school leadership and, more precisely, leadership capacities to develop equitable and supportive learning environments for historically underserved students. Whether and how these reforms may impact principals in meaningful ways remains an open question.

Given the range of implications that ESSA policy has for school leadership, the goal of our analysis was twofold. First, we aimed to better understand how state ESSA plans provide support for school leadership and how the consequent policy shapes the development and daily work of principals.

A prominent feature of many US states’ individual ESSA renewal plans was a focus on school leadership, but how states planned to go about building principal capacity varied significantly. Second, we aimed to understand principals’ knowledge of ESSA reforms, including the ways in which it diverges from NCLB. We interrogated principals’ awareness of state ESSA plans, their familiarity with ESSA implementation in their districts and states, and their comprehension of ESSA-era accountability policies. Last, we examined principals’ perceptions of ESSA’s influence on their leadership work around issues of accountability in schools.

Accountability policies and principals’ work

Since 1970, one of the prevailing images of school organization is that of it being loosely coupled with (or even decoupled from) the environment (Cuban, 1993; Elmore, 1996; Firestone, 1984; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Weick, 1976). Due to the uncertainty and ambiguity around teaching, what school organizations actually do to ensure student learning is hardly clear from an outsider’s viewpoint; evaluation of teaching quality may be infrequent and done perfunctorily (Weick, 1976). Thus, by following institutionalized practices, which makes organizations appear to be functioning, school organizations can often survive regardless of their actual efficacy (Meyer & Rowan; Weick, 1976). Such accountability measures for school organizations have been central in explaining the failure of numerous educational reforms to reach the street-level bureaucrats. In this context, principals often function as a buffer to protect a weak “technical core” of their organizations from external scrutiny by creating the appearance of rationalized practices and evaluation (Elmore, 2000).

Such a classic view on school organizations, however, began to shift as standards-based accountability reforms became a “fundamental part of the architecture of policy and governance in American education” (Elmore, 2000, p. 4). Researchers also posited that the educational system in the US has gradually become more tightly coupled due to such policy movements (Fusarelli, 2002; Knapp & Feldman, 2012; Ladd & Zelli, 2002). By removing barriers to scrutinize the technical core of school organizations, the policy movement made it much clearer which schools or teachers are indeed effective in improving student achievement because this determination was based on data directly from student performance rather than indirect institutionalized signals from the organizations themselves. Researchers mostly agreed that such policies indeed had an impact on school organizations, which had long remained an unaccomplished goal of other reforms, despite disagreements on the effects of standards-based reforms (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Dee & Jacob, 2011; Ladd & Zelli, 2002; Reback,
Accountability policies changed how principals distributed their resources, conceptualized students’ and teachers’ abilities, and gave them new insight into what to focus on when working with teachers, all of which had previously been regarded as a technical core that external influence could hardly touch (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2007; Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Harris et al., 2014; Firestone et al., 2004; Rutledge, 2010).

For example, Ladd and Zelli (2002) showed how North Carolina’s ABC program, its school-level accountability policy, shaped principals’ behavior. Whether or not they supported the policy’s priorities, principals redistributed their resources to math and reading instruction and focused on low-achieving students. Additionally, principals spent more time with teachers discussing test scores and encouraged teachers to spend more time on test-taking skills. Furthermore, such patterns were more salient with principals who served a greater number of low-achieving students. Similar patterns have been found in other studies that show that schools responded differently to the policy based on their accountability status. Schools that received greater degrees of pressure tended to focus more on the targets of accountability policies (i.e., low-achieving students, test grades, and subjects), while schools that received less pressure tended to focus on all students’ achievement (Diamond & Spillane, 2004).

Knapp and Feldman (2012) investigated how principals combined external accountability policy elements with their internal accountability practices by taking more active roles in teaching and learning. By using data, creating internal rewards and incentives, shaping PD, and clearly delivering the expectations of external accountability policies, among other approaches, the principals led their schools to meet the expectations of the external accountability policy.

Based on the extant literature, it seems clear that accountability policies have been influential in shaping the role of principals’, even though it is unclear whether such changes bring about a positive shift in student learning. However, it is also less clear how principals have responded to ESSA. Accountability policies have now been embedded in the structure of educational systems for more than two decades, and it is possible that school organizations have successfully developed new “rationalized practices” that can buffer external scrutiny in the meantime. Moreover, as noted above, ESSA follows some major elements of previous versions of standard-based accountability policies, but other significant elements have been revised. Taken together, one can expect that ESSA has an impact on principals’ professional responsibilities in the same way as the previous versions of accountability policies did, but at the same time, it is also possible that such an assumption is wrong, as this generation of principals who experienced earlier versions of these policies may react differently. To answer this question, we elucidate how principals understand and respond to ESSA.

### Method

#### Research design and context

Individual state plans vary throughout many areas, including how states choose to allocate Title II, Part A funds, SEA and LEA implementation strategies, and existing state accountability infrastructures. In selecting the states of PA and NJ, we wanted to capture neighboring states that were similar in terms of number of schools, districts, and school principals (see Table 1 for a comparison), but which varied in terms of ESSA policy.

We used an exploratory, qualitative research design (Maxwell, 2013) that exploited differences in state policy, including divergences in ESSA planning and development for school leadership, to underscore similarities and differences in principals’ perceptions of and experiences with reform across both states. The data inquiry for our study included the coding and analysis of state policy documents from PA and NJ—namely, the PA and NJ state ESSA plans—as well as interviews with principals from both states. We conducted interviews with nine principals in PA and NJ (see Table 2 for complete participant information). We purposively sampled principals from each state who had been working as elementary school administrators for at least five years, which was important for being able to reflect on the evolution of accountability policy reforms over time. We chose to sample elementary school principals to avoid some of the complexities of middle and high schools (such as having multiple building leaders). Having similarly experienced participants working in comparable contexts helped us draw

#### Table 1 State information

| State       | Number of school districts | Number of schools | Number of students | Number of school principals |
|-------------|---------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| New Jersey  | 639                       | 2440              | 1,356,431          | 2470                        |
| Pennsylvania| 631                       | 3189              | 1,771,395          | 3160                        |

*Source* NCES (2011–2012)

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out differences in ESSA implementation based on state and district factors.

Finally, to represent a broader diversity of school contexts based on locale and socioeconomic factors in our sample, we included more participants from PA than NJ. Given the importance of school setting, racial makeup, and economic disadvantage for teaching and learning, the investigative benefits of diversity in these areas outweighed the convenience of having balanced state representation. However, we acknowledge that we were restricted in our ability to compare the lived experiences of principals across the two states, as NJ sampled principals worked at relatively high-achieving schools. Arguably, principals would experience accountability provisions differently based on their school’s achievement levels. Accordingly, the divergences in principals’ perceptions and background that arose from the data could be due to the divergences in state implementation or gaps in the school contexts.

We conducted two interviews with each of the nine participants over a 12-month period from the fall of 2018 to the fall of 2019. All interviews lasted approximately one hour and were audio recorded and transcribed. Interviewing principals over two school years provided insight into how principals’ perceptions changed over time. We asked questions that probed principals’ knowledge of ESSA policy provisions, the perceived influence of ESSA reforms on their daily work, and their patterns of communication with state and district officials about ESSA implementation.

### Qualitative coding

We used qualitative coding techniques (Miles et al., 2014) to draw out key topics and themes from our policy documents and principal interviews. For the PA and NJ state ESSA plans, we systematically identified and coded information related to school leadership, including funding allocated to the preparation, training, and development of school leaders, as well as to any programs or initiatives included in ESSA that had the potential to influence the daily work of school leaders. We developed our codes iteratively, using matrices to organize, compare, group, and clarify major themes (Bowen, 2009). After we reviewed each ESSA plan multiple times, five themes emerged: (a) funding, (b) initiatives, (c) preparation/training, (d) support/development, and (e) equity.

Interview transcripts were coded independently. Three principal interviews were selected at random for this step, after which we compared coding processes and reached agreement on all codes. We began the coding process by looking for overarching themes within the data. Once we documented these themes, we created a codebook by identifying specific codes that related to these overarching themes but were more specific data points and included the language of the participants (Miles et al., 2014). We then continued to develop codes inductively, and, as themes became apparent, we reviewed, grouped, and regrouped the text, iteratively pinpointing and refining our coding schema (Bowen, 2009). A different set of seven primary codes emerged from principal interviews: (a) knowledge, (b) money/funding, (c) creation/adoptions, (d) communication, (e) training, (f) influence on daily work, and (g) personal opinions/beliefs about ESSA. We checked the validity of the coding process by recoding all data for a second time, noting and resolving discrepancies along the way (Miles et al., 2014) (see Table 3 for a description of the coding process).

**Table 3** shows the process by which the researchers initially developed codes from the data and organized and grouped these data into themes. Column one indicates the initial inductive codes that were applied to the qualitative data (the final codes, after recoding and refinement) (Saldana, 2016). These codes (and the specific language) were taken from raw data, including participant quotations.
and documents. The categories in column two represent the initial codes that the researchers grouped together based on relationships. Column three shows the themes that emerged as an outcome of the initial codes (Saldaña, 2016). In qualitative analysis, themes often emerge from the initial coded data, and these themes transform into theories that serve as the basis for the research findings (column four of the table) (Saldaña, 2016). The theories indicated in column four can be directly linked back to column one (initial inductive codes) and the raw data that were analyzed.

**Findings**

In a message to the stakeholders that appeared in the NJ state plan, Education Commissioner Kimberley Harrington wrote, “Recognizing the tremendous diversity of student populations and priorities in the state’s 2500 schools, NJ Department of Education set forth policies in the state plan that provide schools and districts the flexibility to prioritize what their unique student populations need for well-rounded educational experiences” (p. 8). Both PA’s and NJ’s ESSA plans expressed similarly passionate sentiments about local flexibility and student needs. However, our findings show that, despite such lofty rhetoric, and despite substantial differences in the ESSA plans in terms of investments in school leadership, principals in PA and NJ reported strikingly similar experiences with ESSA implementation.

**Perceptions of change: from NCLB to ESSA**

Explicit funding to build capacities for school leadership was a major selling point of ESSA reforms, as it gave states the option of allocating Title II, Part A funding to bolster support for principals. We might expect that states like NJ, which opted out of Title II funding, would have less visible support structures for principals than states like PA, which exercised the Title II option to fund school leadership initiatives. However, principals were unaware of any investments for school leadership development regardless of which state they lived and, in general, displayed a relatively superficial understanding of ESSA policy provisions. Most principals were able to, for example, describe ESSA as a federal educational policy aimed at enhancing student achievement, but they were only able to do so in abstract terms. As one PA interviewee (Principal D) put it, “I guess ESSA is some federal policy of some sort.” Principals were also able to articulate a link between ESSA policy and student learning goals. For instance, Principal F stated the goal of ESSA was “to ensure that every student is learning and then achieving certain goals.”

Both the PA and NJ state ESSA plans explicitly devolved power to states and districts. The PA Department of Education emphasized, “Pennsylvania is a local control state, and PAED’s Consolidated State Plan recognizes that the federal law provides greater autonomy and flexibility at both the state and local levels” (PAED, 2019, p. 6). Likewise, we found a strong presence of devolution of accountability in the NJ plan, which makes continual reference to the idea that local schools and local school districts are best suited to meet the needs of educators and students within their communities. In contrast to principals’ relative lack of awareness of shifts in funding, they were more aware of ESSA’s move toward the devolution of accountability. They mostly understood, albeit vaguely, that ESSA policy took a more flexible, guided approach to school accountability. Principal D, for example, knew that the ESSA state policy plan “delineates or kind of provides some guidance for how districts or schools should be,” and that “some of that will vary and there needs to be some different degrees of how that might look like for different kids.”

Most principals conveyed a similarly indistinct understanding of the devolution of accountability, and the majority could not specify any of the new decision-making powers that ESSA afforded to districts or schools.

One of the main reasons that principals appear to have had difficulty delineating ESSA policy was due to its perceived continuity with prior federal policy. Perhaps most pointedly, one principal at a suburban school in NJ said,

I don’t know much about it. I felt like I was pretty tuned into No Child Left Behind. I kind of found over...
the years that we tend to rename things in education and we tend to recycle things. What’s new is old again, usually. I saw it [ESSA] as just, you know, what we were doing with No Child Left Behind. (Principal I)

This statement illustrates a commonly held sentiment regarding ESSA policy changes among most of the principals in our study. For most, it was challenging to distinguish ESSA policy from what was already in place under NCLB. In relation to their day-to-day responsibilities as school leaders, many interviewees viewed ESSA statutes more as common sense “good practice” than as new or different leadership approaches. When asked about perceived policy shifts, multiple interview participants talked about continuing to do what they thought “was best for their students.” Many saw more similarities than differences between NCLB and ESSA. For all practical purposes, the accountability system put in place by NCLB largely persisted under ESSA in the perception of most principals. For them, the mandates and requirements put forth in state ESSA plans were more of a policy abstraction than practical reality. There were, of course, important exceptions that merit further attention.

Notably, those principals who discerned little to no change from NCLB to ESSA were also those who served more affluent student populations, which represented much of our sample. In contrast, the two study participants who served relatively poor, urban communities, Principal B and Principal C, could see important policy changes that impacted their work. This divergence between the two principals working with historically underserved students, and everyone else was a common theme throughout our findings. In other words, differences in principals’ views cut sharply along existing lines of disparity. This can be seen in the varied interpretations of Pennsylvania’s Career Readiness Indicator to measure and track career-oriented curricula and activities. In reference to this metric, Principal A, who is employed in a relatively affluent community, stated, “I know there’s career readiness involvement now which, as a district, we are looking at how to make sure we’re providing artifacts and getting that information.” For him, the new indicators were simply about providing more information. Contrast this with the following statement from Principal C:

The one thing that we feel we have absolute control over in the building are the career readiness standards. So, that was something that we had a huge emphasis on last year to make sure that we had almost 100% of our building hitting their career readiness and completing their portfolio. So that was a nice piece to add.

As Principals C’s statement illustrates, the ability to showcase success in new ways represented an important step forward. The school led by Principal C was racially and economically segregated, served mostly poor students of color, and had been struggling to meet accountability targets. For her, the Career Readiness Indicator was a welcome reprieve. However, this example suggests that, like its predecessor NCLB, ESSA may exacerbate existing educational inequalities by placing unreasonable demands on already struggling schools. Indeed, our findings indicate that ESSA implementation is having a significantly different impact on low-income schools with a history of accountability-related sanctions. Accordingly, PA plans to use Title II, Part A funds for various initiatives that aim to prepare, hire, retain, and develop teachers and principals.

Perceptions of state intervention: from federal to local indicators

Both the PA and NJ state plans strongly endorsed academic indicators based on multiple measures, eschewing a single score based on test results, as was the norm during the NCLB era. At first, these shifts may appear consequential, but our findings tell a different story. Rather than feeling empowered to set their own metrics, principals reported that ESSA had little to no impact on their daily work and, instead of introducing a new, devolved form of accountability, kept existing accountability policies in place. As Principal A explained, “I feel that, although the rules may have changed during the years, we’re still doing something quite similar. I don’t know that it’s really changed our day-to-day, or my day-to-day as a principal.” The perpetuation of data norms geared toward performance-based accountability, such as annual reporting requirements, appears to have been a contributing factor. Unlike NCLB, which drew much attention from both the public and educators, ESSA reforms were barely noticed. Rather, the policy changes introduced in ESSA state plans, often indistinguishable from existing routines, appear to have blended quietly into the backdrop of existing accountability systems.

Overall, the continuous use of data for school improvement planning obscured the impact of ESSA reforms for many of the principals. By and large, principals conceptualized policy change through the same lens as before—that of performance-based accountability. Data narratives of school improvement in which quantifiable growth is the ultimate measure of academic success continued to animate principals’ notions of change.

When describing changes to accountability metrics that can be attributed to state ESSA plans, principals often interpreted those changes as technical adjustments to district data collection protocols, as opposed to ESSA policy requirements. Principal A, for example, asserted that changes to PA’s testing system were “not connected to ESSA,” which he elaborated on at length:
Um, you know I don’t remember exactly what time we interviewed, but we went through our PSSA testing. Last year could be the first year where there was a reduction in the number of tests. That was noticed, like I think could be one less day for both math and language arts. That was beneficial. Um, for our students. With all the testing that they have to do. But other than that, I don’t know that anything else was really different.

The elaborate systems of statewide testing, monitoring, and analysis of academic performance institutionalized by NCLB continued to operate as principals’ frame of reference for understanding educational change. The above statement by Principal A also shows how, in many instances, principals could perceive the policy changes set in motion by ESSA but fail to attribute these changes to ESSA federal reform efforts or state plans.

While ESSA reforms had little meaningful influence on the daily practice of most principals, there were again important exceptions according to the school context in which that practice occurred. Here again, we observed a notable difference between principals who worked in high-stakes accountability environments and those who did not. Principals who held positions in more affluent communities were unsure whether state interventions based on performance indicators still existed under ESSA policy. While principals assigned to suburban schools were seemingly unaware of policy shifts related to performance-based interventions, the two principals (Principal B and Principal C) who assigned to urban locales were all too aware. These principals were well versed in the technical details related to interventions outlined in state ESSA plans. Principal C, for example, was able to describe in depth changes to the accountability measures, including the thresholds for each measure for each year. This stands in contrast to principals who were largely unaffected by targeted interventions, as the following statement by Principal E highlights:

In the past, we’ve always gotten a number, a score. And so this is changed a bit in that there’s a myriad of things that we’re looking at with Future Ready. We’re looking at student academic performance, but we’re also looking at student attendance, which is you know critical piece of all of this as well. So we’re not just sort of, you know, looking at that together because student attendance affects achievement, so it’s important to be looking at both of those pieces. And then the third piece is the career readiness.

Here, it is evident that Principal E understood how data reporting had changed from previous years (for example, in comparison to policies under NCLB), but interpreted these changes as minor technical adjustments. In addition, unless their school had a history of targeted interventions, this group of principals did not associate these changes with ESSA reforms. Put differently, the changes touted in ESSA state plans seemed to move principals’ responsibilities in more or less the same direction—that is, toward the collection and analysis of student data that indicate academic progress. This contrasts with principals of low-income schools in urban communities, for whom many of the specific provisions related to data monitoring and compliance carried a different meaning. New reporting requirements for attendance and career readiness, which are specific provisions of PA’s state plan, for example, meant extra administrative responsibilities for Principal B:

Attendance is also a big part of what I do. And the career readiness piece, which is part of you know the Future Ready Index…That’s been a challenge with who does what and actually getting stuff done.

More generally, our findings indicate that ESSA’s model of devolution, with its focus on delegating more of the technical aspects of accountability to state bureaucrats and local officials, made it difficult to distinguish federal mandates from district strategy. When we asked principals about specific provisions of ESSA state plans, their responses frequently conflated ESSA policy provisions with the directives of district-level leaders. Most principals passively accepted ESSA reforms passed on to them by district officials, and they were often unsure whether new requirements were related to ESSA. In reference to PA’s Future Ready Index, an explicit part of the state’s ESSA plan, Principal E equivocated, “It’s all future ready. Nothing that’s ESSA directly. I don’t know if it comes to them directly as ‘this is ESSA.’” Thus, when principals were expressly implementing ESSA policy statutes, they were often either unaware of it or uncertain whether their actions were connected to ESSA. On occasion, principals did try to clarify this confusion by conducting their own investigations of ESSA policy. Principal F, for example, turned to the Internet for more information on Pennsylvania’s state plan to see whether “it’s already stuff we’re doing,” suspecting that his school was already “incorporating what ESSA wants us to do” but that the district just “hasn’t [yet] used the terminology of ESSA” to describe those activities. More broadly, principals’ lack of knowledge related to specific ESSA plans or even the general thrust of ESSA reforms was manifest throughout our sample of interviews. While the continuation of the NCLB-era system of accountability partially explains this knowledge gap, it does not fully account for principals’ weak understanding of ESSA policy reforms. Fragmented patterns of communication and ineffective training that principals received from local and state agencies were also an important factor.
Perceptions of implementation: from federal accountability to state bureaucracy

LEAs and SEAs were key institutional actors in the implementation of ESSA policy. The model of devolved accountability envisaged by state ESSA plans placed state and district officials at the center of implementation as leaders of a more inclusive, democratic system of accountability. The PA plan, for example, described an expansion of existing initiatives for developing leadership capacities, such as the induction program for new principals, PD for principals partnering with the National Institute for School Leadership, and the secretary’s superintendents’ academy. Similarly, the NJ state plan explains that the SEA will continue to support principals through existing practices and initiatives, such as continuing their current relationship with the Rutgers University Graduate School of Education (the largest public higher education institution in the state). However, our analysis of state ESSA plans and principal interviews reveals inconsistencies between the policy goals of investing in school leadership capacities and the actual implementation of those goals. Both the PA and the NJ state plan, for example, resolve to include a diversity of viewpoints in their implementation of ESSA by “developing a stakeholder engagement process” (PAED, 2019, p. 1). Yet, our data suggest that there was little, if any, communication from state authorities responsible for ESSA implementation in either PA or NJ. In fact, all the principals we interviewed, regardless of their state or local context, gave strikingly similar accounts of perfunctory and ambiguous communication from state and district authorities with regard to ESSA implementation.

For one, the communication principals did receive was typically a one-way form of communication, such as an email blast, that provided information. “Our superintendent shoots out things to the administrators whenever she comes along things...They are really great about communicating changes and things,” explained Principal E. Other principals described similar patterns of information dissemination in which district officials would receive particulars about ESSA that they would filter and append for principals. Principals overwhelmingly relied on district officials to pass along relevant information about ESSA policies. Therefore, unless principals were active consumers of information, important knowledge about ESSA policy was easy to miss. Further, when asked about specific types of information, such as ESSA-related PD for school leaders, principals exhibited even less familiarity with ESSA provisions. When asked whether she had received any notification of ESSA training, Principal D responded, “None at all. Honestly, the only way that I even know that it exists is when I’m reading professional circulars that come across my desktop online.” As Principal D observes, the content of information about ESSA policy and the manner in which principals were exposed to it were “incidental” and based on the idiosyncratic behaviors of individual superintendents. Although the generally poor quality of information was a constant condition of ESSA implementation, there were some notable patterns of communications related to training and PD.

Most of the principals we interviewed, the majority of whom held positions in affluent communities, indicated that they received no training related to the core ideas of ESSA or its implementation in schools. Some reported that ESSA training was aimed at school leadership but was instead about updating relevant personnel on specific provisions that schools need to comply with. This was illustrated by Principal F’s description of ESSA training:

It was more training for our guidance counselors, it was more I would say, I wouldn’t say training it was more basic it was in-service, basically explain more about the career readiness and how it’s going to flow into elementaries and also talking about the portfolios. In fact, only two principals reported being offered any kind of ESSA-related training or PD. Here again, the experiences of Principal B and Principal C, the two principals working in high-needs school contexts, were distinct from the rest of our sample. Many of the communication issues were replicated when it came to principal training, however. This was illustrated in the following description provided by Principal B:

From the state level, we did receive training. It was a video conference or webinar. It was not really in detail at all because I think that our district personnel was trying to figure out exactly how to make sense of it. There were some questions that we had, especially when we talked about the career readiness and schools not hitting that target. I know that they had emailed the state and asked them questions, and I don’t know if they actually ever heard back?

Thus, not only does our analysis suggest ESSA training was aimed at principals serving in schools that were targeted for intervention, but also that this training was lacking in quality, thoroughness, and follow-up support.

Despite numerous references to partnerships with school leaders, as well as the formation of advisory committees to help inform the development of state ESSA plans and guide ESSA policy implementation, we found little to no evidence of principal involvement in the creation, adoption, or enactment of state ESSA plans. Occasionally, principals made vague mention of decision-making structures and processes that stayed distant from them. In reference to her superintendent, for example, Principal G said, “I know [he] sits on many round tables and different things, so he may have been [trained] at his level. They may have elicited some sort of input, but to my knowledge, nobody said anything yet.” Several participants made similar allusions to organizational
abstractions like “round tables” or “planning committees,” but there was no direct evidence that principals were formally included in the development of ESSA plans in either PA or NJ.

Consequently, principals were unconvinced of the sincerity of ESSA policy makers to consult school leaders. This sentiment was summed up in the following statement made by Principal I:

I feel like that’s always your joke about that. Like, I know there’s always these committees and they always say, you know, all the educators were brought together. I’ve never known anybody who was part of that. Even on their like official report and stuff, they say like, yes, committee, like we have these committees and they consisted of, you know, practitioners and then I always, but I’ve never yet. And I’ll, I do quite a few interviews and talk to principals a lot, and I never have found one that’s been involved in it. So I was wondering who these people are.

Skepticism toward state officials was pervasive among the principals in our study. In reference to an overview of ESSA policy given at the beginning of the school year, Principal B noted with amusement that “a lot of principals, it was funny because they sat there and said it was a waste of time, but no one knew what it was. So how was it a waste of time if you don’t really know what it is?” As Principal B notes, some trainings were offered to principals, but principals were often dismissive of this training and chose not to engage in it. Our analysis suggests not only was no training available to principals, but when it was available, some principals did not actively engage in it as they did not think it was relevant to their work.

Most of the principals in our study revealed that, if they wanted to learn about ESSA, they needed to take the initiative and educate themselves. For example, Principal H said, “If you go on the state website, I think that’s where I pulled it [information about ESSA] from. That was helpful.” Taking this point further, Principal A said, “I don’t know that it has changed. You know we get little snippets as things come out. Superintendent will send us, you know, some information—‘take a look at this’—but I haven’t really seen anything that’s been meaningful to me.” Even in cases where district officials did a good job of filtering information from the state for school administrators below them, implementation guidance was sorely lacking. This was the case with Principal I, as she explained in the following statement:

[W]here the state goes wrong a lot of times is these mandates come in, but we’re not really given anything from them as far as implementation. And really it’s all about ongoing management, right? So, right. “Hey, here’s this memo. This is what you have to do.” But we’re not giving you exactly what to do. We’re not giving you any funding to do it. We’re not giving you any like intense training. But we will make you fill out some reports later on to make sure you’ve done it.

Poor transparency combined with ambiguous and inconsistent messaging from state officials is indicative of a highly bureaucratized implementation process that severely limited principals’ access to reliable information about ESSA policy. Some of this may be attributable to state plans. In the NJ plan, for instance, although there are general specifics about how LEAs should shape educational experiences (e.g., creating welcoming and safe spaces and including ESSA-required accountability monitoring, such as graduation rates and progress toward ELL proficiency), the way in which schools and districts go about managing and adhering to these accountability requirements is left up to local leaders.

A final point of analysis lies in the consistency of our findings over the two years of data collection. When we first interviewed principals during the 2018–19 school year, ESSA had already been fully implemented in both states. Nevertheless, in addition to some small changes in the states’ plans, it was still at the early stage of implementation—which is particularly the case for a large-scale, comprehensive federal policy like ESSA. Thus, after one year, we anticipated some changes in principals’ knowledge and perceptions when we conducted our second round of interviews in the 2019–2020 school year. However, most of our sampled principals did not report any changes in their knowledge and outlook. Principal A noted, “I don’t think any beliefs I have changed. It hasn’t really affected my day-to-day job at all. Still trying to meet the needs of all kids, getting all students to improve.” Similarly, Principal C pointed out the delay in data reporting systems and that her knowledge of ESSA had not changed.

Discussion

Our analysis shows that principals overwhelmingly perceived ESSA implementation as a continuation of the performance-based accountability system established by NCLB. If anything, the paradigm of academic success and data-driven improvement instituted by NCLB was reinforced by ESSA policy. Despite its similarities with NCLB, we found substantial evidence of uncertainty regarding ESSA policy. Principals possessed limited knowledge of the distinctive nature of ESSA, and the vast majority believed that ESSA had little to no impact on their daily work. One explanation may lie in the local distribution of accountability. For example, many of the principals in our study said their district superintendent or Title I coordinator handled compliance activities and tasks specifically related to ESSA. At the
elementary school level, it is usually school counselors or a secretary who deals with attendance and career readiness rather than the principal, which could be one explanation as to why these principals were largely lacking in knowledge about ESSA. This lack of awareness can also be attributed, at least in part, to the virtual absence of communication or training related to ESSA policy. Notable exceptions were principals working in disadvantaged communities who were knowledgeable about ESSA reforms, both because of their students’ poor academic performance and because their schools remained under the threat of state intervention.

Our study also offers a strong critique of ESSA’s narratives of devolution and flexibility for school leaders. The PA and NJ state plans, for example, represented divergent paths of devolution within the ESSA framework. Regardless, many details of school-level policy implementation remained unspecified in both plans, which portends high levels of autonomy combined with high levels of uncertainty related to principals’ work. In other words, our document analysis indicated that principals may be vulnerable to a form of decision paralysis (Schwartz, 2006) under ESSA’s devolved policy regime. Rather than empowering principals, too much autonomy to choose indicators of educational success may, in precarious policy environments, have paradoxical effects and undermine efforts to induce and manage educational change. Overall, the implementation of ESSA appears to be shifting the center of educational policy away from a singular focus on federal accountability metrics and toward the marginal adjustment of technical measurements within a complex state bureaucracy.

The challenges associated with the implementation of ESSA have been documented before. According to a survey conducted in 2017, SEA officials in many states (23 of the 45 states that participated in the survey) reported that their SEA was facing a heavier workload under ESSA than under NCLB, while almost all states reported that they lacked the capacity to implement ESSA (Rentner et al., 2017). As a result, many states failed to include all required information in their report cards, which is one of the core elements of ESSA (Burnette, 2019). Duff and Wohlstetter (2019) anticipated that, without sufficient guidance, this trend would continue and principals would not be able to access the data that they need. Our finding corresponds with their prediction. At the school level, with limited communications and training, principals were largely excluded from the policy implementation process, not knowing exactly what ESSA stands for and requires them to do. At the same time, however, how much they need to understand about ESSA remains a question. It has been widely recognized that time is one of the most precious resources for principals given their numerous job responsibilities (Grissom et al., 2015a, 2015b; Hochbein & Meyers, 2021).

Identifying the optimal level of principals’ knowledge and awareness of large-scale policies like ESSA is beyond the scope of this study, but excluding principals from the implementation process entirely can be detrimental to the policy implementation. From the cognitive framework for the implementation processes, local agencies’ knowledge and well-informed sense making are crucial for success in enacting policy. For instance, Spillane et al. (2002) posited that “State and national standards ask local implementing agents—teachers, school administrators, local government officials, policemen, human service providers—to change their behavior and do things differently, but a cognitive perspective on implementation underscores that behavioral changes on the part of individuals are fundamentally cognitive” (p. 419). Principals are also policy mediators as they “determine the conditions under which policy interpretation and implementation will take place” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 35). In terms of accountability policies, “school leaders do not simply react to policy makers’ expectations; instead principals enact their accountability environment” (Shipps, 2012, p. 3). That is, how they make sense of policies and how they enact them determine the ultimate policy outcomes (Coburn, 2006). Without sufficient information, principals are only “small cogs in the wheel” in the ESSA implementation process, which sounds alarm bells for educational leaders and researchers who are well aware of the critical roles that principals play in policy implementation. We, therefore, strongly recommend providing training on ESSA and offering opportunities for building-level administrators to discuss it among themselves, as such an exchange can facilitate a deepening of their understanding of policy based on their local contexts. The effects of collaboration among school leaders have been well documented, and the medium can be regular face-to-face meetings or online forums (Rehm et al., 2021; Umekubo et al., 2015). Principals might be swamped by their daily job responsibilities, but such investment will be fruitful in the long run for their own growth as educational leaders as well as for the success of ESSA.

We acknowledge that our findings come from a limited number of principals at the elementary school level in two states. In particular, although our data suggested that school characteristics exert an influence on principals’ responses to ESSA, it is impossible for us to fully investigate such variation due to the limited sample from NJ. In a similar vein, as we only focused on an elementary-level context in order to maintain comparability across two states, it was not possible to compare principals working at different levels of schools. Including high school principals in the sample would be especially valuable, as ESSA generally did not bring significant changes at the high school level, which makes it an important counterfactual for elementary or middle schools. Future studies should draw on data from more principals working in diverse contexts. As
noted earlier, our NJ principals held positions at relatively high-achieving schools, so we were limited in our ability to compare principals’ experiences across the two states. We further recommend that future studies embrace more participatory research models. Surrounded by uncertainty from policy environments, it is critical to understand how practitioners perceive and act upon policies. Given the effective defunding of public education over the past decade and the unexpected financial, social, and educational costs imposed by COVID-19, it is particularly critical to investigate the feasibility of ESSA’s accountability framework in helping every student succeed. Our study raises concerns that the additional layers of administration imposed by ESSA state plans may overwhelm principals and teachers.

Another limitation is related to our analysis of the state-level policy implementation plans. These documents laid out how the policy is supposed to be enacted in each state, but some of the important details related to implementation (e.g., nature of the funded PD, data collection and reporting requirements, and detailed accountability provisions) were absent. Some of these more nuanced aspects of policy implementation may be determined by district-level administrators based on their local knowledge. Future research might fruitfully investigate these aspects of implementation plans at different levels of administration.

As promised, the enactment of ESSA is shifting the center of educational policy away from a singular focus on federal accountability metrics. Rather than clarifying the responsibilities of principals as they relate to accountability, however, decentralization has muddied the waters. Our data suggest that ESSA reforms are displacing the central ledger at the ED with 50 central ledgers at state agencies across the country, leaving principals to make marginal changes within an increasingly bureaucratic environment. Further, the bureaucratic burden that comes with ESSA’s devolved policy model could undermine the ability of school leaders to absorb the policy shock of the pandemic. In this light, even the top-down authority of test scores imposed by NCLB may be preferable to the free-floating responsibility of multiple measures that has emerged in the wake of ESSA.

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Research involving human participants and/or animals This study was reviewed and deemed exempted, and it was done in accordance with the ethical standards of the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.
