DECIDING TO CHANGE: ONE DISTRICT'S QUEST TO IMPROVE OVERALL STUDENT PERFORMANCE

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This single case study of a school district responding to federal and state accountability pressures presents a rare analysis of educational decision making as it happens. It focuses in particular on the challenges and choices of making a strategic decision and the transition from that decision into implementation. Using a conceptual framework of multiple stakeholder decision making and a mixed methodology, this article demonstrates who has influence in decision making, how that influence directs decision making, and the effects of the ways in which strategic change decisions are communicated. This particular school district formulated its change decision collaboratively but issued an implementation directive to the schools that was hierarchical in nature. The result is rapid implementation with some unresolved problems. Practical implications suggest that education leaders can be thoughtful about aligning transition choices with desired outcomes. Research implications lead to further examination of implementation consequences stemming from transition choices.

Introduction

School districts wrestling with inadequate student performance as determined by standardized tests face difficult choices about how to react. This article presents a case study of California's Barloma School District (the names of the school district, the schools, and all participants are pseudonyms), a district caught in the struggle to help challenging students meet state performance standards. It illustrates the difficulty of responding to federal and state accountability policies while dealing with limitations on district and school site ability to make change.

In California's implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, schools that have substantial numbers of students not meeting state standards for two consecutive years are classified "Program Improvement" (PI). Districts are obligated to assist schools to meet standards and emerge out of PI status (California Department of Education, 2005). Fourteen of BSD's 15 elementary schools did not meet 2005 adequate yearly progress (AYP) criteria in English and language arts. Of the 14 schools, 7 are cur-

rently in PI status because they have been unable to meet AYP criteria for at least two consecutive years.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how instructionally oriented decisions develop in a context of external accountability and uncertainty about how to improve achievement. In the process, we explain leadership choices regarding how the district decides to change, the degree to which specific decisions will be made collaboratively, and how the district communicates its change decision to school sites. We elaborate our specific purpose below, followed by discussion of significance. After presenting our research questions, we describe the conceptual framework of the study as we apply it to this particular district. Findings and conclusions follow.

Specific Purpose

This case is part of a larger study of three school districts implementing different changes focused on improving long-term student progress. We seek to understand the subtlety and complexity of educational decision making by focusing in particular on a strategic change decision and

the transition from this decision to implementing the change. By strategic, we mean a decision that addresses the long-term direction of the school district. In BSD, this is a decision to implement an English language development (ELD) program for all students in all of the district's elementary schools. This research provides one example of how decision making evolves during the process of addressing substandard state-mandated test results.

Significance of the Study

With a few exceptions (Allison & Zelikow, 1999; Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972), theorists, empirical researchers, and authors oriented toward practice explain leadership and decision making before and after multiple stakeholders are involved, but leave out what happens during the interactions of numerous players as decisions develop (Blase & Blase, 1997; Bolman & Deal, 2003; Fullan, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2001). Empirical research about how decisions are actually made is relatively difficult to find in the general literature related to how organizations function and practically nonexistent in education leadership literature. Studies that do exist are experimental (Gersick, 1989), retrospective, and focused primarily on noneducational organizations (Allison & Zelikow, 1999; Gersick, 1988; Keeney, Renn, & von Winterfeldt., 1987; Rogers, 1995; Weick, 2001; Winn & Keller, 1999; 2001). Decision-making theory and retrospective studies are vital for developing the conceptual framework analyzing educational decision making that we present in the next section. But a critical weakness of retrospective studies is the tendency for participants to forget, filter, and rationalize their recollections of how they decided to take specific courses of action (March, 1994). This case study moves beyond past research to demonstrate how decisions evolve by collecting data as those decisions are being made or shortly thereafter.

Our analysis of the transition from BSD's decision to implement a new ELD program into implementation provides researchers with a more complete understanding of how schools and districts engage in the change process and what roles various leaders (e.g., superintendents, principals, or teacher leaders) play. The model we employ and our subsequent findings create a jumping off point for additional fieldwork in different types of districts grappling with diverse issues involving change. The benefits from this and future studies include new practical insights into change, decision making, and leadership in educational settings. By studying decision making as it happens, we learn if influence of individuals varies in collaborative decision-making settings, how the direction of a collaborative decision is determined by individuals or groups, and how those involved in strategic decision making determine the

path toward implementation. Leaders in schools and districts similar to this case study face a difficult choice between fast implementation resulting in partially addressing accountability pressures or implementing slowly and more thoroughly. Choices made in the transition from a change decision into implementation have consequences that provide valuable lessons for educational leaders striving to improve student achievement.

Research Questions

To guide our exploration of decision making, we ask the following research questions:

1. Which stakeholders influence educational decision making in this district?
2. How does stakeholder influence steer decisions in a specific direction?
3. How does communication about a change decision affect the transition into implementation?

The conceptual framework we employ to study these questions is one portion of a larger model we developed to guide field work that examines decision making in educational contexts as it happens (Brazer & Keller, 2006).

Conceptual Framework

In this section, we apply a general framework of multiple stakeholder decision making to the specific school district at the center of this study. Through text and figures, we show how the model we are using illuminates decision making. We begin with a description of the research context, followed by development of the conceptual framework.

Research Context

The Barloma School District is a medium-sized K–8 district in California. BSD serves nearly 13,000 students, 96 percent of whom are nonwhite. More than 82 percent of the district's students are eligible for free or reduced price meals and 54.8 percent are designated English speakers of other languages (ESOL).

As early as 2003, the BSD board, superintendent, and administration were concerned about the difficulty they were having meeting state standards in English/language arts. As a result, they accepted the invitation from a local university's Leadership Development Center to join with school districts from California and other states focused on identifying local needs and learning how to make change effectively. One of the authors participated with BSD in the summers of 2004 and 2005 as an observer during Leadership Development Center Summer Institutes.

The Leadership Development Center has as part of its mission the promotion of collaborative leadership strategies

and techniques aimed at meeting the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act. It therefore requires participating school districts to put together what they call an NCLB Team that consists at a minimum of one board member, the superintendent, the president of the local teachers' association, and a representation of school principals. Barloma created their NCLB Team consistent with these guidelines and added two teachers, a classified staff member who is also a district parent, and four central office administrators. Thus, no later than October 2003, BSD was involved in a multiple stakeholder approach to decision making in their effort to improve student achievement.

A Multiple Stakeholder Conceptual Framework

The BSD superintendent's decision to participate in the Leadership Development Center's process to make a critical strategic decision places him within a web of stakeholders whom he has invited to influence his and each other's thinking. Decisions about how to improve student achievement in English and language arts and how to communicate necessary changes to the district at large come from NCLB Team deliberations.

In BSD, the NCLB Team is the most obvious stakeholder group involved in the change decision to improve student achievement. Additionally, stakeholders outside the district that exert influence over the superintendent's ultimate decision include the U.S. Department of Education because of NCLB mandates associated with Title I funding and the California Department of Education as the enforcer of state standards. Potential additional stakeholders include principals and teachers not serving on the NCLB Team.

Noticeably absent from the decision-making process we observed are parents (with the exception of the classified staff member mentioned above), students, and other community members. The absence of parents is mentioned by various participants as a weakness of the collaborative process, but there is also an implication that parents who could be classified as working poor are often unable or unwilling to participate on committees. Barloma students affected by decisions regarding English and language arts instruction are too young to participate. We did not engage in any discussion about other community members.

Figure 1 (page 4) displays the dynamics inside BSD Superintendent Steve Thomas's stakeholder web. Solid arrows indicate that we found evidence of influence from a particular stakeholder group. Dashed arrows show that influence in the indicated direction is plausible, but we are not certain because we were unable to find evidence of that influence. The double-headed dashed arrow between the school board and the superintendent indicates that influence could be felt in either direction, yet we did not have

direct evidence of influence either way. Arrows are labeled with possible content of the influence exerted. The NCLB Team oval overlaps the Superintendent's Strategic Change Decision circle to indicate that the NCLB Team operates inside the decision making process, as opposed to other entities with arrows going into the circle that may try to exert influence from the outside. Influence within the NCLB Team is felt by the superintendent and moves among each of the stakeholders listed in the boxes as a result of numerous NCLB Team meetings.

During the first Leadership Development Center workshop, Barloma staff focused on English and language arts as the most important area in need of change. The NCLB Team also decided that they would design their English Language Development program at the elementary level first because that was where the need was greatest. They spoke vaguely of implementing ELD in middle schools at a later time. Consequently, Figure 1 displays "English Language Development K–6" in a box at the center of the superintendent's change decision. A solid arrow, labeled "Accountability," comes from the Federal and State Education Departments box because there are clear messages that district schools are not meeting standards.

Other influences on the change decision are less clear. Boards often direct superintendents to make change, but in BSD their influence is ambiguous. One school board member serves on the NCLB Team, suggesting direct influence, but the role other board members may play is uncertain. For that reason, we have placed a two-headed dashed arrow between the school board and the superintendent to indicate that the change impetus could be going in either or both directions. We are likewise uncertain about the influence of principals and teachers outside of the NCLB Team and have therefore drawn a dashed arrow from those stakeholder groups to the ultimate change decision.

The NCLB Team was established with the specific purpose of helping the superintendent to determine what change is required and how the change should be carried out. Inside the NCLB Team, influence potentially flows in all directions. Principals and teachers may have direct influence on the superintendent's thinking as a result of him inviting their input by creating the team and placing them on it. Members of the Instructional Services Department are listed by role in Figure 1 and participate in a fashion similar to principals and teachers. Both groups may also exercise influence on the NCLB Team indirectly by promoting their ideas to Javier Martinez, the Assistant Superintendent for Instructional Services, also a member of the NCLB Team. Martinez will convey to Superintendent Thomas his ideas regarding the change decision inside the NCLB Team process and possibly outside of it, as well.

Figure 1: Influences on the superintendent's decision
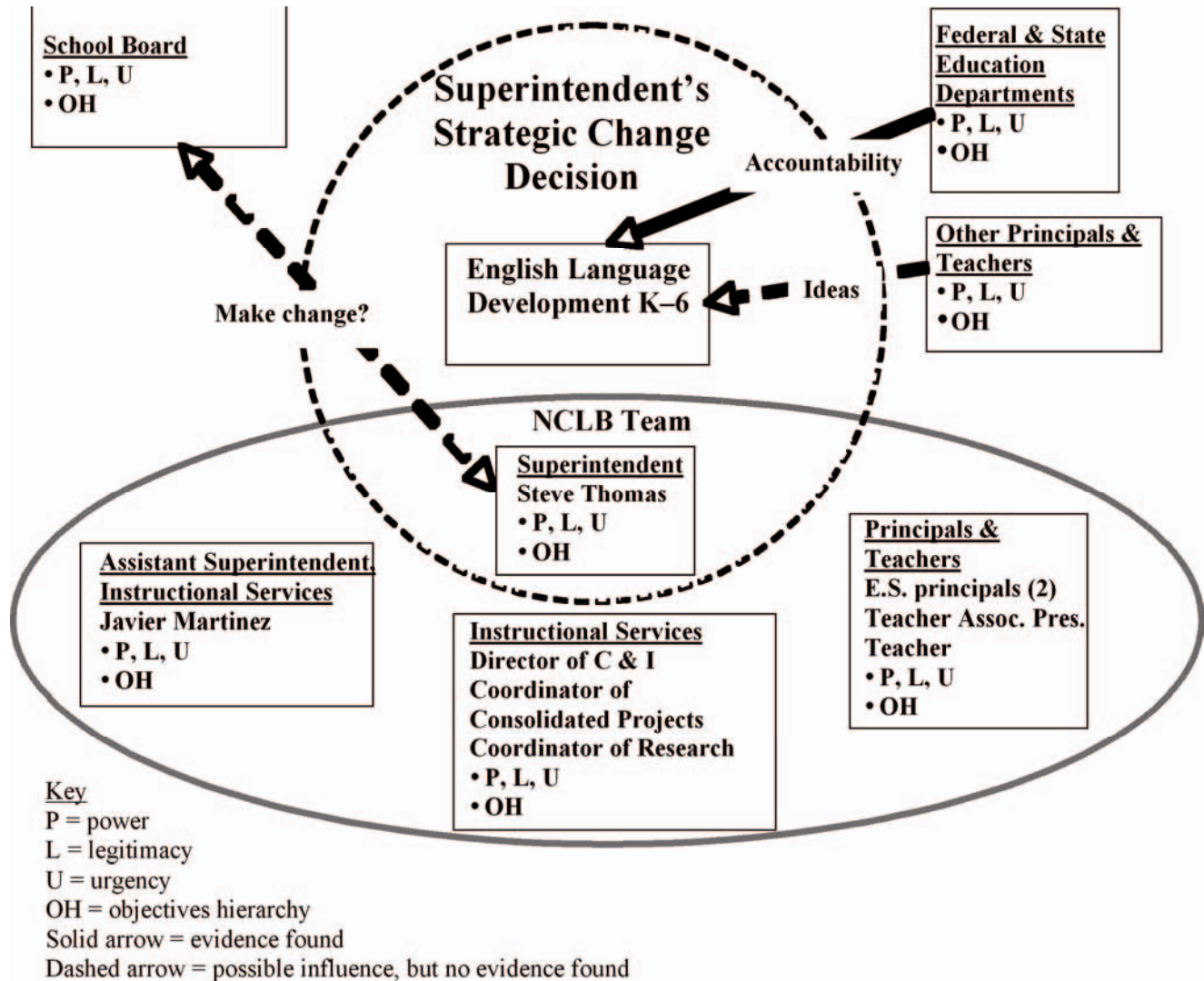
To express the relative strength of influence from any given stakeholder or group, we use the terms power, legitimacy, and urgency, borrowed from earlier studies of multiple stakeholder decision making (Keeney, et al., 1987; Winn & Keller, 1999; 2001). Stakeholders' individual priorities for influencing the change decision in a specific direction stems from their personal and collective objectives and the order of importance of those objectives, or their objectives hierarchies (Winn & Keller, 1999; 2001). These labels appear in each stakeholder box and are explained in the key at the bottom of the figure. They convey that power, legitimacy, and urgency and objectives hierarchies are at work throughout Superintendent Thomas' stakeholder web.

Following the decision to make change is a chain of decisions required to implement the desired change. This article examines the first of these, which is how to convey to the affected schools implementation expectations resulting from the change decision. Given the Leadership Development Center's intent to foster collaboration,

Superintendent Thomas and the NCLB Team were persuaded to make an explicit decision regarding if and how principals and teachers district wide would be involved in the decision regarding the nature and scope of the new English Language Development program. Though the NCLB Team did not discuss it this way, their choice can be described by one of four basic types of collaboration with others:

- Type 1—explain their rationale for the ELD program to teachers and principals;
- Type 2—first seek input from teachers and principals about a new ELD program, then design the program and explain their rationale;
- Type 3—work as peers with teachers and principals to arrive at a consensus on a new ELD program; or
- Type 4—delegate the design of the ELD program to teachers and principals, holding them accountable to meet predetermined goals and

standards. (Vroom & Yetton, 1973; Hoy & Miskel, 2001; Jarvis, 1993)

Figure 2 illustrates the collaboration choice Superintendent Thomas faced. The basic question underlying the choice, and one that BSD dealt with explicitly, is: What type of collaboration decision will best create the desired change? How this question is answered can be described by decisions makers' assumptions about how implementers (i.e., principals and teachers) will respond. Weick's conception of loose and tight coupling (1976) corresponds to the types of collaboration described above. Choosing Type 1 or Type 2 indicates beliefs that school site actions are relatively tightly coupled to central office decisions—principals and teachers will understand what is expected and do what they are told to do. Choosing Type 3 or Type 4 is consistent with beliefs that the school sites are relatively loosely coupled to central office decisions and therefore require more participation in making the decision in order to understand and be willing to implement it.

When given a particular message about implementing a change, principals make choices of their own. As indicated in the School Site oval of Figure 2, they can embrace the change, pick and choose aspects of the change that they favor, or ignore the message that change must happen. How the NCLB Team anticipates the choices principals make regarding their approaches to implementation is critical to the decision about how to transition from the strategic change decision into implementation.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method approach to learn who has influence in strategic decision making, what direction that influence takes based on objectives hierarchies, and how both the change decision and the choice about how to communicate that decision evolve. Data collection is carried out through surveys, participant observation, and interviews.

Data Collection

In the spring of 2005, shortly after implementation of the new BSD English Language Development program, surveys were administered to all teachers, administrators, and staff present in regularly scheduled schoolwide meetings in all BSD elementary schools. We achieved an 83 percent response rate among teachers with 395 surveys returned out of a total of 477 certificated staff in the district's elementary schools.

Figure 2. Superintendent choosing a decision type based on perceptions of tight or loose coupling
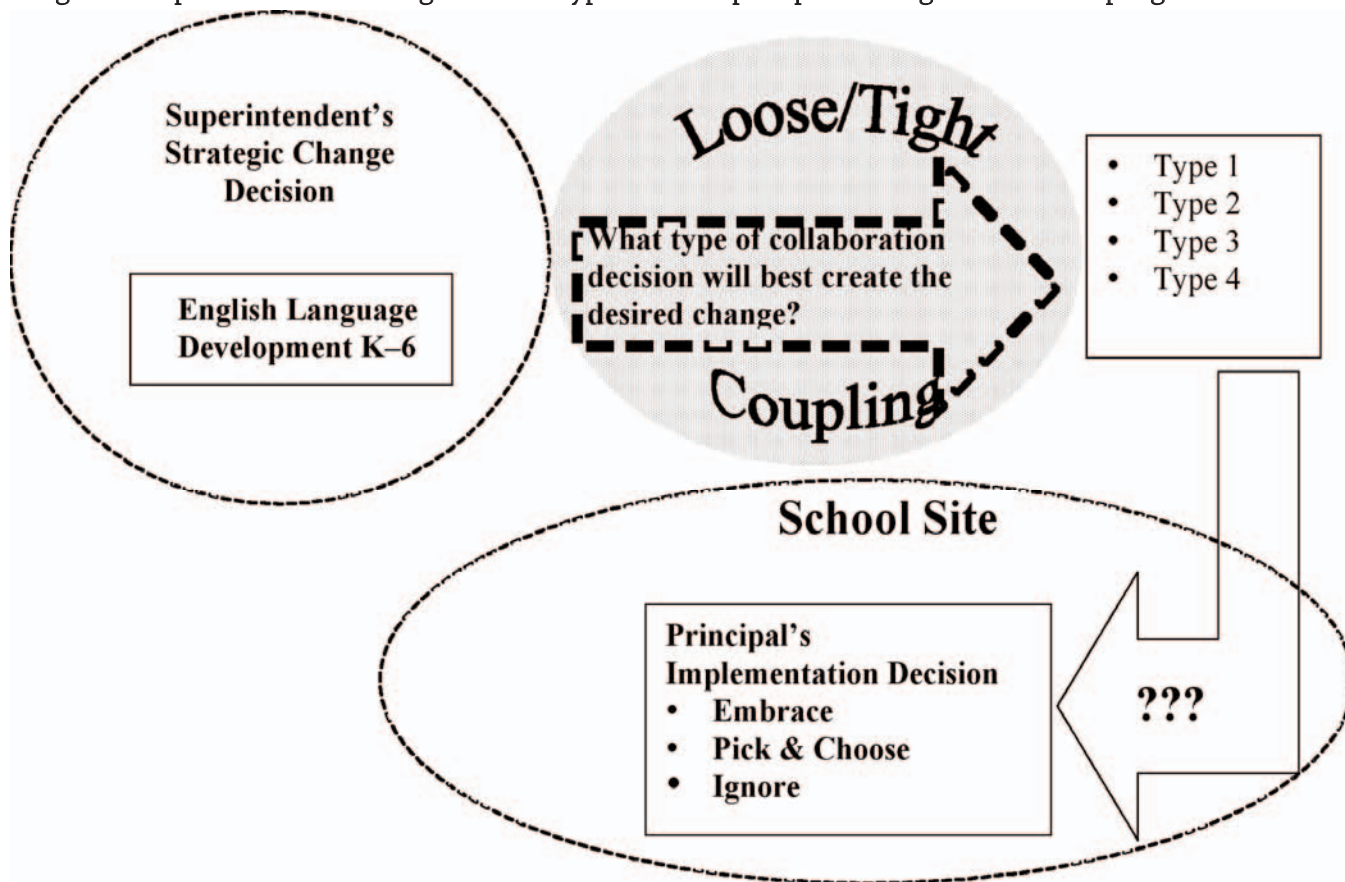
Using Likert-type scales, the survey asks respondents to rate the characteristics of people in specific roles, the respondent's individual school, and the district as a whole according to descriptors of hierarchy, influence in different types of decision making, willingness to change, and implementation tendencies (i.e., embracing, picking and choosing, or ignoring). Members of the NCLB Team were asked to take the survey in a different setting to keep their anonymous surveys separate from the district as a whole.

We address content validity of the survey by clearly defining unfamiliar terms in each question where they occur. The same survey has been used in two other districts with no apparent respondent misunderstanding or misinterpretation. Results from these districts similar to what we find in Barloma indicate that the survey is stable and reliable. We have made minor modifications in the order of the questions to ease survey completion. The survey yields helpful background information in the form of frequency distributions.

As mentioned above, one of the authors was present during Leadership Development Center Summer Institutes in both 2004 and 2005. The author was assigned the role of providing feedback to BSD as they went through the process of figuring out how to address the needs of students not meeting state standards. This role was purely advisory and was in no way construed to be exerting power over or substantial influence on the NCLB Team. From his perspective, the author was mostly quiet during meetings so that he could observe processes as they unfolded and maintain field notes.

Using an interview protocol tailored to the work of the NCLB Team, interviews with six of the 10 NCLB Team members were conducted in the fall of 2005 and the spring of 2006. We made attempts to interview all members of the NCLB Team, but of the remaining four, two did not respond to inquiries, one missed her appointment, and one could not be scheduled during the brief time we were in the school district. Any bias we may have introduced by leaving out members of the NCLB Team is mitigated by the large teacher response to the survey and the fact that the entire NCLB Team responded to the survey. Once transcribed, interviews were sent back to participants for verification of accuracy and to provide opportunities to correct any misstatements.

Data Analysis
Interview transcripts were coded based on the conceptual framework. We viewed each concept as a bin for data (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and therefore started with codes such as "power" or "loose coupling" to capture text that reveals participants' thinking about those ideas. A small number of additional codes were derived from patterns that emerged while reviewing transcripts. One example of such an emerging code was "consistency concerns" because we learned by reading the transcripts that many on the NCLB Team wanted to be certain that all schools would implement the new ELD program in very similar ways.

We created a comprehensive coding list that includes our working definitions for each code. One author used NVivo 2 software to attach codes to text. The other author separately coded interviews by hand. Disagreements about coding were discussed and resolved by the authors together and additional coding was added using NVivo 2. Interview data was subsequently sorted by codes to search for clear trends across respondents. Sorted data was also gathered into larger themes that emerged as a result of the coding process (Maxwell, 2005). Sorting and gathering were guided by our search for answers to this study's research questions.

We used frequency distributions from our quantitative data to triangulate NCLB Team and districtwide perceptions of who has influence in decision making. For categories with high response rates and that showed some tendency for NCLB Team and districtwide perceptions to differ, we used Analysis of Variance to determine the magnitude and statistical significance of perception differences noted through frequencies. The few differences we found have no practical significance for this article.

Field notes from Leadership Development Center Summer Institutes are used as a baseline record of what the NCLB Team intended to accomplish with its decision to change how ELD instruction is carried out in the school district. They are also used to provide triangulation for interviews, particularly regarding critical decisions made in the transition from the change decision into implementation.

Findings

Knowing who the decision makers are in the Barloma School District is simple because the NCLB Team was established to assist the superintendent in his strategic decision making. Knowing the strength and nature of various individuals' influence inside that process is more subtle. Although the NCLB Team is a collaborative venture, influence within this group plays out in hierarchical ways.

Backdrop of Accountability Pressure
There is little doubt in BSD that some kind of change was needed. In the hierarchy established by the California Department of Education and reinforced by NCLB, the district was informed through state reports that student

achievement was insufficient. The district saw Program Improvement troubles on the horizon and started on its journey to change some aspect of instruction in October 2003. As of this writing, seven elementary schools currently in PI status because of English and language arts creates a sense of urgency within the district—urgency focused on English language learners. School district data shows that English and language arts is an area of difficulty for native and nonnative speakers, but the latter category has the highest proportion of students with the lowest achievement.

Who Has Influence?

To answer our first research question, Which stakeholders influence educational decision making in this district?, we begin with the NCLB Team because they are charged by the superintendent to help determine the direction for the district's effort to improve student achievement. All members of the NCLB Team whom we interviewed agree that this group works together collaboratively. When pressed, however, members acknowledge that some people on the NCLB Team have greater influence than others.

Through a process facilitated by the Leadership Development Center, the NCLB Team decided to direct their efforts toward English language development. Superintendent Thomas and one of the principals explicitly acknowledge in interviews that this was a consensus decision requiring considerable deliberation. The principal explains:

> [W]e're one group united. I don't feel that it's been top down or vice versa…. I would say… as a group we came up with the goal all together. It was like, based on everything that we had jotted down, we came up with one specific target area for our district, and that was the area of English language development.

The collaborative nature of the group is further supported by our observations of their functioning during Leadership Development Center Summer Institutes. We found that all members were invited to contribute to all discussions and most took advantage of this opportunity.

The overall collaborative disposition of the NCLB Team is somewhat nuanced by the fact that different members are named as being more influential than others. Respondents were able to categorize this influence according to power, legitimacy, and urgency that derive from both position and actions within that position. A central office administrator describes relationships in the following way:

> Well, I always think that the superintendent has more power than others just because he's the superintendent…. Even on the NCLB Team, it's hard to put that aside…. I respect what [the superintendent's] position is, and so I give him that power. I don't think I have ever felt like he imposes that power.

Seeing power in the upper echelon district leadership is also characteristic of another central office administrator.

> Certainly I think that people look to the superintendent because he's the boss. So, that would be legitimate in that it's appropriate for him to be making decisions because he's at the highest level of the district…. [T]here's Javier who would be next because he's the assistant superintendent and the boss of most of us that are on the team.

Thomas acknowledges that he holds a position of power and he spoke about how he tries to mitigate this when working with the NCLB Team in order to preserve the collaborative nature of the group.

> Are there people who have varying levels of influence and who have more influence than others? Well, certainly I do. There's a culture here of, if the superintendent says it, then we try and do it. So, I have to watch to be sure that I'm not overbearing or overaggressive or whatever because there's still that element of fear in the culture that says if the superintendent wants it, we're going to do it.

Thomas also recognizes that other members of the NCLB Team have influence based on their expertise and actions (what we refer to as legitimacy) and the power of their positions.

> I think Emily, who is our [coordinator of consolidated projects] …controls all the resources that people have, for the most part, because she's the categorical person who has the categorical dollars that people do all the fun and extra things with. There's certainly influence there. Certainly our union president has influence. And fortunately she doesn't use her influence in a union way; she uses it in a teacher way because she is first and foremost a teacher…. And she has influence and power in the group because of the culture around our teachers' union here ….

The NCLB Team in BSD collaborates in a manner that allows each member to be heard and to provide his or her input on any issue being considered, but individuals who bring greater position power to the NCLB Team are perceived to have greater influence within the group. Principals and teachers are not mentioned in interview responses regarding influence on the NCLB Team. They were active participants during NCLB Team discussions, but we could not determine the specific strength of their influence within the group.

Districtwide surveys reveal a wider perception of influence consistent with that from inside the NCLB Team. Table 1 shows that when asked to rate the influence of various positions on change decisions on a Likert-type scale, 86.6 percent of respondents rated the superintendent 4 or 5 (5 is the most influential and 1 is the least influential). Principals had greater influence attributed to them than appears to be the case inside the NCLB Team (60.5 percent rated principals 4 or 5). Teachers, on the other hand, are perceived to have very little influence, with 22.6 percent rating teachers 4 or 5 and 50.7 percent rating teachers 1 or 2. Perceptions both inside and outside the NCLB Team appear to be that those who hold positions near the top of the Barloma School District hierarchy exercise the greatest influence over decision making.

BSD's hierarchical tendencies are tempered by subject committees made up of teachers and administrators that advise administration on issues of curriculum and instruction. The ELD curriculum committee, embedded in the Curriculum and Instruction Department and under the supervision of its director, is a highly influential stakeholder group. The NCLB Team turned to them to provide the basic design of the ELD program because of their perceived subject matter expertise.

The Directions Decisions Take

Knowing that influence within the NCLB team varies, we now address our second research question: How does stakeholder influence steer decisions in a specific direction?

When we asked interview respondents to reflect on their objectives and to place those objectives into priority order, we found that although there was strong agreement regarding the development of a new ELD program, there was wide variation in what members of the NCLB Team hoped to accomplish. Superintendent Thomas and the director of curriculum and instruction identified group processes such as analyzing problems, using the NCLB Team to create and carry out major initiatives, getting the district to move forward in new ways, and achieving consistency throughout the district as their top priorities. Other

respondents tended to focus on specific initiatives for ELD. Assistant Superintendent Martinez, one of the principals, and the coordinator of research, were much more focused on students making progress through the ELD levels so they could achieve proficiency.

We neither observed nor heard about much effort to work through the varying objectives hierarchies to achieve clear and consistent goals. Instead, the process of consulting with and adopting the recommendations of the ELD curriculum committee brought the objective of students progressing through ELD levels to the top of the NCLB Team's objectives hierarchy. Other objectives named above are still important to individuals, but they are more latent than active.

The NCLB Team ratified the ELD curriculum committee's proposal that all schools would engage in ELD instruction a minimum of four days per week, a minimum of 30 minutes per day, carved out of the already-established two-and-one-half hours of language arts instruction. Students are to be homogenously grouped by ELD levels (as determined by the California English Language Development Test [CELDT] administered annually). Teachers are to use materials such as basal reader series that are already in use within the district, a decision driven by resource scarcity and uncertainty (discussed further in the Implementation Barriers subsection).

Communicating to schools how the new ELD program should work was a matter of considerable discussion within the NCLB Team. One of the common fears the group identified when they first began in 2003 was that of follow-through. Superintendent Thomas describes how they worked through this when reflecting on their discussion of implementation strategies from the summer of 2004:

> For our team, the time that you were with us, we were wrestling mightily with this whole issue. …This district has historically called itself the Burger King district. Everybody does it their way. …And it's also a district that has had an overlay of fear…that something bad is going to happen if we mandated something from the top. And yet I felt

Table 1. Districtwide Ratings of Influence on Change Decisions

	Position		
	Superintendent (N = 359)	Principals (N = 362)	Teachers (N = 367)
Percent Rating 4 or 5	86.6	60.5	22.6
Percent Rating 1 or 2	6.4	12.7	50.7

comfortable with it.… My thought was, if we're on the right track, everybody understands what the issue is, we've thought it out carefully, then there's not gonna be a problem with acceptance of what it is we're asking or telling people to do.

To transition from making a strategic change decision into implementation, the NCLB Team decided to tell the schools that they are required to implement the specific structure of the new ELD program. This directive became known in the language of the NCLB Team as "The Mandate." It is something of a source of pride because The Mandate communicates strength from the central office and an understanding of the right way to get things done in the district. A central office administrator describes the importance of using district hierarchy to bolster implementation:

I think it was very important that it came out from the top. It's like the first time… it ever really happened that way. "You shall do this." Then people ran with the ball.

The Mandate decision is consistent with NCLB Team and district perceptions of the legitimacy of the district's hierarchy. Superintendent Thomas' willingness to issue The Mandate gave the group critical impetus from its most influential stakeholder. NCLB Team members in turn, by themselves endorsing The Mandate, gave Superintendent Thomas multiple stakeholder support to take a firm position on the program all believe to be the appropriate response to student achievement challenges.

Despite the NCLB Team's endorsement of The Mandate, it appears to have put them into something of an internal contradiction. The group engaged in collaborative processes that Superintendent Thomas and others tried to preserve as Type 3 decision making—all acted as peers for the decisions about where to focus, how the ELD program should be structured, and how the decision should be communicated to the school sites. They clearly valued their own group process as a means to making sound choices. But they also achieved consensus to issue The Mandate that prohibited the schools from engaging in similar processes regarding implementation, communicating a Type 1 decision.

Type 1 communication in the form of The Mandate suggests that the NCLB Team perceived the relationship between the central office and the school sites as tightly coupled. The validity of this belief is confirmed in survey data about respondents' perceptions of how various roles in the district implement change. Survey participants were asked to describe how different people in the school system implement change. The superintendent, principals, and teachers are all perceived by more than 85 percent of respondents to implement in a manner that embraces change. (Other options on the survey included picking and choosing which aspects of change to implement or ignoring change.) These results are also consistent with Superintendent Thomas' view quoted above that when given a directive from the superintendent, most district staff will do their best to implement it.

Beliefs about tight coupling notwithstanding, issuing The Mandate as they did created a gap between the understanding of the ELD problem that the NCLB Team has and the understanding that principals and teachers have districtwide. Principals and teachers outside the NCLB Team were given information about the new ELD program, but they did not have opportunities to discuss it or modify it, which might have deepened their understanding of what they were told to implement. In the Conclusions section we discuss potential consequences of this gap.

Transition to Implementation

We turn next to the final research question, How does communication about a change decision affect the transition into implementation? Mandating the ELD program from the central office via the NCLB Team is an essentially hierarchical approach to program implementation. This is but one of many alternative choices that could have been made in the transition from strategic change decision to implementation. It appears to be driven by an attempt to overcome the central office's reputation for lack of follow-through and by a sense of urgency emanating from the situation in general and from the superintendent specifically.

The urgency is derived, in part, from the district's previous deficiency of specific, focused attention to ELD instruction. It may seem surprising that as a district with more than half its student population designated English Speakers of Other Languages, the Barloma School District had no actual English language development program prior to The Mandate. The director of curriculum and instruction, Mary Schultz, explains:

Interviewer: In your opinion, was there a need to change the ELD instruction in the district prior to the NCLB [Team's] taking it on?
Schultz: Um hmm. Definitely, there was a need to change.… There was a need to have ELD instruction because we didn't see that ongoing, even though we've always had materials and strategies and teachers on special assignment.
Interviewer: Mmm, wow! So you just stated that in the past there wasn't even instruction happening in ELD for English language learners.
Schultz: Right.

Although it may have been assumed that ELD instruction would take place as appropriate within regular language arts classes, whatever was happening was judged to be inadequate in light of schools being unable to meet adequate yearly progress criteria with the English language learner subgroup.

A situation that had been developing for several years as the language minority population of the school district grew achieved a critical sense of importance by 2003. It may have developed on its own, but NCLB and its implementation by the State of California increased pressure on the school district to do something about instruction for English language learners and language arts in general. The following interview excerpts describe the need for the district to move out on a new ELD program.

> We are on such an accelerated pace process-wise, from initiation of product to testing product to determining outcome of product because of the [requirement that] by the year 2014 in this country all kids will be at a proficiency or higher level. (central office administrator)

> He [Superintendent Thomas] has always mentioned there's a sense of urgency. We don't have time to waste and we need to make sure that our English language learners progress. (principal)

> [T]he superintendent [conveys] as far as, you know, the urgency. "Ok, we've got to move ahead. We have to address the fact that we're going to be in PI. We have to plan this… quickly." (central office administrator)

Superintendent Thomas verifies the validity of the others' beliefs about him:

> [W]e're still primarily in the NCLB Team focused on the English language learner issue since… if we could resolve our English language learner problem, our test score problems would go away. It still remains the single largest issue for us.

We believe that it was the underlying sense of urgency coupled with the desire to take a strong stand that motivated the NCLB team to take the hierarchical approach of The Mandate. This helped them to feel more confident that implementation would be taken seriously and that English language learners' instructional needs would be addressed. In short, The Mandate was intended to provide a smooth, fast transition. The strategic choices embedded in The Mandate appear to have some unanticipated consequences, however. Implementation barriers encountered by BSD

help to elaborate our answer regarding how communication about a change decision affects implementation.

Implementation Barriers

Thirty minutes of ELD instruction at least four days per week and sorting students for ELD instruction according to their level as determined by the CELDT—two of The Mandate's three central provisions—could be carried out without any support from outside the school site. Some foot dragging at some sites created situations in which the routines of moving students into homogenous groups for 30 minutes of instruction were not well planned, but logistical problems were relatively simple to resolve. This was not the case, however, with classroom materials and professional development.

One aspect of The Mandate the NCLB Team agreed on was that all schools would use materials currently in the district for ELD instruction. This choice was driven by the fact that the state was in the process of adopting new series for ELD instruction and the district did not want to buy a series that might not make the state approved list. Waiting to see what the state would adopt exacerbated a shortage of student materials created by student population growth and the recent opening of a new elementary school. NCLB Team members identified the initial lack of materials as a school site excuse for partial or late implementation of the ELD program.

Recognizing that prior to November 2004 there had been no districtwide ELD instruction, providing professional development to teachers seems to be a logical early step in the implementation process. Members of the NCLB Team disagree to some extent in their perspectives on what has happened with regard to professional development, but they tend to agree that teachers have not received adequate discussion, training, and feedback opportunities to assist them in their implementation of the new ELD program. Training has been available at the central office after school on a voluntary basis, but participation has been low.

The most substantial barriers to implementation are time and attention. Follow-through on The Mandate requires careful monitoring and inspection to ensure full implementation because principals and teachers do not have the same understanding of the program as those who participated on the NCLB Team. Central office administrators could not know ahead of time how school site staff would respond. NCLB Team members are themselves aware that administrators must inspect teachers' work to be certain that The Mandate is being implemented.

Interviewer: Who do you see as the key players for implementing the ELD program?

Assistant Superintendent Martinez: Administrators.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Martinez: Because we are the ones that need to be watching to find out if it is being followed through in the classroom.

Principal Isabella Gomez agrees with Martinez's perspective. She has a deep-seated personal commitment to improving English language learners' achievement both because her home language growing up was Spanish and because she was put in charge of a new school with the highest proportion of ESOL students in the district. Even with a large number of teachers who have a similar commitment, she believes there is a need to monitor what happens in ELD instruction.

I can go into any of those classrooms [during ELD time] and I expect to see it.… I know that in some grade levels we had teachers change grade levels and there were some things that… I'm saying to myself, "That doesn't need to be done in 4th grade." And, fortunately, I have the rapport with this teacher that I can say, "This part and this part were very appropriate. This part I don't think needed to take place."

A central office administrator speaks to the difficulty of sustaining adequate monitoring over time.

As far as the nitty gritty, folks getting into classrooms, seeing how it's actually going, spending a lot of time looking at data and that type of thing, we haven't gotten to that point yet. I think we have made some major strides. Sometimes I think it's one of those priorities that goes away and comes back and goes away and comes back.

The need for monitoring is also emphasized through some evidence of frustration in the fall of 2005 as the second academic year of implementation began.

Steve was a little upset because… [he would] just assume that you did leveling last year… as soon as you're ready and you get your groups ready, you're going to start leveling again. Well, some people were saying, "Well, what's the date?" He [Superintendent Thomas] was saying, "Well, what do you mean, date?" "Well, what's the date you want us to start?" Well, it's not about that. (central office administrator).

The central office administrator who has spent the most time in the schools observing implementation of The Mandate believes that there is underlying resistance to helping ELD students that impedes implementation. She proposed moving the inservice offerings from the central office to school sites:

Emily Harris: And then taking the flak. You know, listening to the flak and trying to respond to it and say why. Because sometimes… it borders on bigotry. It's almost like, "I don't care how many materials you give us, we don't want [pause]… This is so much harder, we don't want to deal with this clientele." But this is our clientele. You can't not want to work with them. And I've been told that, been confronted [pause]… "Take all their green cards," or they don't even have green cards.… I think it's pervasive that there is an issue with children of color.

Interviewer: There is an issue in the sense of teachers are resistant to doing what children of color need?

Harris: No, I think it's an issue of thinking that [children of color] can do it. That's what I've finally come to believe.

Superintendent Thomas presents a more optimistic point of view, however, indicating that the work he and other central office administrators have done to achieve stronger implementation is working.

At some schools there was kickback because they thought they were doing well enough and why would the district come in and mandate a change. Well, the district mandated a little more of what the successful ones were already doing and a lot more of what the unsuccessful ones weren't doing. …One principal at one school last year had a tremendous problem getting her people to do it and have it organized and have it be something that people could believe could be effective. This year, that school may be somewhat less. …I may not necessarily believe that they're all as good at it as they should be, but they're all doing it and they're not griping about it and they're making a legitimate effort.

In addition to the need for principals to monitor how implementation is proceeding at their sites, members of the NCLB Team believe that the Team needs to follow through to be sure the ELD priority does not fizzle. One central office administrator has visited each of the elementary schools and engaged faculties in discussions about the ELD program, but other forms of follow-through appear to be hit or miss. Despite administrators' awareness of the importance of monitoring, time and attention to accomplish it

has been lacking. Furthermore, coordination of the monitoring function may be falling apart as the NCLB Team finds it more and more difficult to convene. Researcher visits to BSD in the fall of 2005 and the spring of 2006 revealed evidence that monthly NCLB Team meetings were being cancelled because of other meetings preempting them or because key members were unable to attend.

Interview data indicates that the critical choice to issue The Mandate appears to have triggered responses from many principals and teachers consistent with their subordinate positions in the district hierarchy. They are reluctant to initiate independent corrective actions in the face of unforeseen difficulties, or even just a new school year. The main benefit of The Mandate is rapid implementation at most sites, but it comes with the cost of monitoring and inspection that administration appears unwilling or unable to provide.

Conclusions

The Barloma School District made a critical decision about how to teach English language learners under considerable accountability pressure. As the change decision and transition into implementation unfolded, those in formal leadership positions had the greatest influence on decision making, the NCLB Team was persuaded by ELD curriculum committee members to adopt their recommendations for the ELD program, and the NCLB Team achieved consensus that the change would be communicated to all elementary schools as a central office mandate. Several barriers came into play as implementation began, particularly an inability to monitor and support how the ELD program was being carried out in school sites.

Practical Implications

Leading school districts and schools through change is a tricky balancing act in which superintendents, principals, and teacher leaders find themselves compromising among accountability to outside authorities, improved student achievement, involvement of multiple stakeholders in decision-making processes, and the need to implement change quickly and effectively. All are worthy of attention, but each factor can contradict one or more of the others. In Barloma, accountability to state and federal authorities appears to have motivated a hard look at how ESOL students were being taught. The search for improved instruction was collaborative and deliberate and took into account the views of the ELD curriculum committee. But the search and subsequent decisions were constrained by the urgency imposed by accountability and resulted in a mandate that generated implementation barriers. The structure of The

Mandate is simple, but implementation is complicated by a lack of materials and professional development. Based on our most recent visit to BSD, the materials problem is being addressed, but professional development remains sporadic. BSD may not have the manpower or other resources necessary to follow through as they would like on implementation of the ELD program.

Multiple stakeholder input is valued in BSD, but only as far as official committees are concerned. The transition choice of The Mandate created a gap between the NCLB Team's understanding of the ELD problem and how to address it and understanding at the school sites. The result is required school site assistance that the central office has not yet found the ability to provide. Implementation options that might have mitigated the materials and professional development problems that surfaced in the first year were not developed by many sites perhaps because they did not believe they had the latitude to do so. More likely is that the sites wrestled with the difficult problem of new demands placed on them without additional resources to meet them. When new requirements come with insufficient support, schools can become paralyzed despite their best efforts (Elmore, 2004). Outcome data from the first year of implementation point to this kind of problem because all but one of the elementary schools had fewer students improve by one or more CELDT levels in the first year of the ELD program than they did in the previous year.

Districts similar to BSD that serve challenging student populations face a difficult dilemma as they strive to meet accountability demands. On one hand, the value of collaboration to achieve the most appropriate change and sensible program design is commonly understood. On the other hand, districts such as BSD do not have time to spend in long deliberations because NCLB benchmarks are rapidly rising, culminating in 2014 with the requirement of all students achieving proficiency. When districts compromise the conflicting demands, as BSD has, they appear likely to end up with potentially good instructional choices that are weakly implemented because of time and resource constraints. Despite their best efforts, they may be no further ahead on meeting state standards and NCLB demands.

Research Implications

The Barloma School District case study demonstrates the conceptual importance of the transition between strategic change decisions and implementing change. The model we use to help construct the case study anticipates the critical role of the transition by identifying the specific choice regarding the degree of collaboration as the district moves

into implementation. More can be learned about the transition phase by studying other types of decisions in additional school districts to determine if the model's usefulness is consistent across settings.

Research that remains to be done, and that we anticipate conducting in BSD and other districts, includes learning more about principals' and teachers' actual implementation modes. We wish to know if they are indeed embracing the ELD program, or if their implementation shows signs of picking and choosing or ignoring. Furthermore, whatever the implementation profile, we anticipate tracking student achievement progress to determine if ELD students are moving up the levels as hoped for in many participants' stated objectives.

Close scrutiny of decision making processes and outcomes yields helpful information to education researchers and leaders alike. As more is learned about how decisions evolve in educational contexts, researchers will be better able to predict results from various choices. Using the BSD example, collaboration at the NCLB Team level appears to have created a strong commitment by all members to the ELD program they had a hand in crafting. The Mandate precludes the development of a similar commitment by principals and teachers districtwide, however, because they do not share the same collaborative experiences. By recognizing BSD's transition choice as an essentially hierarchical one and the response at some number of school sites as partial implementation, district leaders are able to analyze the degree to which their own choices yield the outcomes they desire.

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