



# Increasing the Odds That Policy Reforms Will Improve Performance

*Five ingredients to cook up coherent state accountability policies.*

Morgan S. Polikoff

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) gives state boards of education a tremendous opportunity to revamp education policy. The federal government will have dramatically reduced influence over issues related to standards and accountability systems. States will have increased freedom to revise state standards and assessment systems, change the weights on test-based performance measures in accountability systems, and include a greater variety of nontest measures for accountability than was possible under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). In short, the new law gives state policymakers the opportunity to implement their own ideas for reform. Yet they will do so with the sobering knowledge that many past reform efforts in education have failed to promote real change.

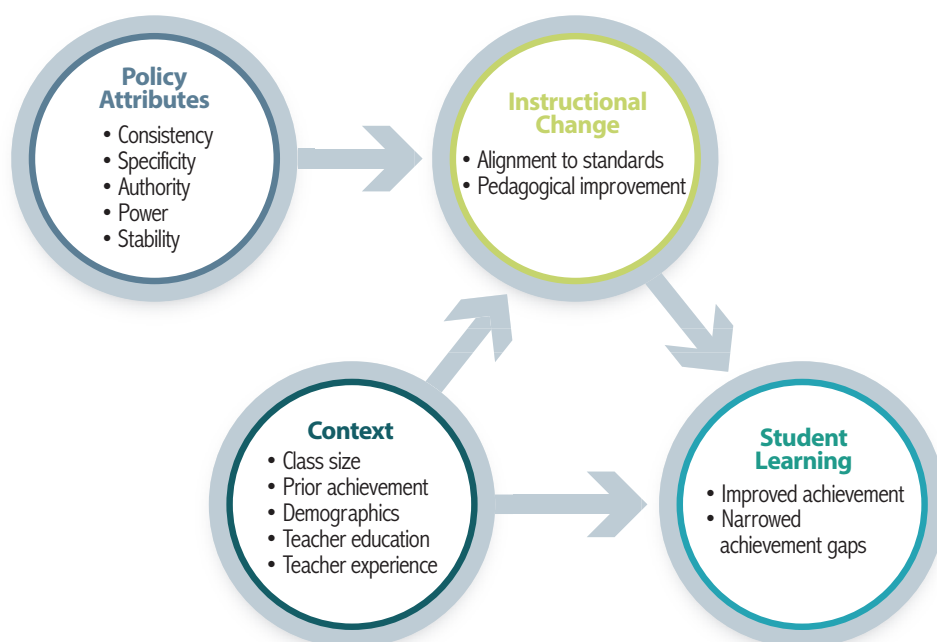
To increase the likelihood of policy success, state policymakers will need to incorporate five ingredients in their education reforms: consistency,

specificity, authority, power, and stability. This “policy attributes framework” has been used to study comprehensive school reforms and standards implementation, among other policies.<sup>1</sup> The framework points toward features of policies that make them more likely to achieve meaningful change in schools. Figure 1 shows a simplified conceptual model for how the policy attributes might affect instruction and student learning.<sup>2</sup>

## Consistency

The first and perhaps most fundamental attribute is consistency. Consistency refers to the extent to which policies provide educators coherent messages about what they should be doing. Too often, educational policies send conflicting, confusing messages, forcing teachers to choose between competing visions or encouraging them to simply check out and ignore the policies altogether.

Figure 1.



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The most obvious example of inconsistency in state policy is when standards and assessments are not well aligned. For example, state tests under NCLB routinely failed to assess large swathes of the content in state standards, sending teachers the message that those portions of the standards were less important to teach.<sup>3</sup> Another example is when states have had multiple accountability systems. For instance, California had both Adequate Yearly Progress—the federal accountability measure—and the Academic Performance Index—the state accountability measure—during the NCLB era. Different systems sometimes have given different answers about which schools were doing well and which were in need of improvement.

A consistent state response to ESSA would start with a clear guiding vision from state policymakers about what the goals of education are. From this vision, goals might be distilled into a set of measures and indicators so that educators can understand their progress toward the goals. Finally, some of these measures might be included in the accountability system, reinforcing the goals through the application of rewards or sanctions. The key in thinking about consistency is that state policies should be pointing in the same direction. If states have multiple accountability systems, each telling teachers to focus on different things, they will likely focus on none of them. If there is coherence, there is the possibility of change.

States should of course build consistency into their policy approaches on the front end, but they should also investigate consistency on the back end. Alignment methodologies offer one way to demonstrate consistency, showing the extent to which assessments, curriculum materials, and professional development align with content standards to support instructional change.<sup>4</sup> Regardless, policymakers should pay careful attention to issues of coherence as they revise policies—otherwise there may be a tendency to drift away from the goals over time.

## Specificity

Specificity, also sometimes labeled “prescriptiveness,” describes the extensiveness and level of detail of a policy. For instance, content standards could be general (e.g., “students will multiply fractions fluently”) or specific (“Interpret the

product  $(a/b) \times q$  as a parts of a partition of  $q$  into  $b$  equal parts; equivalently, as the result of a sequence of operations  $a \times q \div b$ ”). Similarly, accountability goals could be vague (e.g., “rates of chronic absenteeism will decrease each year”) or specific (“chronic absenteeism, defined as students being absent 10 percent of days or more, will decrease in each school by half by 2021”). It is not hard to see that more specific policies are clearer and easier for educators to understand; therefore, they are more likely to guide behavior.

For ESSA accountability, it is important that standards and accountability systems provide specific guidance. This might be achieved through supplementary documents such as curriculum frameworks, which help teachers translate the standards into practice. Districts, schools, and teachers rely on these kinds of documents when they are making decisions about how to instantiate the standards through the adoption and use of curriculum materials, for instance. State boards have a role in bringing the expertise together to create and disseminate these resources. Similarly, for accountability policies, documents and training might explain to educators what the goals and measures are and how the data will be collected and analyzed.

## Authority

Simply put, educators have to buy in to a policy before they will implement it. This buy-in is gained through the authority vested in a policy. Policies can gain authority through many means. Certainly, laws themselves have authority—legal authority. Policies can also gain authority through becoming part of social norms. For instance, it is now more or less standard practice that teachers will use content standards to guide their instruction, whereas this was not the norm 30 years ago; content standards now have normative authority. Policies can also gain authority through leadership—charismatic or persuasive leaders may lead educators to believe that a policy is “good” and in the best interests of their children. Policies can also simply be popular, lending them authority from popular support. Of course, there are other ways policies can gain authority, but the key is that policies must have buy-in in order for educators to implement them long-term.

The best way for states to build authority for their policies is to make good ones—policies that teachers naturally want to support. Policies that are fairer (that don't punish teachers or schools for things that are outside their control), that are not overly punitive, and that align with teachers' existing beliefs would likely be more widely supported.

But policymakers can also build authority intentionally, and this may be especially important for the continued success of a policy. For example, policymakers should actively seek the support of influential scholars, education organizations, parent groups, or teacher unions by including these groups in the creation of the policy. ESSA in fact requires stakeholder engagement, and state boards and state education agencies should ensure that this engagement is not pro forma but meaningfully contributes to state policy decisions—this will build authority. In addition, they should create opportunities for educators to provide feedback on the policy during its creation and revision. Explicitly explaining the rationale for the policy and promoting its utility directly could also build support. In short, it is not simply enough to create a policy and assume that teachers will buy in. Efforts to create authority should be intentional.

## Power

Sometimes it is not enough to encourage implementation through authority. For instance, policies might run counter to educators' beliefs, making them less likely to be implemented. Alternatively, some educators, while not opposed to a policy, may be perceived as not exerting the requisite level of effort in implementation. Extrinsic motivation might, in these cases, facilitate changes in beliefs or effort. Power involves the use of rewards (for good behavior or performance) and sanctions (for bad behavior or performance) to motivate desired responses to policies.

There is little doubt that power—that is, consequential accountability for performance—can motivate improvements in school practices and student learning. Dozens of studies over the last several decades show this clearly.<sup>5</sup> For instance, Florida's A-F accountability policy produced school policy and instructional changes (e.g., block scheduling, common

planning time), and these changes were associated with improved student performance in low-performing schools.<sup>6</sup>

However, there are weaknesses to a power-focused approach to policy. Certainly one challenge is that the effects of power-focused policies are likely to be short lived; when the rewards and sanctions go away, the incentives to perform do as well. This stands in contrast to authority-based policies, which may be more likely to promote long-lasting change by affecting “hearts and minds.” Policies focused on power can increase the likelihood of undesirable unintended consequences. For instance, consequential accountability, especially if the goals are unattainable, might be more likely to lead to gaming behaviors or even outright cheating.

Finally, power distorts behavior toward the measures used to mete out rewards and sanctions. If those behaviors are important and good predictors of life outcomes, this may be a good thing. If they are bad predictors or crude proxies, such distortions could be harmful. In short, while policies based on power can clearly motivate desired changes, they should be used judiciously and designed with an eye to minimize unintended consequences.

## Stability

As education policies come and go, educators may grow weary and develop “reform fatigue.” As policies rapidly change, they may decide it is simply easier or better to ignore new policies on the assumption that they will only change again shortly. The fifth policy attribute—stability—describes the commonsense notion that policies that stick around are more likely to have an impact. There are many reasons for this, such as the ability of teachers to develop more knowledge about the policy over time. It is not to say that policies should never change, but rather that policies should be given a chance to be implemented and mature before they are changed. One of the major struggles of education policy is that initiatives come and go with new administrations, both at the local level and at the state and (to a lesser extent) national levels. These initiatives are often implemented quickly, given a short window to take effect, and then evaluated (often crudely) in an attempt to demonstrate results. It is almost certainly the

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case that the rapid-fire turnover of education policies reduces the implementation strength of any one of them.

## Aligning Policies

The policy attributes framework offers a useful set of hypotheses to guide the development of policies for standards, assessments, and accountability systems. Several concrete suggestions flow naturally from consideration of these attributes.

1. **Start with the vision.** If there is not a clear vision—a powerful goal that the state wants to achieve—there is little hope of building a strong, aligned policy system. The vision should be clear and specific, ambitious but attainable. Key stakeholders have to be included in developing the vision to build buy-in.
2. **Build out supportive policies to align with the vision.** Once the vision is in place, assemble experts (both practitioners and researchers) to help build a system of policies that will help achieve the vision. Establishing coherence in policy is essential for effective implementation, and coherence should flow from vision down to goals down to specific measures.
3. **When it comes to alignment, don't trust, but verify.** Focusing on alignment during policy development is important, but it is not enough. Far too many studies have shown that policies thought to be aligned with standards, such as curriculum materials and assessments, are not.<sup>7</sup> While state boards of education may not have the budget or staff to do this work themselves, opening up policies and assessments to scrutiny from external experts can and should be an expectation, and they can ask pointed questions about whether this work has been done and about the results.
4. **Devote resources toward building support and capacity.** Without support from educators, no education policy is likely to succeed. Educators and the general public may need guidance to understand new policies and why they are important. Those implementing the policies will need capacity-building support if new knowledge and skills are required. In short, policies are not self-implementing, and they should be designed with that in mind.
5. **Use rewards and sanctions, but as fairly as possible.** The first response to poor

performance should be to improve it through support. But states need to establish clear bottom lines, and they need to enforce those bottom lines when they are not met. Consequently, policies emphasizing power are needed. However, research lays out clear principles for designing accountability systems, and state policymakers should follow those.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most important of these principles is that the systems must be fair to teachers and schools serving historically underserved student groups. Unfairness will result in unintended consequences and negative incentives that may create more harm than good.

6. **Evaluate progress and tweak often, but make larger changes sparingly.** States will make some major changes when they first implement ESSA. Once those changes are in place, the evaluation of policy implementation and effects should be ongoing. Dollars allocated toward good data and research will likely pay dividends in more effective implementation down the road. When state policymakers identify flaws in their ESSA policies, they should tweak them. But broader changes should be held off, because policies need time to mature and produce their desired effects. Furthermore, constantly changing policies undermine stability and coherence and harm morale.

ESSA offers states the opportunity to make fundamental changes to their accountability systems, and they should. In a time of turbulence for state political leaders, state boards of education can serve an essential role in ensuring that these policies are well designed and implemented thoughtfully over time. Boards can demonstrate real leadership by focusing their policies on a core vision, building support for the vision and capacity for implementing the vision through policy, aligning policies and evaluations, and showing patience with implementation. State boards that make these choices are more likely to see their ESSA efforts pay off with improved implementation and better effects on students. ■

<sup>1</sup>See, for instance, L. M. Desimone, "How Can Comprehensive School Reform Models Be Successfully Implemented?" *Review of Educational Research* 72, no. 3 (2002): 433–79. See also M. S. Polikoff, "The Association of State Policy Attributes with Teachers' Instructional Alignment," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 34, no. 3 (2012): 278–94.

<sup>2</sup>This model is adapted from Polikoff, "Association of State

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cont'd from pg 14

Policy Attributes.”

<sup>3</sup>M. S. Polikoff, A. C. Porter, and J. Smithson, “How Well Aligned Are State Assessments of Student Achievement with State Content Standards?” *American Educational Research Journal* 48, no. 4 (2011): 965–95.

<sup>4</sup>For a review, see A. Martone and S. G. Sireci, “Evaluating Alignment between Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction,” *Review of Educational Research* 79, no. 4 (2009): 1332–61. For a newly developed methodology, see N. Doorey and M. Polikoff, *Evaluating the Content and Quality of Next Generation Assessments* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2016).

<sup>5</sup>For a review, see D. N. Figlio and S. Loeb, “School Accountability,” in E. A. Hanushek, S. Machin, and L. Woessmann, eds., *Handbook of the Economics of Education* (North-Holland, The Netherlands: Elsevier, 2011).

<sup>6</sup>C. E. Rouse et al., “Feeling the Florida Heat? How Low-Performing Schools Respond to Voucher and Accountability Pressure,” *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 5, no. 2 (2013): 251–81.

<sup>7</sup>See, for instance, M. S. Polikoff, “How Well Aligned Are Textbooks to the Common Core Standards in Mathematics?” *American Educational Research Journal* 52, no. 6 (2015): 1185–211. See also Polikoff, Porter, and Smithson, “How Well Aligned Are State Assessments?”

<sup>8</sup>M. S. Polikoff et al., “The Waive of the Future? School Accountability in the Waiver Era,” *Educational Researcher* 43, no. 1 (2014): 45–54.

cont'd from pg 37

<sup>2</sup>K. Seashore-Louis, et al., “How Does Leadership Affect Student Achievement? Results from a National US Survey,” *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 21, no. 3 (2010): 315–36.

<sup>3</sup>K. Leithwood et al., “How Leadership Influences Student Learning,” (New York: The Wallace Foundation, 2004).

<sup>4</sup>Wallace Foundation, *The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning* (New York, 2011), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/effective-principal-leadership/Documents/The-School-Principal-as-Leader-Guiding-Schools-to-Better-Teaching-and-Learning.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup>The district organized its work around principles articulated in Jim Collins and Morten T. Hansen, *Great by Choice™* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), whose titular maxim grounded the district’s strategic plan, theory of action, as well as its Coherence Framework.

<sup>6</sup>For example, one group included representatives from Maryland Department of Education’s Breakthrough Center, the National Institute for School Leadership (NISL), principals, and central office administrators and executives from the district. See Maryland State Department of Education, Maryland Instructional Leadership Framework (2016), <http://archives.marylandpublicschools.org/NR/rdonlyres/DF957230-EC07-4FEE-B904-7FEB176BD978/19877/MDInstructionalLeadershipFramework.pdf>; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, *Educational Leadership Program Standards* (Reston, VA: NPBEA, 2011).

<sup>7</sup>PGCPS partners with Johns Hopkins University, Bowie State University, the University of Maryland-College Park, and McDaniel College. We started by addressing preservice programs at each and then developing a common language around expectations, guided by the district standards.

<sup>8</sup>National Policy Board for Educational Administration, *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders* (Reston, VA: NPBEA, 2015).

cont'd from pg 41

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<sup>8</sup>Jensen et al., *Beyond PD*; The Wallace Foundation, “School Leadership,” Knowledge Center [website] (2017), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/pages/default.aspx>.

<sup>9</sup>Learning Forward and Education Counsel, *A New Vision for Professional Learning*.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 39.