Exploring the Politics of Differential Resource Allocation: Implications for Policy Design and Leadership Practice

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This qualitative case study explores the political and leadership challenges imbedded within the implementation of a district-wide resource reallocation policy. Based on a two-year study of a medium-sized district's efforts to address changing demographics of families in the district and a widening achievement gap, we draw upon concepts from education finance and the politics of policy-making to better understand the strategies used to introduce and implement a differential resource-allocation formula. Leadership strategies are explored, with a focus on anticipated areas of both internal and external "pushback," and a discussion of the cycle of political support for equity-focused policy initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

Systems of public education are being asked to redesign, retool, or otherwise reform—and as with all complex systems they never seem to get, or stay, fixed. Certainly, a part of this recurring call for improvement includes the political dimensions of leadership, and the expectations of school boards, building staff, and parents that the transition from one district leadership team to the next will bring with it new ideas and new policies. An unfortunate by-product of this cycle of change is the resulting lack of sustainability of well-crafted, thoughtful educational reforms (Datnow, 2005). Reforms that may have shown great initial promise, but little sustained improvement in a

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short cycle of district leadership, are too often scrapped and forgotten as a new leadership team ushers in their vision for district-wide reform.

Often, the energy and resources necessary to convince a district and its community to alter the strategic direction of the organization is considerable and, over time, these repeated efforts can leave districts with "reform fatigue" (Lora, Panizza, & Quispe-Agnoli, 2004). Districts leaders focus on bolstering public and economic support for a new vision of improvement, principals struggle to find new ways to motivate their teaching staff to implement another new initiative, and parents and other community-based constituency groups often lose confidence in and become frustrated with the ever changing focus of the efforts to reform the system.

Based on a two-year study of how district leaders decide to invest staffing resources in equity-focused improvements in student learning, this article explores some of the intriguing political dimensions of the policy design and implementation process within a district which struggled to sustain, but ultimately persevered with, a challenging, equity-focused reform agenda. The main question this article seeks to address is: How can we better understand the political dimensions of the policy and leadership work associated with implementing equity-focused, differential resource allocation? This question is examined by combining theoretical perspectives from education finance with policy design and implementation, and then exploring these concepts within an illustrative case of a single, medium-sized urban school district. This district engaged in a multi-year effort to address core matters of educational equity, particularly with respect to growing concerns over increasing disparities within the district (e.g., declining district enrollment, shifting socioeconomic profiles of families into distinct quadrants within the district, and a widening of the achievement gap by race/ethnicity and class). As a result, this district engaged in: (1) a reconceptualization and articulation of its resource challenges, (2) an explicit recognition and public identification of the distinct regional disparities of opportunity and access that had perpetuated over time within the district, and (3) a process to publicly question and redefine what was the most "fair" way to allocate resources to students and schools. It is our hope that this case can serve to inform the discussion on both the design and implementation of differential resource allocation strategies, as well as provide educational leaders with additional ideas for managing the political dimensions of equity-focused change within their school communities.

DEFINING WHAT'S "FAIR": THE CHALLENGE OF EQUITABLE RESOURCE ALLOCATION

At the heart of the debate over how schools within a district can or should be financed is often the complex and politically charged determination of what is fair. Historically, within many districts across the country, the answer
to this question has been to design a system that distributes a large portion of dollars (e.g., funds for instructional materials) and human resources (e.g., teachers, principals, librarians) to schools based simply on the number of students enrolled. However, a substantial body of research has established that not all students’ needs are equal, and those with economic, social, or language challenges bring to school an increased need for support that might not be met by the additional support of categorical funds alone (Harris, 2008). Therefore, a funding formula that doesn’t recognize these need-based differences not only fails to adequately support its students, but may in fact be exacerbating the achievement gap within the district (Baker & Corcoran, 2012; Reardon & Robinson, 2008). Unfortunately, this realization often leaves district leadership with the complex and perplexing question: Given that an equal distribution of resources to students/schools doesn’t work as an effective and equitable funding formula, how do we develop and sustain a system that gives more to those with greater need and less to others? Additionally, it is important to note that the measurement of the level of resources available to any given student extends beyond the dollars allocated. It also includes the equity of distribution of what those dollars buy, such as the quality of teachers, instructional time, and professional learning (Grubb, 2009).

Central to this question is a complicated debate about the distinctions between equality and equity when it comes to the distribution of resources to support student learning. One notion of equity, especially when used in reference to the distribution of resources across a district, is classically defined and commonly understood to be the equal treatment of equals, known as horizontal equity. However, given that quite often students are not equally situated and bring varying abilities and needs to their school, defining equitable treatment presents a far more complex challenge. Essentially, the unequal nature of the playing field creates the need to explore strategies that provide for a differential treatment of un-equals, or what is known as vertical equity (Berne & Stiefel, 1994).

The first level of equity testing within a district is often to determine whether or not horizontal equity has been established through the existing funding formulas; that is, are equally situated individuals being treated equally? But equal resources don’t necessarily result in a lessening of the achievement gap or an equal provision of access to educational opportunities across districts or schools. This often requires leaders to examine a second level of equity testing: “an assessment of the ‘appropriate unequal treatment of unequals,’ or the desired relationship of resources to needs” (Rodriguez, 2004, p. 8). However, even if a need for vertical equity can be established, articulating and operationalizing “student need” can be a difficult task:

Vertical equity is a concept that continues to be among the most difficult to clarify for research and policy purposes. Although principles that underlie it are commonly understood due to so much attention in
the sociological and economic literature on the impact of schooling on student achievement, what is less available are standard definitions and measures of educational need. (Rodriguez, 2004, p. 17)

Again, as the quote illustrates, a fundamental leadership challenge rests in the recognition that unequal resource needs exist among students within a district. But perhaps even more challenging is being able to accurately and consistently identify and measure these differential needs. Additionally, another layer of complexity exists in understanding the important distinction between distributional equity for students and equity among taxpayers within the district. As many state-school finance systems are dependent on property tax revenues and/or the passing of supplemental bonds or levies, considering the fairness to the taxpayer within the community is often an important part of the equity equation within a district (Chambers, Levin, & Shambaugh, 2010; Rodriguez, 2004).

Equity, Adequacy, and the Relationship to System Inputs and Outcomes

A further dimension of the funding formula for district leaders to confront is the concept of adequacy or sufficiency, and its relationship to equity. Establishing an equitable distribution of inputs to students and schools across a district is only half of the challenge; there is also the question of educational outcomes to consider. Districts may determine that an average test score or level of proficiency is an outcome standard to be met by all students, and thus an equality of outcomes may require an inequality of inputs, providing further justification for the concept of vertical equity (Ladd, 2008).

When equity is defined in terms of equality of outcomes, a distributionally equitable education system would, in theory, be one in which all schools have sufficient resources to achieve similar educational outcomes. In this case, some schools or districts would need more resources than others because of their greater proportions of challenging-to-educate students. (Ladd, 2008, p. 4)

Clearly, the challenge of identifying and articulating the equity goals for a district is one that is both complex and contentious, and has implications for policy and leadership practice (Jordan, 2010). We first turn our attention to the problems of policy design, followed by a case-based examination of equity-focused leadership practices that attempt to address the challenges of implementation and sustainability.
The Process of Designing Equity-Focused Policy

As is clear from the education finance literature, there are a number of technical and structural challenges to establishing an equity-focused resource allocation strategy (Baker & Corcoran, 2012; Henry, Fortner, & Thompson, 2010). However, perhaps an even more complex issue involves both the short- and the long-term political challenges inherent in the design and implementation of equity-focused reform policies—especially during times of fiscal retrenchment. How, among the plethora of problems confronting a district, does a particular issue like equity get prioritized for policy action? Why, among all the academic challenges exposed by the analysis of data about student learning, does a school district's leadership decide to focus on developing a highly complicated and politically charged issue like differential resource redistribution? And how do leaders sustain this chosen focus over time?

Three theoretical perspectives are examined in this article that help to better understand the complexity of the problem: identification, agenda-setting, and the policy-design process. John Kingdon’s (2003) “Streams” model will be introduced as a means for explaining the random and non-rational nature of the problem identification and agenda-setting process. In these times of decreasing enrollments and diminishing revenues, the process through which district leaders make choices and prioritize problems is of particular interest and considerable consequence. Schneider & Ingram’s (1993) work on the social construction of policy targets will also be explored, as it offers a means for better understanding the critical link between the way policymakers positively or negatively label the targets of their policy attention, which can impact public support for district policy initiatives. The third theoretical construct involves an examination, and possible extension of, Weatherly & Lipsky’s (1977) concept of “street level bureaucrats” and the degree to which the people implementing the policy, both within the district as well as in the community, can play a major role in its sustainability as a district policy initiative.

The most interesting part about recognizing problems is that problems are not simply objective things. People interpret conditions as problems, and that is what makes it interesting. (Kingdon, 2001).

Rational models of policy-making tend to be the least effective when used to explain the action of policymakers within a crisis. A linear, rational model (Allison, 1971) often fails to capture the dynamic, and sometimes chaotic, nature of a leadership team trying to communicate that they understand the urgency of the crisis, while at the same time providing time and space for deliberation as options for action are weighed. During a crisis, problems and alternatives don't get in line for the attention of policymakers; they often come swinging at their heads in a random order, and from multiple angles. Therefore, a theoretical model which attempts to capture the unpredictable nature of the process is of much greater utility.
Politics of Differential Resource Reallocation

Kingdon offers a particularly useful model for trying to explain the complex, dynamic, and multi-layered nature of the policymaking process. His model characterizes the randomness of the process of policymaking by likening it to a collection of independent “streams,” each with their own pace and direction. In his model there is a stream full of problems, a stream full of policies, and finally a stream full of politics. “Each of these streams has a life of its own, and they are largely unrelated to the others . . . and they each have their own independent rules by which they run” (Kingdon, 2001, p. 1).

In the stream of problems, Kingdon suggests that a number of different issues are floating along, all of which need attention, but not all of them are immediately recognized as “problems.” While there are certainly routine and systematic sets of checks and balances within school districts that can elevate issues to the status of problems, at times it can be how an individual or group chooses to select, identify, and articulate an issue that can raise its status to one needing more immediate policy attention. These “policy entrepreneurs” are willing to “invest their resources of time, energy reputation, and sometimes money in the hopes of future return. That return might come in the form of policies of which they approve, satisfaction from participation, or career promotion” (Kingdon, 2003, pp. 122–123).

Not unlike the stream of problems, within the stream of policies there are multiple “solutions” floating along, some of which have been tried before but lost public/political favor or resources, and some that are new. Again, Kingdon suggests that these policy solutions aren’t discretely assigned to a singular issue or problem, but rather are often drifting downstream, waiting for a clever policy entrepreneur to snatch them, refine and revise them, and attach them to a newly identified problem.

Last within the model is Kingdon’s stream of politics, and it is within this stream that things like political or leadership changes, swings in national or community mood, or district-wide testing results are considered. While the other two streams tend to focus on much of what happens internally to an organization and its policymakers, the politics stream captures those external elements that may influence and/or explain how a long-standing issue can suddenly become the immediate focus of policymakers’ attention, or how a solution that previously had been considered too expensive or extreme can find its way back into favor.

Also particularly useful for exploring this case is Kingdon’s notion of “windows of opportunity,” created when the streams join together to create an opening for policy action:

So these streams develop, all independent of one another. The proposals are generated whether or not they are solving a given problem, the problems are recognized whether or not there is a solution, and political events have their own dynamics. Then a choice opportunity comes along, and advocates (policy entrepreneurs) join the streams together. At these
moments, a problem is recognized, a solution is available, the political conditions are right... I call that occasion an open policy window. (Kingdon, 2001)

Kingdon's conceptualization of a policy window provides an explanation for the often non-rational way the policy arena can shift course and thrust a problem or solution to the forefront of policymakers' attention, or dramatically change the course of policy action. We saw this with the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan, and the accompanying nuclear accidents at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. This disaster immediately prompted a global shift in the perception of the safety of nuclear power. Within less than a week's time, countries around the world halted or brought under critical review nuclear power plant projects, and publicly questioned their future as a public power source. Prior to the disaster in Japan, numerous countries (e.g., Switzerland, Germany, France) all had long-range, multi-billion dollar projects in place to build or upgrade nuclear facilities. However, within a few hours of the tsunami hitting the coast of Japan and the reports of its meticulously managed power plants being compromised and in jeopardy of systemic failure, a significant problem was identified (the safety of nuclear power plants), and the mood of citizens around the world toward nuclear energy shifted considerably. As Kingdon's model would suggest, these two streams (the response to the disaster and existing anti-nuclear power policies) collided and, as a result, a policy window opened up and policymakers believed they were obligated to take policy action (e.g., suspend, re-think, or halt current and proposed nuclear projects).

While Kingdon's model has the advantage of offering flexibility, it lacks specificity and potential generalizability. Clearly, there are independent streams of activity running through a policy community, but if and how the streams may be influenced by each other remains a less well-developed concept within the theory. Nonetheless, it does provide a useful starting point for trying to identify, describe, and explain the often chaotic nature of policymaking within a dynamic policy arena.

The Social Construction of Policy Targets

We argue that the social construction of target populations is an important, albeit overlooked, political phenomenon that should take its place in the study of public policy. The theory contends that social constructions influence the policy agenda and the selection of policy tools, as well as the rationales that legitimate policy choices (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 334).

As Kingdon suggests, public mood within the political stream can be a major contributing factor to policy action. Schneider and Ingram's theory of the social construction of policy targets suggests that how you label those
whom you wish to influence with policy action can help to explain "why some groups are advantaged more than others, independent of traditional notions of political power" (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 334). So, in the case of district leadership trying to identify those within a school district who are caught within the achievement gap, it may be important to consider how these targets of policy are identified. This may be particularly important when trying to convince a community to move from a traditional system of horizontal equity (equal distributions) to one of vertical equity (the differential treatment of un-equals). The positive construction and description of the under-advantaged (the targets of support) may be critical to gaining and maintaining public and political support for a differential allocation strategy.

Much like Kingdon's theory, Schneider and Ingram capitalize on the dynamic and fluid nature of the process of policymaking, and suggest that there may be a proactive element to the labeling of policy targets. For example, a policymaker seeking to gain political favor for a policy providing shelter for the local homeless population might positively construct a label for them as "displaced local citizens." However, if she was attempting to forward policy to move a tent city that was causing problems within the community, she might negatively construct them as "vagrants" or "drifters." Essentially, she could be describing the same population of citizens, but it is suggested that one group (positively constructed) would tend to gain, and perhaps maintain, more public and political support than the other (negatively constructed). Another example of the importance of the social construction of policy targets can be found in Gloria Ladson-Billings' (2006) argument that a focus on the "education debt" rather than the "achievement gap" can urge policymakers to understand the policy environment in a fundamentally different way.

For this article, we extend Schneider and Ingram's work by arguing that the positive social construction of the policy tools, the instruments designed to produce vertical equity within the district, were also significant in the design and implementation of the shift to an equity-focused policy that guided the differential allocation of resources to schools. In addition to a positive social construction of the policy targets, how district leaders positively oriented the language surrounding the differential allocation policy initiatives may have been equally critical to the shift in public mood and eventual positive gain in political support for an equity-focused policy. In other words, it wasn't only that leaders had targeted a worthy set of goals, but the ways in which they were proposing to address these goals were positive and equally well received.

Street-Level Bureaucrats

Unlike the two previous theories which focus predominantly on the policy design phase of the process, a final theoretical perspective that bears on this
case is one that examines the implementation phase of the policy-making process. Weatherly and Lipsky's introduction of the concept of “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky, 1980; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977) provides a contrasting view of the process, one that looks from the “bottom up” and examines how those charged with the delivery of a policy can influence and shape the policy process. The theory suggests that those who are charged with implementing the policy can, and often do, exercise considerable political power and influence by using their discretion and/or authority to modify what actually gets delivered. Ultimately, as a result of the influence, interests, and motivations of those “in the streets,” the actual enactment of a policy may rest in their hands. This implies that there will be numerous iterations and adaptations of the same “policy,” with potentially multiple designs and varying results when implemented. Thus, a finance reform such as a weighted-student funding policy as implemented in practice results in a myriad number of permutations and differing understandings of the policy aims and targets (Chambers et al., 2010).

Within this model there is also an opportunity to examine the ways that those on the “front lines” of policy delivery (e.g., principals, teachers, staff) in a district may influence the stream of politics or public mood surrounding a policy initiative, and the degree of support or pushback an initiative receives. If parents or members of the community get feedback from those within the school that a particular policy initiative is either positively or negatively impacting student learning or the school community, chances are good that it will provide evidence for the debate surrounding the policy’s effectiveness, and that feedback will find its way to district leadership. In the case of an equity-focused policy initiative, with the potential of some students or schools getting more and others less, public support can be a fragile and fickle thing, so having a better understanding of how it can (and often does) shift within a policy community can be very useful in guiding leadership action.

As is clear from these bodies of literature, both the technical problems and political challenges inherent within the process of designing and implementing equity-focused school reform policy are considerable. From a technical perspective, there is not only the matter of accurately defining and articulating a contextually tethered, community-based representation of equity, but there is also the matter of how to most efficiently and effectively divide up the resources, unequally. Add to this technical challenge is the diplomatic complexity and professional risk associated with leading a policy initiative that asks those who have historically had the advantage to acknowledge that history and support a policy that would potentially relinquish their advantage. We now turn to an exploration of an illustrative case of such an initiative, with the hope of adding to our understanding of how both technical and political challenges faced by educational leaders might be addressed. We begin the exploration of our case by describing the
key challenges faced by educational leaders when they attempt to tackle pronounced and historic inequities.

The Leadership Challenge

Public school leaders are increasingly being asked to do more with less, and to provide an opportunity for more of their students to experience school as an equalizing social and economic vehicle. Accountability initiatives like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top have shifted the focus of attention toward measurable outcomes in schools and across districts, and the corresponding wealth of published data about student performance has brought issues of difference and disparity to the forefront of school leaders’ attention (Lee & Wong, 2004; Oakes, 2008). Like many districts across the country; this district is wrestling with the complex and dynamic challenge of trying to raise the academic performance of all students, close the achievement gap, and distribute educational access and opportunity more equitably to every student. These objectives can at times compete for both attention and resources, and leave school leaders struggling to find adequate or useful decision-making models and resource allocation strategies. Adding to this challenge is the growing realization by many school leaders that sharpening their pencils and creating new funding formulas is not enough. Specifically, leaders face some common problems of practice with respect to resource allocation (Plecki, Alejano, Knapp, & Lochmiller, 2006). Four of these are central to the complex task of equitably allocating resources based on differential needs:

1. **Targeting achievement gaps:** Making resource-related decisions that seek to close achievement gaps and have good prospects for enhancing the equity of educational outcomes. The key leadership act is to “put the money where the rhetoric is,” by making achievement gaps a basic reference point for resource-related decisions. Accountability systems can play a vital role in providing data about the nature of achievement gaps and monitoring progress on addressing those gaps.

2. **Organizing schools to enable the alignment of resources with learning improvement.** Structuring time, the nature and assignment of staff, and programs so that they collectively emphasize learning improvement priorities. The technical, formula-based approach to allocating human resources is accompanied by a history of limited decision-making discretion on the part of school leaders to configure resources in different ways. The leadership challenge is to imagine alternatives to current practice and to create the organizational conditions that enable resources to be used in a more flexible and purposeful way.

3. **Developing the human resources of the school or district:** Providing supports, incentives, and opportunities for learning that build motivation and
expertise, thereby fostering higher performance. While teachers are of prime concern here, the development of human capital also refers to others who work throughout the educational system, including principals, central office staff, school board members, and state officials.

4. Managing the politics of learning-focused leadership: Anticipating and mediating the political pressures associated with decision-making about differentially allocating resources. These political pressures are, in part, generated by competing demands stemming from a variety of sources, including actors both inside and outside the education system.

All of the four challenges were present in our district case, and responses to one of these challenges either interacted with or were dependent upon strategies to address the other three. In this article, we pay particular attention to understanding the fourth challenge regarding the successful management of political tensions associated with equity-focused leadership.

TECHNICAL SOLUTIONS AND POLITICAL CHALLENGES TO INITIATING EQUITY-FOCUSED POLICY

Unfortunately for most school leaders, the “devil” lies in both the details of the technical solutions derived to more equitably distribute resources to schools, as well as in the complex political dynamics of maintaining support (from teachers, principals, parents, the school board) for the long-term sustainability of policies designed to give some schools more, and others schools less. While equalizing the allocation of resources to all schools within a district can at times be a technical challenge, defending the fairness of equal distributions (e.g., every school in the district gets the same amount of money per student) is rarely a political obstacle for district leaders. The political challenge emerges for many school leaders when, in times of shrinking enrollments and declining revenues, all schools are asked to do more with less, and everyone across the district is impacted. For school and district leaders, the conundrum appears to be in both trying to adequately address challenging circumstances within targeted schools, while at the same time maintaining access and opportunity for all students across the district. Thus, the primary leadership challenge is to invest resources in ways that respond to the unique needs of students, teachers, and schools while maximizing these goals and developing economically and politically sustainable strategies for doing so.

An Illustrative Case

For purposes of examining the extent to which the three theoretical perspectives we introduced earlier in this article are present in the actual
work of educational leaders, we explore the case of one district that was part of a larger multi-year study of the connection between leadership, leadership support, and student learning (Knapp, Copland, Honig, Pleck, & Porting, 2010).

The broader study in which our case is located concentrated on four urban districts and 14 schools in three different states. A nested research design allowed us to examine interactions among state, district, and school levels. Our work focused on three central questions:

1. What internal or external challenges prompt or pressure educational leaders to alter how they invest resources inside districts and schools? What frameworks do district leaders construct to guide these resource decisions, in relation to a learning-improvement agenda?
2. What specific strategies do leaders pursue to bring resource investments to bear more directly on improved, equitable learning outcomes for all students?
3. How do principals and district leaders establish and sustain support for efforts to differentially invest resources to equitably meet the learning needs of all students?

Research team members conducted site visits to each of the 14 school sites at least four times over the course of the two-year study. School principals were interviewed at each site visit along with other staff exercising leadership within the school (formal and informal), as well as a stratified representative sample of teachers; in addition, researchers observed a wide variety of school-based activities, including classroom instruction, staff and community meetings, and other leadership events (e.g., coaching work). The research team conducted a minimum of five site visits at the district level, including interviews with the superintendent, other district-level leaders, school board members, and business and community leaders. Research team members also observed a host of other activities, including leadership-training sessions, budget meetings, school board meetings, and community events, and had access to some of the district's personnel and fiscal databases (Plecki et al., 2006).

The district we focus on in this article serves approximately 18,000 students. Like many medium-sized, historically suburban districts in the country, the characteristics of the student population are changing, and estimates are that by 2015, close to a third of the district's students will be persons of color and approximately 45 percent will be students from low-income families. Affordable housing is becoming increasingly difficult to find within district boundaries, and as a result enrollments are increasing in surrounding communities and declining within district boundaries. The district is organized into four geographic regions, with each region serving as a feeder system of
elementary and middle schools and one comprehensive high school. Two of the four quadrants serve the majority of the district's low-income families, as well as the majority of students of color and English-language learners. One of the other quadrants serves a primarily affluent community, reflecting the stratification by race and class that has historically existed across the various neighborhoods within the district's boundaries. The district has an extensive history of offering a number of small alternative school options for families, often housed adjacent to or in the same building as the traditional neighborhood school. Accompanying the history of alternative schools is a long-standing school-choice policy that allows families to apply to and, if accepted, attend any school within the district. The district has enjoyed significant stability in leadership and in its teaching corps. The superintendent who served during the time of our study had served in that capacity for a decade, and a number of the current central office and school leaders have worked in the district for more than 20 years.

For a number of years, reducing the achievement gap has been the principal reform priority for the district—as indicated by a clear and resounding message from the school board, superintendent, district leadership, and principals. Due in large part to the superintendent's vision, determination, and leadership, cultural competence and issues of fairness and equity have been consistent themes within the district and central to the reform theory. There was little disagreement across the district that some schools have been disproportionately impacted by the changing demographics of the community, and that student performance has been tightly linked to poverty and racial/ethnic differences. The district's commitment to equitable outcomes for all students forms the basis for its reform strategy of improving access to strong programs in all neighborhoods and increasing staffing resources and support for those schools and programs most in need.

In the early stages of the process, district leaders took deliberate steps to identify publicly the scope and nature of equity challenges facing the district. Specifically, they first invested resources in exploring what equity was (and was not) within the district. Defining the term _equity_ was a critical leadership action that enabled participants (both within and outside the district) to come to a shared, collective understanding of the differences between allocation policies designed to equalize resources across the district and those that promote an equity agenda. Doing so laid a critical foundation upon which district and school leaders could develop a broader program and curricular restructuring agenda focused on equity. From there on, successive cycles of planning and action, involving numerous committees and district-sponsored strategic planning initiatives, built on the foundation. Critical to this process was the inclusion and support of union representatives, school board members, parents, and members of the local business community. District leadership invested in a process that included these parties and built a broad-based network within the district and throughout the community. At each
stage, district leaders invested heavily in the planning that surrounded both the process of trying to understand the differences between equality and equity, as well as in the deliberate move to include a broad cross-section of the community in the process of moving forward toward a shared policy goal for the district.

Another key element of the district's success appears to be the deliberate transparency of the process. Committees designed to explore issues of equity or inequity were broad based and inclusive, and reports from these committees were openly discussed in school board meetings and in meetings the district leaders held with members of the public. In our conversations with union leaders, principals, faculty, and parents, it was clear that they were aware of these committees and initiatives, and what the goal of all this work was—to increase access, opportunity, and achievement for all students within the district. The clear, consistent, and open message from district leaders appears to have helped build support among both district personnel and the community. Table 1 summarizes the nearly decade-long effort on the part of the district to define, articulate, implement, and sustain their commitment to closing the achievement gap and improving learning for all students.

The district's process resulted in the identification of particular schools that were targeted for additional resources and support. Table 2 provides a summary of the types of equity-based strategies that the district adopted as a result of their multi-year planning and preparation.

An important aspect of the circumstances surrounding the initial granting of these targeted funds within this district was the fact that the district didn't "rob Peter to pay Paul." At the time, the district had supplemental resources that it diverted to this specific pilot initiative, and so schools that were not receiving these additional funds were not losing any resources—they just weren't getting the extra funds these targeted schools were getting. Another important, and politically strategic, factor was the time limit put on this pilot project. The schools were promised these targeted funds for only three years, and so non-targeted schools (and parents) viewed this additional support as temporary. As a result, there was very little initial "pushback" from principals from these non-targeted schools; how could they be against giving extra money to schools with a greater percentage of students who were underperforming? The reception from parents within the non-targeted schools was much the same; as long as our school isn't getting less, why not give some of the district's "extra" resources to those schools/students who are falling behind academically?

What became increasingly complicated in this case was the emergence of a growing cadre of parents (from the non-targeted schools) who began to shift their position, withdraw their support, push back on the notion of differential funding for schools, and question the fairness of a funding formula that was designed to be unequal. For example, one of the district's popular
<table>
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<td>1999–2001</td>
<td>Initial community-based planning process and follow-up</td>
<td>Surfacing inequities inherent in neighborhood schools versus alternative schools of choice How equal-per-pupil allocation process yielded inequitable resource distribution, especially in context of enrollment decline Consideration of potential school consolidation and closures, and their potential differential impacts</td>
<td>Public recognition of equity concerns Need for resolution of disparities in school resource/attendance situation</td>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>Board discussion on establishing equity-related principles</td>
<td>Search for consensus among different stakeholders concerning school choice and its ramifications</td>
<td>Consensus statements on school choice that recognized equity principles</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>Board retreats and follow-up actions</td>
<td>Continued discussion of the relation between school funding and school choice</td>
<td>Board forms a commitment to close achievement gap and enhance equity as central district goals</td>
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<td>2003–04</td>
<td>New, district-wide committee charged with assessing options to improve equity while increasing alternatives</td>
<td>Exploration of alternatives for realizing equity principles within a framework of school choice</td>
<td>Equity grants to the neediest schools Committee recommendations concerning school configuration alternatives and ways to enhance access and equity Differentiated literacy funding to all schools, based on weighted formula</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004–05</td>
<td>District outreach process (through survey, focus groups, community forums, meetings with school staffs, principals, and union)</td>
<td>Assessing stakeholder views and commitments, in relation to committee recommendations</td>
<td>Superintendent’s recommendations to board—e.g., changing lottery system for alternative schools, redrawing attendance boundaries, designating neighborhood academy schools Extra funding to academy schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006–08</td>
<td>Community-based strategic planning process (focus groups, survey-driven deliberative process)</td>
<td>Imagining services and facilities for the next 5 years and more to support district’s instructional program, to increase achievement of all students and reduce the achievement gap</td>
<td>Reaffirmation of equity, excellence, and choice as district values Limiting inter-school transfers (to limit drain from poorer schools) Movement toward differentiated staffing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE 2 Types of Differential Investment Decisions to Enhance Equity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Differential Investment Decision</th>
<th>Focus of Equity Concern</th>
<th>Level of Decision Making</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allocate funds or staffing FTE in proportion to need</td>
<td>Schools experiencing the greatest need or that are hardest to staff</td>
<td>District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invest most heavily in building capacity of staff based on need and challenges</td>
<td>Concerns within or across schools about weaknesses in staff knowledge, skill, and commitment</td>
<td>District, school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve the match between students and staff through changes in classroom or school assignment</td>
<td>Mismatch between staff capacities and particular student learning needs</td>
<td>District, school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Augment the allocation of instructional time for underserved or underperforming students</td>
<td>Insufficient instructional time (that can be addressed through alterations of the master schedule, repurposing of particular time blocks, teaching assignments within time blocks, or additions to the normal school day)</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pool and concentrate existing resources to maximize assistance to struggling students</td>
<td>Insufficient concentration of resources (e.g., dollars, FTE, or even students, treated as a resource), brought to bear on students exhibiting the greatest need</td>
<td>District, school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

alternative schools was located in one of the more affluent quadrants of the district and was attended primarily by students from this neighborhood. The district's open enrollment policy provided access to the alternative school for families across the district, but families needed to provide transportation to this school of choice. In an effort to provide opportunities for low-income families to attend this school, a proposal was put forth by the district to provide transportation for economically disadvantaged students who could not get there otherwise. Nearly immediately, parents with children already attending that school asked the district if transportation would now be provided for all students in the school. What incidents like this began to suggest is that parents in the non-targeted schools were comfortable with the targeted schools getting additional resources, if they were used within those targeted schools, and not used to integrate students from the targeted schools into other schools or programs across the district.

Looking at a number of episodes of inconsistent and conditional public support from a school leader's perspective, we began to try to make sense of how and when leaders might anticipate pushback on the part of parents. If a superintendent or district leader was trying to move forward with a targeted funding formula that resourced schools differentially, what might they expect
in the way of parental/community support, and potential pushback? If they could anticipate particular concerns or challenges, could they proactively manage the policy campaign and mitigate potential conflicts?

Some of the political challenges that arise from leaders’ decisions to reallocate resources stem from the fact that this work does not take place in a vacuum—instead, it reflects policy conditions that form a context in which opportunities for effective, equity-focused leadership can be created. For example, effective leaders often know how to use data strategically to inform resource allocation decisions and to provide insights about the productivity, efficiency, and equity of resources. The roles, responsibilities, and authority of leaders at each level of the education system also impact whether and how they are able to allocate resources to particular districts, schools, programs, teachers, and students. Further, the type of governance structure that is in place also affects decisions about resources and incentives. Governance issues arise as leaders become involved in raising revenue and distributing educational resources. This activity is shared by multiple entities, including the voting public, state legislatures, local school boards, superintendents, principals, and teachers’ associations. Each of these connections can provide insights into how to allocate resources and provide incentives that powerfully and equitably support learning, for both students and education professionals.

Findings From the Case Study
Findings from our case analysis suggest that the politics of equity-focused investment can be most productively managed when leaders:

- **Adopt a long-time horizon for planning equity-related investments**—in effect, they invested in planning for equity. Through elaborate processes with repeated occasions for engaging stakeholders, they built an awareness of equity issues, some working consensus on equity principles, and the basis for more focused action.

- **Shepherd the equity conversation over time, while taking action on steps that were feasible.** In shepherding the conversation, they took pains to be proactive, getting out in front of the issue rather than reacting to an equity-related debate framed by events or other parties; used data publicly and often as a reference point for conversation; and invested in coalition building to broaden the base of support for decisions that could be unpopular in various quarters.

- **Anticipate and persevere in the face of the inevitable pushback** from groups that perceived differential investments to be unfair to them and their interests, even if justified as a productive way to address the achievement gap.
Our case-study analysis found the overarching principle was that the pursuit of equity goals meant taking both a short- and a long-term view of the challenge. District leaders were most successful when they engaged in a process that unfolded over years. While there are strategic advantages to students' learning when educational leaders operate from a long-range, investment perspective, successful long-range investment planning also depends upon incremental, short-term implementation successes and lessons, grounded in an ongoing inquiry process. A long-term investment perspective offers schools and school districts the opportunity to deal more effectively with periods of compressed fiscal resources. Investing in learning improvement needs to occur both in times of fiscal plenty and fiscal cutbacks. Our study site, along with many other districts across the nation, experienced severe fiscal retrenchment in recent years, and used these times as occasions for creative improvisation on what they had been doing before (Calvo & Miles, 2011).

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

As is clear from the review of our district case, the policy conditions under which these district leaders sought to introduce equity-focused resource allocation strategies were less than favorable. They were faced with fewer students, diminished resources, and an achievement gap that called into question their ability to legitimately serve low-income English-language learners or underperforming students within the district. In addition, the pressure to improve was coming not only from parents and the community, but also, more subtly, from principals and teachers within academically successful and more affluent schools within the district. As a result, district leaders were not only facing a significant achievement gap challenge, but equally problematic, they were faced with having to confront an attitude and culture within the district and community that failed to recognize privilege and a lack of systemic equity.

The policy climate was far from ideal for the creation of a long-range, equity-focused resource allocation strategy in this district. The level of investment necessary (in dollars, time, and political capital of district leadership) was considerable; so too was the risk. Had district leaders not invested considerable resources in coalition building and the inclusion of a broad base of the community in the process, it is likely that the outcome would have been different, which brings us back to the primary questions in this case. Why did district leaders choose to focus on this risky, long-range strategy, why engage such a broad spectrum of the community in the process, and ultimately, how did they accomplish this? To address these questions a look back at the theoretical perspectives introduced is useful.

Revisiting Kingdon's theory, one could argue that a "policy window" may have been opened by the collision of three events within the district.
First, due to a dramatic fluctuation in the housing market, the district saw both a decline and an increasing stratification of its student population across the district. The flight of families to more affordable housing elsewhere meant that those with the means to buy homes, and those who lived in the remaining rental housing resulted in more racially, culturally, and socioeconomically segregated communities within the district. Second, with fewer students, the district received less money from the state, so district leadership was under increased scrutiny and pressure to use the diminished resources as efficiently and effectively as possible. Finally, as a result of the migration of many of the students who had formed “the middle” of the district’s performance profile, the achievement gap between those students and schools who were performing and those who were not increased. All three of these factors contributed to a heightened sense of urgency among district leadership, on the school board, and within the community, and a window for the policy process to begin was opened.

While many aspects of the case explored within this article follow the theoretical course Kingdon suggests, what is less clear is how (and why) a long-range, resource-dependent policy initiative was forwarded by district leadership. What one might expect in a case like this (decreasing enrollments, decreasing resources, increasing gap in achievement) is to see the introduction of short-term, quick-fix, cost-cutting approaches to such challenges; so how and why a lack of equity across the district was plucked from the “problem stream” is a unique and interesting aspect of this case. Additionally, there were few if any “solutions” waiting in the policy stream to be re-introduced and put into policy action. Instead, a far more deliberate and time-consuming process of study and consensus-building took place, which included a broad base of constituents, both within the district and across the community, and it is from this process that solutions and policy initiatives grew. What may be the most confounding (and interesting) anomaly in this case is the fact that it was not the public mood that created the energy to divert the politics stream into a collision course with either of the other streams, it was largely the initiative of a few, select district leaders who created a public mood surrounding this issue, and persevered with their mission to improve equity across the district.

What appears equally critical to the success of the equity-focused policy initiatives within this district was a positive social construction of both the targets of the policy, but also of the policy initiatives themselves. A potentially significant, and a possibly unique, aspect of the process within this case was the articulation by district leadership of the differential resource allocation strategies as investments. No longer were they characterized as merely resources going from the district, to schools, to students, but instead, they were being considered as investments; in the students who were struggling, in the schools that were under-performing, and in the community the district served.
Politics of Differential Resource Reallocation

From a district leadership perspective, one of the most challenging aspects of the process may have been the recruitment and collaboration with "street-level bureaucrats." Clearly, district leaders invested a great deal in coalition building and in developing a sense of a community mission surrounding equity in schools (e.g., community-wide surveys, town hall meetings, focus groups). In interviews with union leadership, as well as with the school board president, it was clear that the superintendent had invested a great deal of time and attention to gaining and maintaining their support for an equity-focused policy agenda. For those within the schools or across the community, district leadership was equally committed to getting their input and including their perspectives in the dialog. Presentations to teachers and staff by the superintendent and assistant superintendent took place in each of the four regions within the district, with question-and-answer periods following. Feedback from these meetings, as well as the data from several community-wide surveys and specific community events sponsored by the school board surrounding equity issues and the future of the schools, created a sense of "buy-in" to the process, provided an expression of confidence that the district is committed to seeing the reform through, and articulated a collective ownership of responsibility for outcomes. Through a considerable investment of time and resources by district leadership, those at the street level were actively courted to become a part of the process, and as a result had a personal and/or professional investment in the outcome.

Where we did see a breakdown in the positive utilization of those on the streets was in the eventual pushback of some parents within the district toward a further extension of equity-focused polices beyond the schools that were targeted. A growing cadre of parents in the district, for example, began to push back on the notion of disproportionate funding for schools and question the fairness of a funding formula that was designed to be unequal. When a proposal was forwarded by the district to provide transportation to a language immersion school for students who could not get to the school otherwise, affluent parents with children already attending that school (who were providing their own transportation on a daily basis) asked the district if transportation would now be provided for all students.

What incidents like this began to suggest is that parents in the schools with fewer English-language learners, students from low-income backgrounds, or single-parent households (the non-targeted schools) were comfortable with the targeted schools getting additional resources, if they were used within those targeted schools, and not used to integrate those targeted students into other schools or programs across the district (Brantlinger, 2003). A particularly troubling representation of this perspective was shared by the principal of a targeted school when he described the "grilling" his faculty took from other parents when faculty members chose to send their own children to the targeted school. "That's a good school for those students, but . . ." was the sentiment expressed by one questioning parent.
“Fairness” and the Margin of Perceived Competitive Advantage

For purposes of better understanding and articulating the behavior of these parents, we introduce a concept that we call the Margin of Perceived Competitive Advantage (MPCA). A general summary of this pattern of behavior is as follows: those who have historically held a competitive advantage within a society and school system have a dynamic, flexible threshold of acceptance or support for allowing others who have not held the same advantages to temporarily receive an unequal distribution of access or resources so that they can “catch up.” This acceptance and support usually lasts up until a point at which the historically advantaged (the “haves”) perceive that their ability to maintain and perpetuate a margin of increased access to, and control of, information or resources (their advantage) is threatened. In other words, promoting equity by gaining support from the “haves” for a differential distribution of resources is accepted until it results in the “have nots” gaining fully equal access to information, resources, or opportunities (see Figure 1).

Looking at these episodes of inconsistent and conditional public support from a school or district leader’s perspective, one can begin to anticipate how and when they might face significant pushback from parents or other community members. If a superintendent or district leader was trying to move forward with a targeted funding formula that resourced schools disproportionately, they might expect parental or community support, and also expect potential pushback at predictable points. Knowing this, leaders can then take proactive steps to counter the pressures to back away from differentiated investments. As they do so, they can counter the pressures emanating from the MPCA by replicating the kinds of tactics discussed above to shepherd

**Summarizing MPCA**

- In an attempt to bring (vertical) equity to the support of historically disadvantaged students within a school district (The “Have Nots”), some schools have created differentiated funding strategies—the unequal treatment of unequals.
- Parents of the “Haves” tend to reach a threshold of political support for vertical resource strategies—a point at which they believe their students are losing their (perceived) competitive advantage over other ("Have Not") students.
- It is within this “Margin” that tipping points for public support, and political decision making by educational leaders, is captured.

**FIGURE 1** The margin of perceived competitive advantage.
the equity conversation over time. In other words, as was the case in our district, they will be getting out in front of the issue proactively, naming it and framing it in the most productive way possible, engaging public conversation around data about what is and (to the extent data can be generated) around the likely effects of different scenarios, and, as they do so, building coalitions.

Our study findings also have implications for the preparation and support of leaders who are trying to forward similar equity-focused efforts. First of all, allocating resources equitably—which generally means in a differentiated and unequal way—is difficult conceptual and political work. Leaders and other stakeholders have to come to grips with the slippery definitions of equality, equity, and fairness, and more than one conception of fairness is at work. Coming to full awareness, no less a working consensus, on what is fair takes hard thought and sufficient dialogue at the onset of the initiative and throughout the process of designing and implementing specific strategies. Given the competing interests at play, the investment decisions themselves and their aftermath involve equally difficult political work (Whose interests are being served? How can a viable coalition of interests be assembled behind a particular differentiated allocation plan?). At the same time, complicated technical questions need attention (Exactly what will this formula yield in successive years for each school? How can the particular needs of special education students and English language learners be attended to?), and though the technical solutions never remove the political wrangling, they can do much to clarify the debate and the likely consequences under consideration.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

One overarching principle that emerged from our inquiry was that the pursuit of equity goals within a district meant taking both a short- and long-term view of equity-focused leadership practice and engaging in processes that would unfold incrementally and over years to come. Learning to manage the politics of differential investment of resources and to keep investments focused on learning improvement despite pushback are collectively a curriculum for leadership development that many school districts (and most preparation programs) are not prepared to offer. Accordingly, a different problem of leadership practice concerns the extent to which principals or other leaders are adequately prepared to address fundamental challenges regarding effective and equitable uses of resources. We found that principals, for example, were seeking detailed suggestions and options about how to best allocate resources to address the full spectrum of educational issues that emerge in a particular school and community. Deep and specific knowledge about the types of investments that might be most applicable and effective appears to be in short supply. Our inquiry suggests that thinking through
how to best reallocate resources in pursuit of equitable outcomes is difficult work, both conceptually and politically. In essence, a knowledge gap needs to be bridged so that leaders are supported in their efforts to engage in equity-focused actions that will produce desired results.2

Drawing from what we learned from this case, we suggest that equity-focused leadership practice must go beyond dependence on the heroic leadership of individuals who happen to possess unique traits, energy levels, and abilities, as well as persuasive personalities. Instead, equity-focused leadership is most evident when collective, strategic actions are taken by leaders and communities that build system-wide knowledge of the types of equity challenges that exist, marshal resources to address inequities, and sustain a continuous dialogue and course of action in support of long-term, sustainable strategies that will improve outcomes for all students, particularly for those most in need.

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NOTES

1. The larger study in which this research was nested linked three lines of investigation through overlapping samples. All districts in the study were proactively pursuing an improvement agenda by emphasizing leadership development and the improvement of leadership practice. School sites (3–5 per district) represented all levels (elementary, middle, and high schools) and were among the schools in the district serving the most diverse student populations.

2. We note that our examination of the political and leadership challenges involved in creating and sustaining support for differential resource allocation did not include an examination of whether the reallocation initiatives were successful in improving student learning outcomes, as it was beyond the scope and timeline of this particular study. We acknowledge this is an equally important area in which additional inquiry would be very illuminating.

REFERENCES


