

ABSTRACT

TATE, NICOLE M. Competing for and Receiving Race To The Top Funding: Changes in North Carolina's Educational Policy Landscape. (Under the direction of Dr. Lance D. Fusarelli.)

This case study investigates the relationship between the federal government and state government as it applies to the Race to the Top program in North Carolina. Race to the Top was a component of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. North Carolina received \$400 million in Race to the Top grant funding. The conceptual framework for the study is based on Manna's (2006) theory of "borrowing strength," which argues that policy actors at one level of government influence policy agenda-setting at another level of government. The case study research collected data through interviews with state policy elites and stakeholders, and included a document analysis of relevant documents. The data indicate that the federal government did influence state education policy through the Race to the Top program, and that North Carolina sought the funding to pursue specific state policy goals in the state. Policymakers and other key stakeholders agreed that participation in the program encouraged particular reforms in the state in order to win the funding, and that those reforms may have lasting effects on state policy. Furthermore, initiatives brought forth through the funding were impacted by agendas set by the federal government and enacted through the competitive program. North Carolina participated in the program out of a basic need for more education dollars as well as a desire to incorporate more innovation and more meaningful professional development. While some initiatives implemented as a result of RTTT monies have ended, others survive, supported by independent funding or state funds.

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Competing for and Receiving Race To The Top Funding: Changes in North Carolina's
Educational Policy Landscape

by
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my husband, Joel, and to my children, Christopher and Michelina,

with love.

I can only hope to make you as proud as you all make me.

BIOGRAPHY

Nicole McDermott Tate was born and raised in Pennsylvania. She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree at The Pennsylvania State University. Prior to pursuing her doctorate, she was a member of Teach For America and worked as a middle school and elementary school teacher. She has worked for 10 years as a research education analyst at RTI International in North Carolina.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	viii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background of the Program	2
Purpose of the Study and Research Questions.....	7
Conceptual Framework: Paul Manna’s “Borrowing Strength”	9
Significance of the Study	10
Relevance of the Study.....	11
Definition of Terms	12
Organization of the Study	13
CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	14
Introduction.....	14
History of Federal Involvement in Education Policy.....	14
1954: <i>Brown v. Board of Education</i>	15
1958: National Defense Education Act (NDEA).....	15
1964: The Civil Rights Act	16
1965: Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA).....	17
1979: Creation of Department of Education	18
1981: Education Consolidation and Improvement Act (ECIA)	19
1983: <i>A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform</i> – National Commision on Excellence in Education.....	19
1989: Charlottesville Summit.....	20
1990: National Education Goals Panel.....	21
1991: America 2000.....	22
1994: Goals 2000	22

1994: Reauthorization of the ESEA—Improving America’s Schools Act	26
2002: No Child Left Behind (NCLB)	27
2009: Race to the Top	28
2015: Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)	32
The Relationship between Federal and State Involvement in Education Reform	33
Conceptual Framework: Paul Manna’s “Borrowing Strength”	36
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY	42
Introduction	42
Case Study Research	43
Sample	43
Data Collection	44
Benefits and Limitations of Interviews	46
Data Analysis	47
Research Validity and Reliability	49
Ethical Issues	50
Limitations of the Study	51
Subjectivity Statement	52
Summary	52
CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS	53
Introduction	53
Race to the Top in North Carolina	53
Race to the Top in North Carolina	53
Review of Research Questions	55

Money as Motivator during Economic Downturn	56
Alignment with Education Reforms Underway	59
Concessions	63
Relationships and Spirit of Collaboration	66
Professional Development	69
Lessons Learned/Legacy	72
Summary of Key Findings	77
CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION	79
Introduction	79
Interpretation of findings	79
Federal Influence	82
Implications for Further Research	86
Implications for Policymakers	88
Conclusion	89
REFERENCES	90
APPENDICES	97
APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL	98
APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW REQUEST/INVITATION	99
APPENDIX C. INFORMED CONSENT	100
APPENDIX D. INSTIUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD SUBMISSION	102

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1	<i>Summary of Data Collection Activities—Respondent Categories</i>	44
Table 4.1	<i>Research Questions and Corresponding Themes</i>	56

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the midst of an economic downturn, the Obama administration enacted the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act, or ARRA, in February 2009. As part of this Act, and of the President's goal to "make education America's national mission" (Executive Summary, 2010, p. 2), the Race to the Top (RTTT) competition was announced, enticing states to compete for federal funding by proposing innovations and improvements to their existing educational policies and programs. Forty-one states submitted proposals. The implementation of this Act and subsequent education policy competition induced changes in states' education policies. This study investigates some of these changes and whether or not they were encouraged by the federal government.

The following research is a case study of a federal education policy program and its relationship to education reform at the state level. Specifically, assuming that the RTTT program is a political strategy intended to encourage certain reforms at the state level, what reforms – at the state level – have actually been made in North Carolina since RTTT's implementation? Furthermore, with the recent passage of the ESSA, will these reforms remain relevant in North Carolina? The researcher's goal is to understand how the federal government intended to affect change in state education policy through the implementation of the RTTT funding by exploring the policy processes involved in its creation, inception, and implementation. Outcomes (for example, whether a particular policy component resulted in increased test scores) of state program implementation at the district or student level are not a focus for this particular study.

Background of the Program

Policy changes made as a result of the condition of the American economy initiated changes to education policy at the state level. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) was enacted on February 13, 2009, and is one such change. The Act provided \$787 billion (increased to \$840 billion in 2011) to achieve these three broad goals: “tax cuts and benefits for millions of working families and businesses; funding for entitlement programs, such as unemployment benefits; and funding for federal contracts, grants and loans” (recovery.gov). While the act was meant to provide relief to struggling stage education budgets, researchers question the efficacy of such a large undertaking. As noted in Lean and Smyth (2011), “the misery index, which is the unemployment rate plus the inflation rate, is a practical measure of economic malaise” (p. 493). Lean and Smyth argued that, in the throes of a global financial crisis, that Obama’s 2009 ARRA was an effort to ameliorate the misery index, but that it only had temporary effects. Further, Fusarelli (2011) argued that “The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and Race to the Top are not panaceas that will save America’s schools. Rather, they are bandages to help hemorrhaging budgets” (p. 357)

One of the initiatives of this ARRA is a competitive program, RTTT, wherein states were challenged to come up with ways to improve education and student performance in order to receive federal education funds. By early 2010, forty states and the District of Columbia submitted applications for these competitive grants, and in March 2010, 15 states and the District of Columbia were selected as finalists. Two states, Delaware and Tennessee, were awarded federal monies (\$100 million) to help improve education outcomes in their states. Another 36 competitors submitted additional proposals in the summer of 2010 for

Phase Two of the competition. President Obama acknowledged in a speech on July 29, 2010 – between Phases One and Two – that states who were competing were already changing their existing policies in order to win the grant money. He stated,

And so far, the results have been promising and they have been powerful. In an effort to compete for this extra money, 32 states reformed their education laws before we even spent a dime. The competition leveraged change at the state level. And because the standards we set were high, only a couple of states actually won the grant in the first round, which meant that the states that didn't get the money, they've now strengthened their applications, made additional reforms (The White House Press Office, whitehouse.gov).

Nineteen states were selected as finalists for the second round; nine states were awarded funding in this round: Florida (\$700 million), Georgia (\$400 million), Hawaii (\$75 million), Maryland (\$250 million), Massachusetts (\$250 million), New York (\$700 million), North Carolina (\$400 million), Ohio (\$400 million), Rhode Island (\$75 million), and the District of Columbia (\$75 million). Winners of Phase Three of the program were announced on December 23, 2011 and were awarded \$200 million in grant money. The seven states awarded monies in 2011 were Arizona, Colorado, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

The criteria by which the grant applicants were judged were based on six priorities outlined by the U.S. Department of Education. The first was “*Absolute Priority – Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform.*” To meet this priority, states had to prove

they were committed to “taking a systemic approach to education reform;” specifically, how the funds will be used to “increase student achievement, decrease the achievement gaps across student subgroups, and increase the rates at which students graduate from high school prepared for college and careers.” Priority Two, identified as a “*Competitive Preference Priority*,” focused on the states’ plans for an “emphasis on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).” The remaining four were identified as “*Invitational Priorities*.” Priority Three was “*Innovations for Improving Early Learning Outcomes*,” which would focus on practices to “improve educational outcomes for high-need students who are young children (pre-kindergarten through third grade) by enhancing the quality of preschool programs.” Priority Four, the “*Expansion and Adaption of Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems*,” addresses the need for accountability and using data from a myriad of education sources (for example, finance, student health, student mobility), “to allow important questions related to policy, practice, or overall effectiveness to be asked, answered and incorporated into effective continuous improvement practices.” The fifth priority was “*P-20 Coordination, Vertical and Horizontal Alignment*.” Vertical alignment means transitions between, for example, early childhood and PK-12 to affect student success. Horizontal alignment refers to “the coordination of services across schools, State agencies, and community partners.” The sixth and final priority addressed “*School-Level Conditions for Reform, Innovation, and Learning*,” and references the applicant’s ability to show that its “participating local education agencies (LEAs) seek to create the conditions for reform and innovation as well as the conditions for learning by providing schools with flexibility and autonomy in areas such as selecting staff... controlling the school’s budget... and creating

school climates and cultures that remove obstacles to, and actively support, student engagement and achievement” (Executive Summary, 2009).

In addition to the six overriding priorities, the initial application included five selection criteria, and each were assigned a set number of points on which states would be critiqued. They included: State Success Factors (125 points), Standards and Assessments (70 points), Data Systems to Support Instruction (47 points), Great Teachers and Leaders (138 points), and Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools (50 points).

Governors were considered the official requestors of funds, and under the ARRA, at least 50 percent of the funding provided in the grants had to be sub-granted to LEAs. States had more latitude in spending or dispersing the remaining 50 percent of their grant funds. The federal government initiated the competition for these Race to the Top grants “to encourage and reward States that are implementing significant reforms in the four education areas described in the ARRA: enhancing standards and assessments, improving the collection and use of data, increasing teacher effectiveness and achieving equity in teacher distribution, and turning around struggling schools” (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/faq.pdf>). Upon the program’s launch, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan noted that, “Today we cross a threshold in education reform” (<http://www.ed.gov/blog/2009/07/president-obama-secretary-duncan-announce-race-to-the-top/>). President Obama emphasized that the competition “will not be based on politics or ideology... Instead, it will be based on a simple principle – whether a state is ready to do what works” (Presidential Remarks, July 24, 2009).

State work under the Race to the Top grants ended in summer 2015. The government has since offered competitive programs for early learning programs and districts. However, this study will focus only on the initial three rounds of state competition, which affect

policies for kindergarten through twelfth grade education. Specifically, the study will focus on the Race to the Top process in North Carolina.

The United States Department of Education claims that the program has in fact spurred positive change in educational goals for American students, evidenced by an increase in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores and that, as of March 2014,

To date, 46 states and Washington, D.C. have chosen to adopt high college- and career-ready standards, and several states have altered laws or policies to create or expand the number of charter schools. In the end, not all of these states received grants, but the opportunity to compete helped spur much of this change. (*Setting the Pace:*

Expanding Opportunity for America's Students under Race to the Top, p. 3)

The federal government is arguing then, that even states who did not make an effort to compete for the grant money, and those who competed but did not win, still saw educational improvements stemming from the very existence of the program. Furthermore, the success – or perceived success – of the state RTTT programs has resulted in the government expanding the RTTT “family” of programs, including the aforementioned early childhood initiative and “the Obama administration’s fiscal year 2015 budget request for \$300 million for Race to the Top – Equity and Opportunity...” (p. 10). The goal of the Equity and Opportunity program is to close opportunity and achievement gaps and increase career readiness among high school graduates. That program is currently underway.

There is not, however, consensus among education stakeholders about the success of the RTTT programs. The highly debated, controversial national Common Core curriculum

was adopted by many states in order to make them more appealing for grant funds, and the permanence of that curriculum is yet to be seen. In a March 11, 2015 interview with *Education Week*, John King, senior advisor to the U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, responded to a question about the success of RTTT by somewhat downplaying the program's impact on state policy. "Race to the Top was intended to be seed funding to galvanize states taking on raising standards. It's not the federal role to prescribe standards"

(http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2015/03/senior_ed_advisor_john_king_on.html?utm_source=feedblitz&utm_medium=FeedBlitzRss&utm_campaign=campaignk-12). Given the continuing discussion about the program's strengths and weaknesses, it is important to continue to examine the process by which it was created and implemented.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The ARRA was a unique opportunity for states to seek additional funding for educational innovation in an era of tight economic times and limited funding. Because of the competition for funds, the stakes were high for states to prove themselves as innovators and achievers. However, funding was tied to accountability, so states had to verify that they would follow through on what they propose and that it will result in positive student achievement outcomes. The federal government has increased its involvement and control over state and local schooling significantly during the past decade.

The RTTT program is a recently implemented and oft-debated program. Since components of the program are ongoing, it is relevant to current education policy and may eventually influence policy all states. It is known that states have altered their policies in light of the possibility of federal funding. But what is left unknown at this point is the process by

which the federal government influenced the states to make changes in their existing policies. States' reasoning for allowing increased federal oversight and the need for accountability was the opportunity to supplement current state funding with much-needed federal dollars—or was it because of a sincere interest in education reform with monetary guidance from the federal government? Additionally, now that the program has ended, and in light of 2015's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), will state education officials adjust or roll back the reforms adopted under the state RTTT program? Specifically, given North Carolina's focus on teacher quality and education leadership, what are the long-term possibilities of reforms staying in place?

In submitting their proposals and requests for funding, states made alterations to their K-12 education policies in order to gain additional public school funding in the midst of a nationwide economic downturn. It is reasonable, then, that state policies would be affected and reflect the agenda set by the federal government. The purpose of this study is to answer questions about the role that the federal government has played in affecting states' education policy through agenda setting, and whether those policies are likely to remain after the program's end. I will use a document analysis approach, paired with stakeholder interviews, to examine particular components of the 2010 RTTT program and how they affected state policies. In this study, I seek to answer the following research questions: how has the RTTT program encouraged certain education reforms at the state level? Additionally, since the RTTT program has come to a close, do state education officials in North Carolina believe the reforms adopted under the state RTTT program will stay relevant and actionable, or will they be repealed?

Conceptual Framework: Paul Manna's "Borrowing Strength"

Using Paul Manna's (2006) theory of "borrowing strength" as a foundation for analysis, the researcher explored the influence that federal agenda setting has had on the initiation of particular education reforms at the state level. Manna's framework suggests that "borrowing strength" occurs "when policy entrepreneurs at one level of government attempt to push their agendas by leveraging the justifications and capabilities of other governments in the system possess" (p. 5). While Manna's work focused primarily on the expansion of federal policy in K-12 education since passage of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), this study applies the theory to the development and implementation of the RTTT competition.

The researcher studied how federal policy entrepreneurs at the federal government identified the problems the program is meant to address. Additionally, in what ways were these individuals able to place these issues on the policy agenda in order to obtain monies to fund the program and whether states adopted particular reforms mentioned in the competition's parameters? In John Kingdon's 1995 work, he writes that,

Out of the set of all conceivable subjects or problems to which officials could be paying attention, they do in fact seriously attend to some rather than others. So the agenda-setting process narrows this set of conceivable subjects to the set that actually becomes the focus of attention. We want to understand not only why the agenda is composed as it is at any one point in time, but also how and why it changes from one time to another. (p. 3)

In the case of RTTT, the federal government may be enticing education policymakers at the state level to implement particular reforms (as outlined in the RTTT application). Manna writes that, “During the last several decades, state governments have wielded their powers to reshape the institutions that govern schools and execute education policy. The pace of these changes has varied across the states, providing a valuable arena for understanding the performance of reforms that centralize” (Manna, 2013, p. 683). Studying the media coverage, commentary, and actions of state-level policy entrepreneurs will allow the researcher to uncover how the reforms suggested in the RTTT program were placed on the political agenda. The document analysis will be supported by interviews with key stakeholders. The study will result in findings that may lead to recommendations for policymakers at both the federal and state level in how to best use government monies (carrots) to encourage particular education reforms.

Significance of the Study

This study will provide a look at the attention education receives from policymakers at the national level – specifically, what reforms encouraged by the federal government influenced education policy in North Carolina, and whether policy reforms had long-term effects in the state. The study allows for a detailed, targeted examination of the policy process surrounding RTTT reforms in North Carolina.

Studies and scholarly articles and other works have examined state policy in connection with federal policies regarding education. For example, researchers (Cross, 2004; DeBray, 2006) have covered the history and evolution of federal involvement in education policy. Others (Campbell & Mazzoni, 1976; Fusarelli & Cooper, 2009) have discussed the role of states and state leadership in creating policy and influencing national politics or have

examined the implementation of federal policies (Manna, 2006). While some of the attention surrounding RTTT has focused on policy implementation at both the federal and state levels, this study will focus on whether and how agenda setting at the federal level influences state policy.

Since this is a relatively recent program and initiative, it is relevant to current education policy and affects all states, although doubts about RTTT's efficacy have been raised among education commentators and stakeholders. This study will shed light on the role and involvement of the federal government in affecting state-level policy agenda setting. In today's challenging economy, governments seek to find solutions to pressing problems. Once an issue is identified as a problem, the federal government could affect change at the state level in a number of ways, one of which is by placing educational problems on the national policy agenda. Understanding and analyzing the ways that federal policymakers may affect state education policy is one way to better understand how educational reform policies are distributed and initiated.

Relevance of the Study

This study is relevant to the examination of the federal policy process because it addresses the relationship between the federal government and states in terms of the policy process – and how policies are initiated and carried out by states, districts, and schools. While the federal government enforces many of their policy notions by providing (or denying) funding to states, the RTTT process was different because the funding was dependent on initiatives *from* states. This study examined the policy process behind North Carolina's participation in RTTT, and the reforms included as a result of participation in the

program. The study also examined whether states are leaders in policy development or followers of federally-guided initiatives encouraged by the offering of federal funds.

Definition of Terms

To fully understand this study, it is important to first define several terms that appear throughout this text.

Agenda-Setting: According to Kingdon (1995), an agenda is “the list of subjects or problems to which governmental officials...are paying some serious attention at any given time” (p. 3). Therefore, agenda-setting is the process by which those subjects or problems are narrowed down “to the set that actually becomes the focus of attention” (p. 3).

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA): The ARRA was an effort by the federal government, following the 2008 recession, to rejuvenate the American economy. The plan included several grant programs, one of which was Race to the Top.

Borrowing Strength: From *School's In*, Manna (2006) investigates the relationship between federal and state governments as it pertains to influencing education policy. “Policy entrepreneurs ...push their agendas by leveraging the ... capabilities that other governments...possess” (p. 5).

Capacity: Capacity is an important component in Manna’s (2006) “borrowing strength” theory. in brief, capacity is “the ability to act once policymakers have decided they want to act” (p. 14)

Common Core: According to the Common Core State Standards Initiative, “The state-led effort to develop the Common Core State Standards was launched in 2009 by state leaders, including

governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states, two territories and the District of Columbia, through their membership in the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)” (www.corestandards.org)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): The ESSA was signed into law in 2015, and replaces the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) as the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

Policy Entrepreneurs: Policy entrepreneurs are defined by Kingdon (1995) as “advocates for proposals or for the prominence of an idea” (p. 122).

Race to the Top (RTTT): Part of the ARRA, RTTT was a competitive grant program in which states proposed education innovations to receive federal funding.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the study, and introduced the study’s purpose. It also provided an overview of the study’s conceptual framework. It introduced the study’s research questions, significance, and relevance. Chapter Two of this study will provide a brief history of education policy at both the federal and state levels, especially federal policies that have affected education policy in the states. This chapter will also contain a review of the literature on the policy process. Chapter Three includes a description of the methodology that was used in the study, along with the justification of the methods chosen. Chapter Four will provide an analysis of the results, while Chapter Five will include a discussion of the study’s findings as they pertain to existing research. Chapter Five will also include implications for further research and practice.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

A fundamental issue in the study of a federal education policy program is to what extent the federal government should be involved in state education policy. For years, the role of the federal government in legislating education policy has been debated. Federal funding for certain education programs complicates this issue; does funding indicate control or influence over policy details and outcomes? In addition to the legislative and executive branches of government, the U.S. Supreme Court has influenced education policies implemented by the states.

History of Federal Involvement in Education Policy

This chapter begins with a chronological review of federal involvement in education since 1954, including notable Supreme Court cases that affected state policies in order to set the stage for the political and historical environment in which the RTTT program was introduced and implemented. The chapter will provide a history of the federal government's involvement in national and state education policy. The federal government, in this section, is defined by policies enacted by Congress, initiated by the executive branch (namely the Department of Education), and enforced by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The policies and initiatives examined in this literature review will primarily focus on elementary and secondary education, since those are the areas also affected by the RTTT program. Finally, this chapter will include a discussion of Manna's (2006) "borrowing

strength” theory of federalism, the framework on which this study is founded. I begin with an overview of major federal initiatives and events that have shaped federal involvement in education, which sets the stage for the federal RTTT initiative.

1954: *Brown v. Board of Education*

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court unanimously declared racial segregation in schools unconstitutional in violation of the 14th Amendment. Throughout the case, it was proven that separate school systems (one for Blacks, one for Whites) were inherently unequal and resulted in an inequitable distribution of resources. While the case focused on racial segregation, the effects of the decision also affected school systems that segregated students based on neighborhoods or other factors (Cross 2004, p. 8). This landmark decision, while calling for desegregation in all areas of American society, illustrated that public schooling was an ideal stage for battling inequality.

1958: National Defense Education Act (NDEA) (P.L. 85-864; 72 Stat. 1580)

The National Defense Education Act was signed into law by President Eisenhower on September 2, 1958 in an effort to help the United States become more competitive with its Cold War rivals – “the defense of this Nation depends upon the mastery of modern techniques developed from complex scientific principles” (P.L. 85-864; 72 Stat. 1580). The rationale for the law was “to strengthen the national defense and to encourage and assist in the expansion and improvement of educational programs to meet critical national needs” (P.L. 85-864; 72 Stat. 1580). The initiative included funds for education at all levels, with a focus on science, modern foreign languages, and defense career education. Money was allocated to states and to individuals in the form of loans for postsecondary education. The

act provided financial assistance over four years to help send an increasing number of students to colleges and universities. Of note is the requirement that, in the midst of the Cold War and in the wake of McCarthyism, any beneficiary of funding was required to sign an affidavit “that he does not believe in, and is not a member of and does not support any organization that believes in or teaches, the overthrow of the United States Government by force or violence or by any illegal or unconstitutional methods” (P.L. 85-864; 72 Stat. 1580). This act bears a resemblance to the RTTT program, in that it was created in an effort to make Americans more competitive globally. As President Obama noted in his remarks of the program on July 24, 2009, “In a world where countries that out-educate us today will out-compete us tomorrow, the future belongs to the nation that best educates its people. Period. We know this” (2009 remarks on Education by the President, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-the-Department-of-Education).

1964: The Civil Rights Act

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed by President Johnson on January 7, 1965. While it largely addressed overall institutional discriminatory issues, Title IV of the act did specifically address “desegregation of public education.” (<http://media.nara.gov/rediscovery/02233.pdf>) Cross (2010) noted,

...among Johnson’s priorities in 1964 was congressional enactment of the Civil Rights Act, a measure that would forever shift the debate over education from aid to segregated schools to desegregation assistance, open countless doors for

African Americans at every level of society, and usher in an era of battles over school busing for desegregation purposes. (p. 22)

In addition to desegregating schools (that remained desegregated even a decade after the *Brown* decision), the Civil Rights Act also “mandated a study of equal educational opportunity, an assignment undertaken by sociologist James Coleman” (Cross, 2010, p. 34). The results of the Coleman report, released in 1966, have been much debated in the years following its release. The report was based on the results of a survey of public school teachers, principals, superintendents, and students. Coleman wrote in his summary of results,

In its desegregation decision of 1954, the Supreme Court held that separate schools for Negro and white children are inherently unequal. This survey finds that, when measured by that yardstick, American public education remains largely unequal in most regions of the country, including all those where Negroes form any significant proportion of the population (<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED012275.pdf>, p. 3).

1965: Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA)

ESEA was passed as part of President Johnson’s series of programs that had the goal of creating a Great Society. These programs were part of what he called the “War on Poverty.” As Cross (2010) notes, “Johnson, a former teacher, was a passionate believer in equity and in the power of education to help pull people out of poverty, having himself been

raised in a poor family and having succeeded in life, he felt, largely because he had received an education – one that had been entirely in public schools” (p. 27). Prior to the passage of the ESEA, education issues had been addressed by the U.S. Office of Education, although the overriding sentiment of the federal government was that decisions about education should be left to the states. In fact, as Kirst (2004) notes, “between 1862 and 1963, Congress had considered unrestricted general aid to schools thirty-six times and had rejected it thirty-six times” (p.22). With the ESEA, “Johnson tied education money to special needs categories (schools with low-income and low-achieving pupils) that existed in every congressional district, spreading the funds far and wide and thus winning lawmakers’ hearts and minds” (p. 23). In this way, the ESEA allowed for an expanded federal role in education. Approximately every six years, adjustments have been made to the ESEA; most of them were minor and in keeping with the original intent of the legislation. The “ESEA of 1965 enshrined an equity rationale at the heart of federal education policy – the national government would provide states with supplemental funding and programs in the hope of equalizing educational opportunity for poor and minority students” (DeBray & McGuinn, 2009, p. 17). However, while the ESEA provided federal education funding to states, it did not include stipulations for accountability over use of the funds

(<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/beginning.html>).

1979: Creation of Department of Education

In 1979, Carter created a cabinet-level Department of Education, with strong support from education labor union, the National Education Association. McGuinn (2010) wrote that “Conservatives and states’ rights advocates opposed the new department on the ground that education was a state and local responsibility and that the federal role had been intrusive and

counterproductive” (p. 39). Despite the controversy surrounding the creation of the department and the difficulty with obtaining approval in congress, the establishment of the department has lasting effects on education today, as over time the department has grown. Cross asserts that, “Although the creation of the department did not immediately have any substantive impact on the federal role, it did set the stage for placing education more at the center of national concerns and policy and for what would be a substantial expansion of the federal role in later years” (p. 66).

1981: Education Consolidation and Improvement Act (ECIA)

The ECIA, part of a reauthorization of the ESEA, was enacted in July 1981 as part of an effort by the federal government to de-regulate education, become less involved in the states, and reduce federal fiscal involvement in education matters. McGuinn (2006) writes that, “Reagan hoped either to eliminate the federal role in schools or to redefine the nature of the federal education policy regime by making privatization, choice, and competition – rather than equity – its guiding principles” (p. 42). The act itself required that funds be provided to states for skills programs and to meet the needs of “educationally deprived children, on the basis of entitlements calculated under title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), in a manner which will eliminate burdensome and unproductive paperwork and free the schools of Federal supervision” (Education Consolidation and Improvement Act).

1983: *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* – National Commission on Excellence in Education

A Nation at Risk was submitted to the Secretary of Education in April 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The commission, created in 1981, comprised college and school board presidents, leaders of business, foundation presidents, teachers, professors, and school principals and superintendents. The commission focused on high schools in response to the directive that, in assessing the quality of education in the United States, it looks closely at teenage youth. The commission's report clearly was reacting to the Cold War environment of the time, citing specifically that "if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre education performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war" (*A Nation at Risk*, 1983, p. 1). Furthermore, the commission specifically cited the achievements of the Soviet Union in that, "We have even squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge" (p. 1)

The risk referred to in the title was oft-cited throughout the report as a threat to the country's national security and international competitiveness. Also, the commission indicated that the deficiencies in American education could be the result of "disturbing inadequacies in the way the educational process itself is often conducted" (p. 1). Therefore, their findings were distributed among four areas: "content, expectations, time, and teaching" (p. 1). While the report comprehensively outlined problems with the American system of education, it made few recommendations for *improving* American education to make the country stronger or more competitive.

1989: Charlottesville Summit

The 1989 Education Summit, held in September 1989 in Charlottesville, Virginia, was convened in order to develop national education goals – the need highlighted in *A Nation at Risk*. Part of the motivation was to devise ways to make the United States more competitive internationally. “Every cabinet member was required to attend, and 49 of the 50 state governors came (the only governor not to show up was Rudy Perpich, of Minnesota). No educators were invited, nor were any members of Congress other than those from Virginia” (Cross, 2010, p. 93). Then-governor of Arkansas Bill Clinton played a major role in the summit and emphasized the need for a set of national education goals. “One of the major agreements to emerge from the summit was an agreement to set national performance goals in education. This meant that the goals would focus on the outcomes of education rather than the inputs” (Cross, 2010, p. 94).

1990: National Education Goals Panel

The National Education Goals was an independent federal government agency comprised of seven governors, the president’s domestic policy assistant, the Secretary of Education, four members of Congress, and four state legislators (<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/negp/reports/goalsv1.pdf>). Its purpose was to monitor national and state progress toward the National Education Goals, which were defined as: “having all children ready to learn by the time they start school; greater levels of high school completion; improved student achievement and citizenship; stronger teacher education and professional development; enabling U.S. students to be the first in the world in mathematics and science achievement by the year 2000; literacy and lifelong learning; safe, disciplined, and alcohol and drug-free schools; and increased parental participation in the schools” (National Education Goals).

1991: America 2000

America 2000 was an initiative by the Bush administration, meant to expand on the National Education goals. It included educational standards and called for (optional) educational testing at the state level, and cited the establishment of “New American Schools.” The president’s remarks at the announcement of the plan included the following:

If we want America to remain a leader, a force for good in the world, we must lead the way in educational innovation. And if we want to combat crime and drug abuse, if we want to create hope and opportunity in the bleak corners of this country where there is now nothing but defeat and despair, we must dispel the darkness with the enlightenment that a sound and well-rounded education provides. Think about every problem, every challenge we face. The solution to each starts with education. For the sake of the future, of our children and of the nation's, we must transform America's schools. The days of the status quo are over. (<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED327985.pdf>)

The plan was submitted to Congress, but the bill was not enacted.

1994: Goals 2000

Under President Clinton, Goals 2000 was introduced in early January 1994. While somewhat similar to America 2000, Goals 2000 included more input from the states. Clinton’s plan “called for the creation of voluntary national standards and assessments based on the six national education goals outlined in America 2000. States were charged with

developing targets for the attainment of factual information and intellectual abilities that students should master at specified grade levels” (McGuinn, 2006, p. 86-87).

The eight National Education Goals were outlined in the text of the bill, H.R. 1804 (<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-103hr1804enr/pdf/BILLS-103hr1804enr.pdf>). There were 8 goals described in the text. The first was School Readiness. Specifically, that, “By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn” (p. 6). This goal referred to access to quality preschool programs and parental access to training, as well as attention to child nutrition and health.

The second goal focused on school completion – specifically, increasing the high school graduation rate to at least 90 percent. Details of this goal included reducing the dropout rate and narrowing the gap between graduation rates of minority and non-minority children (H.R. 1804, p. 7).

Student achievement and citizenship was the third goal. This goal stated that,

by the year 2000, all students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history and geography, and every school in America will ensure that all students and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our Nation’s modern economy. (p. 7)

This goal carried a heavy burden, addressing physical education, foreign language competency, cultural heritage, problem-solving, and community service.

The fourth goal focused on teachers, rather than students, and specifically addressed teachers' access to quality continuing education and professional development. Objectives for the goal included teachers' access to preservice teacher education, and that "all teachers will have continuing opportunities to acquire additional knowledge and skills needed to teach challenging subject matter and to use emerging new methods, forms of assessment and technologies" (p. 7). Furthermore, states and school districts were encouraged to develop strategies to recruit talented teachers and support their continued professional development, and create partnerships with higher education and local businesses to enhance and support public educators.

The fifth goal turned to curriculum – mathematics and science, with a bold proclamation: "By the year 2000, United States students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement" (p. 8). Without describing how, the goal was to increase math and science education, increase the number of specialized math and science teachers by 50 percent, and significantly increase the number of mathematics, science and engineering degree recipients – especially among women and minorities (p. 8).

The focus of the sixth goal ventured outside traditional K-12 education to adult learning – specifically, literacy. It called for connections between the education and the workforce, skills learned in college, and increasing the number of students – including nontraditional students who attend postsecondary education. Additionally, there was focus on schools' support of parent involvement and offering literacy programs to improve ties

between school and home. The outcome of these efforts was to by that, “By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship” (p. 8).

Ensuring school safety by the year 2000 was the focus of the seventh goal. “Every school in the United States will be free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning” (p. 8). One of the objectives even included a statement that “every school should work to eliminate sexual harassment” (p. 9).

The eighth and final goal outlined in the bill featured parental participation, and provided further detail on partnerships between schools and parents in order to support student achievement. Notably, this goal specifically called for action from states: “Every state will develop policies to assist local schools and local educational agencies to establish programs for increasing partnerships that respond to the varying needs of parents and the home, including parents of children who are disadvantaged or bilingual, or parents of children with disabilities” (p. 9).

The bill was signed into law on March 31, 1994, after much heated debate in Congress. Significantly, compromises were made affecting the initial spirit of the bill – “while the final bill received the support of almost all of the major business and education groups and successfully navigated the treacherous congressional education waters, many of its proposed reforms were either eliminated or significantly watered-down. Perhaps most important, the law greatly circumscribed the federal role in creating standards or assessments

or in holding states accountable for their education progress” (McGuinn, 2006, p. 90). The final law did not *require*, but merely encouraged, that states’ standards and assessments be in line with Goals 2000 programs.

1994: Reauthorization of the ESEA – Improving America’s Schools Act

The bill calling for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was named the Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA), and was signed into law on October 20, 1994. “The significance of the 1994 bill was hard to overstate. A major corner had been turned; the federal government was now firmly involved in the education program of what was happening in almost every district in the nation through Goals 2000 and the ESEA requirements for new standards and assessments” (Cross, 2010, p. 113). Education writers and policymakers widely agreed that IASA’s impact was significant. The IASA outlined “four key elements” for education improvement: high standards for all students, teachers better trained for teaching to high standards, flexibility to stimulate local reform, coupled with accountability for results, and close partnerships among families, communities and schools. (IASA, 1995).

To address the first element – high standards for all students—the IASA intended to provide states and districts with resources to ensure that students would be able to compete “in an increasingly complex and diverse society and an economic environment that will be dominated by high-skilled jobs.” (IASA, 1995, p. 1) Specifically, the act addresses incorporating ESEA programs into states’ “overall school improvement efforts,” and references challenging state standards. As such, IASA was presented as a way for the federal

government to guide states toward raising educational standards and implementing more challenging curricula.

The second element – professional experiences that better prepare teachers to teach to high standards focused on professional development programs – was connected to the Eisenhower Professional Development program (Title II). Also included in this element were professional development programs for teachers of limited English proficient students (Title VII) (IASA, p. 2).

The third element covered flexibility to stimulate local initiative, coupled with responsibility for results. By including this as part of the IASA, the federal government gave flexibility to states in terms of how the funding was distributed and focused (e.g., while still requiring specific results and outcomes. It also encouraged states to combine funding with Title I funding for high-poverty schools to work toward positive results for all students (IASA, p. 3).

Finally, the fourth element outlined in the IASA was promoting partnerships among families, communities and schools. The rationale for this was based on the notion that family involvement in schools is linked to educational achievement. Again, flexibility was provided for states to apply funding toward parental involvement programs, school safety measures, and health and social services (IASA, p. 3).

2002: No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

While largely disputed by educators and others in the education community, NCLB was unique in that it was passed with bipartisan support. “Despite continuing disputes between the GOP and the Democrats about how to hold schools accountable, as well as the

switch of the Senate to Democratic control midyear in 2001, leaders found a way to bridge the previous ideological gulf between the two parties in order to pass NCLB” (DeBray, 2006, p. 4). The main tenets of Bush’s initial proposal included yearly testing, availability of vouchers, the possibility of school choice for parents of children in failing schools, a focus on reading, an emphasis on teacher quality, and a linking of federal financial support to states based on performance (McGuinn, 2006, p. 168).

The final law included measures of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as a measure of academic improvement, measured by annual testing, inclusion of corrective action for schools that fail to improve, school report cards, measures of teacher quality (including “highly qualified” – measuring licensure, certification, and competence in subjects taught), a focus on reading, funding flexibility, and support for states to implement charter schooling (McGuinn, 2006, p. 181). As Manna writes in Cross (2010), “Even assuming that federal officials possess the political will to enforce the law, it remains debatable whether strict enforcement will produce the desired effects ... because federal officials rely heavily on lower levels of government to make federal initiatives work” (Manna in Cross, 2010, p. 143).

2009: Race to the Top

President Obama’s administration has received accolades from some for his willingness to encourage innovation and, perhaps, in some cases, jump start new education policies in states. “Regardless of whether Obama’s reforms live up to their hype, his challenging of common assumptions about reformers and what they strove to accomplish will have long-term positive results” (McShane, 2012, p. 1). On the other hand, his critics have questioned the feasibility of the program and the spending of additional federal funds in education at the *state* level, believing that, if federal funds are to be invested in education,

they should be to the benefit of all states, not just those who choose to participate in this particular program. In fact, Nicholson-Crotty and Staley (2012) found that “states that needed the money most, either because they were not producing high performing kids or because they struggled to fund education, were not consistently more likely to seek and secure federal funding” (p.181).

The basic premise of the RTTT program is shifting the onus on innovation to states; however, this responsibility was shifted whether or not states, in the era of NCLB, were prepared to take on that responsibility. McGuinn (2010) asserted that “RTT is fundamentally about two things: creating political cover for state education reformers to innovate and helping states construct the administrative capacity to implement these innovations effectively” (p. 1) And, like others, he further questions the long-term impact of the program:

while the program’s approach may be different from that of earlier federal education programs, many of the political and institutional obstacles to sustaining meaningful reform at the federal and state levels remain largely the same. RTT will struggle to surmount these obstacles in the short term, even as it hopes to transform them over the longer term (p. 15-16).

Further criticism of the program has come from the fact that some of the categories of reforms did not become implemented as expected. As Weiss (2014) notes, three years after the program started, states were “largely behind schedule in meeting goals for improving instruction and school and educational outcomes.” She argues that these delays are “due to unrealistic promises and unexpected challenges” (p. 62). Teacher improvement is an area that is especially lacking – for example, Weiss reports that states had trouble particularly in

measuring teaching outcomes for nontested subjects, and that the “push to do too much too quickly with too few resources has led teachers, principals, and superintendents to express frustration and stress. Most critical, many of the major problems limiting student and school success remain unaddressed” (p. 65).

Others (Manna, 2010) have also highlighted the concerns around of making states compete for funding. Several argue that RTTT’s success, depends completely on subnational support and ability to carry out reforms, and that some states may not be able to do so in the long term.

RTT’s overseers believed that winners would serve as models for improving future state and federal policy. Looking ahead, it will take several months or even years to determine whether RTT sparks such policy learning...In theory the winners receive money because they are best positioned to realize the ambitions of RTT. If that is true, then simply gathering up the winners’ ideas and sharing them will not necessarily tell the losers how to get into the starting blocks from which the winners began. (p. 116-117).

Manna and Ryan (2011) argue that the states with the most capacity were the ones that received funding: “...state capacity is a powerful variable helping to predict which states applied for RTTT funds and which states scored well in the competition” (p. 542). And, the results on capacity also should serve as a caution to federal officials who sometimes craft federal policies based on inaccurate assumptions about state capabilities” (p.542). The capacity issue has impact on widespread adoption of effective reforms because states who

were not successful in competing for funding may not have the capacity – at any time – to adopt reforms. “If capacity is a key variable that helps predict success in RTTT and other similar competitions, then states losing those contests may not be well-positioned to adopt the winners’ reforms in their own contexts” (p. 543).

Boser (2012) conducted a thorough review of states’ progress toward their RTTT goals. His findings revealed that states need to build capacity for reform, especially at the local level. Additionally, he found that since several states had trouble meeting their benchmarks, that they should better communicate challenges they encountered. Like others, he found that success requires collaboration with all stakeholders in the state. Finally, he encourages additional competitive programs and monitoring of state progress toward education reform.

To measure whether RTTT has been a success, McGuinn (2012) points out that “...two factors are essential to determining the ultimate impact of RTTT: the vigor and effectiveness of state and district implementation efforts, and the oversight and accountability provided by the federal Department of Education” (p. 148). McGuinn outlines several challenges to the initiatives inspired by RTTT: “For RTTT to succeed, the federal program must lead to state policy changes, state policy changes must result in changes in district practice, changes in district practice must change the behavior of principals and teachers at the school level, and changes at the school level must deliver improved student performance” (p. 147-148). Some have raised concerns about the ability of state governments and their district and local counterparts to continue the momentum inspired by RTTT. McGuinn mentions another challenge that could affect North Carolina: leadership turnover – “...unlike

state legislators, governors do not tend to be in office very long, and reform efforts may stall in the transition to new executives with new agendas” (p. 149).

While time will determine the overall success and lasting effects of RTTT, Howell contends that the program was a success because even states that did not win money enacted education reforms. He cites states’ changes in charter school laws and teacher evaluation policies, and asserts that

The surge of post-2009 policy activity and constitutes a major accomplishment for the Obama administration. With a relatively small amount of money, little formal constitutional authority in education, and without the power to unilaterally impose his will upon state governments, President Obama managed to jump-start policy processes that had languished for years in state governments around the country (p. 66).

2015: Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

On December 10, 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law. The act was part of a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). ESSA replaces No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The act features a requirement of high academic standards, statewide assessments measuring progress toward standards, supporting locally-developed ideas and interventions, increasing access to high-quality preschool, and focus on low-performing schools (<http://www.ed.gov/essa>). Like RTTT and the Investing in Innovation (i3) program, the act includes incentives for states to improve student outcomes. The act will be fully implemented in the 2017-2018 school year, with plans being developed by states during the 2016-2017 school year. The act also provides

for more state flexibility in designing state assessments to measure student progress. (Posey, 2016). Additionally, the ESSA provides for new student support and academic enrichment grants (SSAE), and increased Title I funding for school improvement. More control will be allotted to states under ESSA; they will set their own goals, and choose their own indicators of school quality/student success (Foundation for Excellence in Education).

The Relationship between Federal and State Involvement in Education Reform

The previous sections highlight the federal government's role in initiating, enforcing, and, primarily, providing funding in education policy for the states. But the states themselves have also served as reformers in developing education policy – over time, with more control over policy than the federal government. Cooper and Fusarelli (2009) summarize the importance of state education leaders, because their actions are directly felt by students in classrooms. “The state level of government, constitutionally bound to establish education for all children in their jurisdiction, determines the funding, operation, and structure of school districts, and the curriculum, staffing and programs in schools. The policies of the state determine the nature of the educational experiences for the state's students” (p. 1).

While federal policies must be carried out, states are responsible for creating innovations that are often picked up by other states. Lacy and Tandberg (2014) wrote about policy diffusion in states over time by studying postsecondary finance policy in 47 states over 29 years. They found that states' policies can influence neighboring states' policies as well. “Geographical policy diffusion argues that the policies ultimately enacted in states tend to mimic the policies of their neighbors and, as one state adopts a policy, it increases the likelihood that officials in proximate states will follow suit” (p. 628). There has also been acknowledgment of states influencing and supporting one another in K-12 education,

namely, via RTTT. McGuinn, Berger, and Stevenson write in Hess and Kelly (2011), “In an unusual instance of collaboration not compelled by the law, a new initiative has formed among several states to work together on a shared data and application infrastructure to support many innovations” (p. 147).

In this way, states can influence policies in other states, and perhaps, eventually, at the federal level, even if the motivation is the acquisition of federal dollars. Chester Finn also acknowledges RTTT’s ability to spark innovation from states and asserts that the policy is an “agenda-setter” – by his definition, a phenomenon that occurs when “something big, important, and at least initially constructive originates with Uncle Sam, something that alters the country’s education priorities in a healthy direction. This happens perhaps once a decade, seldom more than twice” (p. 227). Finn describes RTTT as the “brainchild of education secretary Arne Duncan, based on the bold hypothesis that sizable grants of federal dollars, disbursed via a competitive process, can indeed cause states to jump through reform-policy hoops that they likely would not otherwise have attempted, the more so when an economic downturn left them exceptionally hungry for the additional dollars from Washington” (p. 228).

Additionally, while states historically carry out federal policies, with some exceptions, most educational movements are funded largely by the states. In Hess and Kelly’s historical (2011) review of federal education influence, Vinovskis cites that while federal involvement in K-12 education has increased in the last 50 years, “states and local communities still pay for more than 90 percent of that education” (p. 15). Manna (2013) examined whether education outcomes benefit from centralized governance in states. He found a strong relationship between outcomes and the degree of political centralization in

states, but not with financial centralization. "...Chief state school officials...run state education agencies, the primary state-level bureaucracies responsible for implementing education policy. Their work involves administering dozens of state and federal education programs and allocating federal and state resources to fund local school district activities... [They] are policymakers because they help craft and enforce regulations that assist their agencies and localities in executing their duties" (p. 686).

Hirschland and Steinmo (2003) argue that the federal government, over time, has had relatively little control over education policymaking for the states, despite widely-held assumptions that the federal government does wield more control over local and state interests. In fact,

...contributing to, as it now does, only 10% of the educational funding in this country leaves the federal government holding far too little in the way of resources to affect fundamental change. This fact makes it difficult, if not impossible to overcome the inherent inequalities of contemporary education rooted in the political development that has empowered local over egalitarian interests... Whether it be securing a system of educational vouchers or mandating more equal or targeted spending for all children regardless of where they live, change that emanates from the center will prove to be difficult if not impossible. (p. 360)

The authors maintain that not only has the federal government played a small role in creating change for education, but that it has actually failed in carrying out what it has promised. Instead, local entities often play the role of reformers, not states. “The American central state seeks a stepped-up role in directing the provision of education. Today, it is again local interests that face off with a federal government...However, the awkward and institutionally challenged federal machinery is still not up to the task” (p. 360).

Conceptual Framework: Paul Manna’s “Borrowing Strength”

This chapter has provided a history of federal involvement in state education policy. While we know that the federal government has, historically, wielded influence over state policy, it is important to understand the ways in which this influence “touches” the states. Does the promise or provision of funding ensure reform at the state-level? Or are federal education reform initiatives simply political pawns by which to gain support for individuals, with little regard for whether or not states *actually* implement them? This study seeks to examine how RTTT is different in how it was conceived, supported, and implemented. The “borrowing strength” concept provides a vehicle for investigating the policy process that led to federal involvement carried through by state governments.

The framework on which the examination of the policy process leading to RTTT’s implementation is Paul Manna’s theory of “borrowing strength.” In his 2006 work, *School’s In*, Manna outlines the concept as he applies it to the relationship between the federal government and the states when it comes to the education agenda. “Borrowing strength” is a process to describe federal-state interactions, and “occurs when policy entrepreneurs at one level of government attempt to push their agendas by leveraging the justifications and capabilities that other governments elsewhere in the federal system possess” (p. 5). RTTT fits

within this definition, largely because of the inclusion of what Manna identifies as the second key factor in the concept: capacity. “Capacity refers to the ability to act once policymakers have decided they want to act. Capacity exists in the form of financial resources, the coherence and presence of bureaucratic structures such as regulatory agencies of government, and the knowledge, experience, and expertise of government personnel” (pp. 14-15). Because of the financial component of RTTT and the hierarchy that the federal-state relationship suggests, capacity is a key component of applying the “borrowing strength” framework to RTTT. Specifically,

In a federal system, creative policymakers can borrow capacity from other levels of government to help achieve their objectives. Lacking the capacity to reform the nation’s schools on their own, members of Congress may pass laws building on state efforts. In the process, they rely on, or borrow state capacity to make these initiatives work and to push their own agenda priorities. (p. 15)

It is in this way that RTTT is implemented. States request and apply for federal funding for innovative ideas, and following federal guidelines and oversight, suggest policies in order to receive additional funding. The federal government provides the funding, while the states are responsible for innovations.

Several studies have cited Manna’s work to explain educational policy phenomena. In explaining how President Obama was able to deflect criticism of expanding the federal role in K-12 education through the RTTT and I3 programs, Weatherford and McDonnell (2011)

assert that Obama was able to gain support for his vast federal involvement because it was rooted in the power of the state-level reforms already underway.

The ...reason ...the administration was able to deflect criticism can be traced to the pedigree of Obama's education reforms: both his immediate predecessors in the White House had backed policies aimed at narrowing gaps in student achievement across race and class grouping, clarifying accountability, improving teacher preparation, and strengthening academic standards; and Obamas' emphasis on standards and assessment built on the trend of state-level reforms over several decades. (Manna, 2006, p. 10)

Additionally, Weatherford and McDonnell (2011) argue that, since the RTTT program was embedded in a larger series of attempts to stimulate the troubled economy, it was easier to gain support for it.

The stimulus gave the Obama administration time to fashion an agenda that began to fold new approaches into the status quo; to frame that agenda before opposition mounted through traditional policy processes; and resources sufficient for persuading cash-strapped states to accept its reform strategies as a condition for receiving additional funds...By attaching conditions focused on the educational core of teaching and learning for receipt of some stimulus funds, the Obama administration has sought to move states and districts from merely coping to reforming, but the emergence of new

organizational routines or even new institutions is still in the future. (pp. 10-11)

The concept of “borrowing strength” was partially evident in states’ actions prior to applying for the funding. “The most visible response to the administration’s push for specific reform strategies as a condition for competitive stimulus funding has been unprecedented changes in state laws. With no assurance that they would receive any Race to the Top funding, 17 states changed their laws...” (p. 12). In this way, the Obama administration was able to impact policy changes at the state-level before distributing any funds.

Saultz (2014) applies the concept of “borrowing strength,” but asserts that, rather than the federal government “borrowing strength” from the states to encourage the federal education agenda, states borrow strength from the federal government via funding to advocate for their own education innovations. Also, Saultz found that while some states initiated change in order to receive the funding (prior to applying), it was not clear how permanent those changes would be. However, Saultz states that “Federal officials should also be encouraged by the amount of policy change that RT3 created in a short timeline” (p. 111).

Wong (2008) also builds on Manna’s theory by noting the methods by which the federal government can wield their influence over states via funding.

From an implementation perspective, federal support for categorical funding has defined the intergovernmental policy system in several ways. First, in providing supplemental federal grants to state and local education agencies, the federal

government sets programmatic objectives. Categorical or single-purpose grants stipulate the targeted use of supplementary services aimed at eligible, at-risk students. The personnel and other operational details, however, are handled by state and local agencies. (p. S184)

Wong further asserts that the role of the federal government in determining performance standards and accountability is increased through the provision of funding, perhaps moving on territory once dominated by states. He stated, “Given growing public concerns about school performance, the new politics of accountability has elevated the federal role in a policy domain in which states have always played a dominant role” (p. S185).

Rhodes (2012), in discussing federal legislation regarding equitable treatment for students in the 1970s and 1980s, cites Manna’s assertion that “policymakers ...relied on state and local judgments about how to meet the particular needs of disadvantaged students” (p. 33). Furthermore, while federal funds were meant to be spent on particular students, there was no measure of accountability for states to raise students’ achievement. “Federal regulations sought to ensure that federal education funds reached the students for whom the programs were intended, but they did not hold state and local governments accountable for actually raising the achievement of eligible students” (Rhodes, p. 33). Instead, state and local entities were responsible for finding ways to meet the needs of the (disadvantaged) students for whom the funding was intended. Regarding historical analysis of the increase in state-generated education statutes in the mid-1980s, Rhodes refers to Manna – “These findings have led scholars such as Paul Manna to suggest that pervasive commitment to excellence in education at the state level paved the way for subsequent federal involvement by providing

federal officials with political legitimacy and administrative capacity on which they could draw” (p. 72).

The concept of “borrowing strength” has been applied to federal education policy in different ways. Saultz (2014) asserts that the *states* borrowed strength from the federal government via competition for and winning of federal funds. In doing so, they increased their capacity. However, this “strength” may be difficult to maintain in the long term. Meredith (2013) investigated policy diffusion as a result of competitive programs, and asserts that the success of RTTT could be the future justification of additional competitive programs. LaRock (2014) examines RTTT under the basis of the policy streams model in Massachusetts and acknowledging states’ capacity. He found that RTTT simply helped Massachusetts pursue education policies they had already intended on implementing. Dalton (2015) argued that “borrowing strength” allowed the federal government to implement NCLB – by assuming all actors have capacity, the federal government can wield power over states. In effect, then, Dalton also argues that states borrow strength from the federal government.

In examining North Carolina’s actions in the processes of applying for, implementing, and carrying out Race to the Top initiatives, this study explored whether, in North Carolina, the state was “borrowing strength” from the federal government, or, as in the case of policy diffusion and further innovation, North Carolina implemented policies in the state that expanded to other states, such that the federal government “borrowed strength” from North Carolina?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Heck (2004) writes that, “In formal arenas...ideas may be sponsored, negotiated, supported, and eventually, the results of the political process may produce outcomes such as initial policy adoption, policy change, or policy termination...Researchers may gain understandings of regularities of policy activity by applying theory that explains the dynamics of policy interactions...within various policy arenas that lead to policy decisions” (p. 55). This study examined the policy process in which the federal government has implemented a policy to potentially influence policy change at the state level. Specifically, this study examined the political environment in which the Race to the Top (RTTT) program was introduced, as well as the factors that caused the encouragement of particular education reforms to be placed on the educational policy agenda. Additionally, this study looked at whether the program impacted North Carolina’s education agenda. To do this, the study will address the following research questions: how has the RTTT program encouraged certain education reforms at the state level? Additionally, since the RTTT program has come to a close, do state education officials in North Carolina believe the reforms adopted under the state RTTT program will stay relevant and actionable, or will they be repealed?

While the RTTT program expanded over time, this study focused strictly on the initial launch of the program, in which states were encouraged to submit proposals for funding K-12 education only. The researcher does not examine details of implementation of RTTT funds at the LEA or state level, nor does the study focus on current or future components of RTTT and its companion initiatives. In order to sufficiently examine the process by which

RTTT became a major piece of education legislation and its effects on North Carolina, a case study approach will be employed and document analysis and interviews provide the data to be analyzed for this policy study.

Case Study Research

The work involved a descriptive case study design, defined in Yin's quintessential (2014) manual to case study design and research as "a case study whose purpose is to describe a phenomenon (the "case") in its real-world context" (p. 238). This particular study could also be defined as an explanatory case study, defined as "a case study whose purpose is to explain how or why some condition came to be" (p. 238). Yin recommends for a case study plan that the researcher identify a "unit of analysis" on which to focus the study.

While typical case studies involve the examination of one person or group of people, this particular policy study will involve interviews with a group of stakeholders and decision-makers at the state level, and the unit of analysis will be the examination of the *process* by which the RTTT program was initiated and carried out, and how the "borrowing strength" principle can be applied to that process. Case study is appropriate for this type of study, because this type of study is often applied to examination of policies and agendas, as in Kingdon's 1995 work on how policies are adopted.

Sample

This study will employ snowball sampling, a purposeful type of sampling which "identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information rich" (Creswell, 1998, p. 119). The aim of this study was to investigate the factors that influence the placement of certain reforms on the political agenda. This program was selected because it is an issue being discussed among policy entrepreneurs as well as the

general public, and in the midst of recovery from a recession, there is increased scrutiny of government spending. Consequently, the RTTT program provides a unique opportunity to deeply examine the policy agenda-setting process as it played out. Furthermore, was extensive debate and media coverage surrounding the program, the nature and benefits and challenges of the competition it encouraged, and the reforms it supported.

Participants were selected based on their involvement with the policy process of the implementation of the program as well as their knowledge of the program. “Criteria for selecting cases can include the extent to which the case is likely to yield information that adds another dimension to multiple perspectives” (Heck, 2004, p. 221). Categories of interviewees include policy writers, state policy stakeholders (state boards of education), and other education policy stakeholders at the state level. Table 3.1 lists the categories of interviews and documents examined for this study.

Table 3.1 Summary of Data Collection Activities – Respondent Categories

Interviews	Documents
Government leaders/elites	Applications
Foundation members	Summative evaluations
Proposal authors	Evaluations

Data Collection

Interviews and document analysis were the primary data collection methods for this case study. Six interviews with key education policy stakeholders were conducted over the course of data collection. The interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes each, and were conducted using a prepared interview guide. With the exception of follow-up questions, the guide was followed for all interviews. The questionnaire was structured to obtain

background information about the subject, and were left relatively open-ended, to encourage interviewees to do much of the talking. In accordance with the study's research questions, the questions were designed to obtain answers to the impact and long-term effects of RTTT in North Carolina. An example of interview questions can be found in Appendix A. Most participants were contacted via e-mail when invited to participate; one participant was invited to participate via telephone. The email invitation can be found in Appendix B. Once a day, time, and location was agreed upon, the researcher visited the participants and conducted the interviews. Two interviews were conducted via phone. The researcher took detailed notes during and after each interview. All participants provided their permission to be recorded, and noted when and if any comments were to be considered "off the record." All interviews were recorded using a recording and editing application that had been purchased and downloaded on the researcher's password-protected smartphone. The recordings were then downloaded onto a two-factor password protected computer, where they were transcribed verbatim by the researcher into a password-protected Microsoft Word document. Once transcribed, recordings were deleted from the application and the computer.

Documents were selected based on their relevance to the policy process; materials, including states' application materials, and scoring outcomes, are available through the government. Conducting a qualitative document analysis of the RTTT discussions and other coverage of this recent federal government initiative is one way to seek answers to the research questions. When studying policy and policy change, it is necessary to review and examine the documents that record and establish these changes as well as the policy actors who initiated the reforms. According to Weimer and Vining (1999), "document research includes reviewing relevant literature dealing with both theory and evidence, and locating

existing sources of raw (primary) data” (p. 297). Documents were available online through www.ed.gov and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction website (www.ncpublicschools.org/rttt/).

Combining document analysis with interview transcripts allowed for a deeper investigation of the issues studied. As Yin (2014) notes, “interviews are commonly found in case study research. They will resemble guided conversations rather than structured queries” (p. 110). For this study, the researcher focused on “shorter” case study interviews, defined by Yin as “more focused and...take about 1 hour or so” (p. 111).

Benefits and Limitations of Interviews

Opdenakker (2006) cites four interviewing techniques and how they can be of use to qualitative researchers. Differentiating between synchronous (face-to-face, Internet, telephone) and asynchronous (methods), he noted the benefits of each. Face-to-face interviews are beneficial in that the researcher can pick up social cues, though the interviewer must focus not only on the subject’s *responses*, but also on their demeanor. Given the geographical diversity of the potential interview subjects, telephone or internet (Skype) interviews may be beneficial in terms of cost. However, the richness of a person’s response may be lacking due to potential technological issues that inhibit the interviewer’s ability to acknowledge body language and physical reactions to questions. Opdenakker notes that asynchronous interviews can be beneficial if a subject wishes to remain anonymous, and that time isn’t an issue; subjects can take as much time as they wish to formulate a well-thought-out response, but spontaneity is lost. For this particular study, the researcher conducted in-

person interviews whenever possible, but acknowledges that a small number of interviews were conducted over the phone.

Interviewing Elites

A component of this work involved requesting interviews from policy “elites,” such as lawmakers and other education policy makers. Given the exclusivity of this type of interviewing, the researcher took care to provide plenty of advance notice for the interview request, follow up with telephone calls whenever possible, and be mindful of the participant’s time, taking care to keep interactions to approximately 30 minutes. Interviews were conducted in person, in order to obtain more detailed responses and increase trust (Clifford, 2014). An additional challenge of interviewing policy elites is that, because of the amount of time elapsed between the implementation of RTTT in North Carolina and the passage of the ESSA and conclusion of RTTT, participants’ ability to recall details about the program and processes may be difficult to ascertain. In addition, because the participants were deeply invested in the state’s RTTT effort, it is possible that, in order to defend their efforts protect their reputations, they may conceal challenges, negative viewpoints, or overstate successes. Additionally, as policy elites, they are a member of a small group of stakeholders who know the details of this process; as such, their identities could be difficult to conceal, and therefore, in an effort to appear anonymous, participants may have provided inaccurate or untruthful statements. Supporting their responses with evidence from documents will help to minimize this risk.

Data Analysis

Case study is the method of choice for this qualitative research study. It is appropriate because the issue is current and requires a depth of information that can only be revealed

through a detailed analysis of relevant documentation and evidence. As noted in Yin, the sources of evidence most commonly used in case study research are “documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, and physical artifacts” (p. 105). This particular case study will employ document analysis as well as interviews. The documents (transcripts of speeches, news coverage, and blogs of key stakeholders and education writers) as well as interview transcripts were coded for emerging patterns. Coding occurred by closely reviewing transcripts and documents to find connected or similar phrases, sentences, paragraphs or concepts among responses from participants, as well as relationships among documents and interview outcomes. This method is appropriate because the analysis involved both interview transcripts and documents, though interviews hold the most weight in terms of analytic value. Once all transcripts and documents were coded, coding results will be again reviewed to identify emerging patterns and themes in order to determine common outcomes on the phenomenon under investigation. Codes and themes initially emerged through transcription process. As stated in Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “transcribing your own interviews is another means of generating insights and hunches about what is going on in your data. This information ... is actually rudimentary analysis” (p. 200). Open coding was also done by hand, without the use of qualitative analysis software. Evaluating the transcripts and documents revealed common themes and particular passages were excerpted as evidence of these themes via open coding. As is common with case study research, in the process of analysis for the case study, “the level of interpretation may also extend to the presentation of categories, themes, models, or theory” (Merriam & Tisdell, p. 233). A number of themes emerged through the coding process; they are: Money as a Motivator during Economic Downturn, Alignment with Education Reforms

Underway, Concessions, Relationships and the Spirit of Collaboration, Professional Development, and Lessons Learned/Legacy.

Research Validity and Reliability

Qualitative researchers approach the issue of validity in several different ways. While Wolcott (1990) sums up his approach to validity in nine points (including “talk little, listen a lot”), Creswell (1998) recommends that researchers “use the term *verification* instead of validity because verification underscores qualitative research as a distinct approach” (p. 201). For the purpose of this study, validity was approached in a manner such that the information obtained from the participants and my interpretation and analysis of that information is as accurate as possible, while taking into account the challenges and limitations of interviewing policy elites.

The chief methods of data collection for this study are interviews and document analysis. Issues of validity are relevant in any type of research, and qualitative researchers have special concerns regarding validity, reliability, and generalizability. Possible threats to validity are discussed, and efforts to control for those threats are addressed as well. Rothbauer (2008) notes that “qualitative researchers may increase the credibility of their research findings by drawing from evidence taken from a variety of data sources” (p.894). This concept is referred to as triangulation of data sources; since document analysis and interviews will yield different types of evidence, the researcher will conduct both types of data collection.

It is necessary for a qualitative researcher to insure that the findings presented represent the participants’ ideas as accurately as possible. When this does not happen, threats to validity can occur. Strategies such as member checking and triangulation of data help to

enhance validity (Creswell, 1998). The researcher discussed respondents' points of view during interviews to clarify responses. Furthermore, respondents' feedback was compared to supporting document analysis to confirm that they said what she heard them say in an effort to ensure "trustworthiness," which, as stated in Given (2008), "can be thought of as the ways in which qualitative researchers ensure that transferability, credibility, dependability and confirmability are evident in their research" (p. 896)

Great care was taken in choosing participants and documents. This is important for several reasons. First, time and monetary restrictions are of concern, so participants and documents must be chosen carefully so as to make the most of the research that is conducted. Because politically charged issues may be discussed, it is also pertinent to select participants who express as many viewpoints as possible. While anonymity cannot be guaranteed, participants who wish to not have their name included as part of the study were granted that option. All participants chose not to be identified by name.

Another strategy the researcher used to help ensure an accurate portrayal of the issues and people interviewed is to take very detailed notes and review interview transcripts and observation field notes thoroughly, asking follow up questions and clarification questions whenever appropriate.

Ethical Issues

All interview protocols and plans for analysis were submitted for review by the North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), and all data collection and analysis procedures were outlined and submitted for review. The researcher addressed confidentiality concerns by keeping all interview transcripts and analyses in password-protected files or locked cabinets. All participants were provided with informed consent that

outlined the voluntary nature of their participation in interviews, and the identity of participants was protected by describing their responses using pseudonyms or removing their names.

Limitations of the Study

A primary limitation of this study is that review of the states' implementation of RTTT is ongoing; full results and outcomes of the program will not be fully known by the time the work is complete. However, this risk is somewhat mitigated by the focus on the initial process of developing the policy and less on the implementation and outcomes of it.

Additionally, political factors, like elections, could limit the availability of particular individuals and stakeholders to be contacted and interviewed for the study. If a participant was sought out but not available, or unwilling to participate, a substitute participant with similar experience was sought in order to reduce bias and obtain full coverage of potential interviewees.

Yin (2014) cautions researchers against "leading questions" – and recommends that researchers should strive to appear "genuinely naïve about the topic and allow the interviewee to provide fresh commentary about it" (p. 111). In doing so, the researcher is more likely to obtain sincere, unaffected responses from the participants. In addition, the researcher sought out participants with varying backgrounds and levels of "stake holding" in the issue, so that multiple perspectives of the issue can be attained.

Finally, another issue that can affect the usefulness and objectivity of personal interviews is "reflexivity," defined by Yin as "a methodological threat created by the conversational nature of the interview. The conversation can lead to a mutual and subtle influence" (p. 112) between the researcher and the interviewee. The researcher made

significant efforts to mitigate the effects of reflexivity in the process of interviewing participants by closely following interview protocols and remaining as neutral as possible throughout the interview process.

Subjectivity Statement

While the researcher is not a significant stakeholder in the RTTT program in North Carolina, I am employed at a research institute and have a child who attends public schools in North Carolina. Furthermore, I have been involved in studying policy for approximately 10 years as a graduate student. However, in my work life, I focus mainly on issues in postsecondary education, not state education policy.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the research methodology for this study, which involves a qualitative case study. Two sources of data collection will be employed: document analysis and interviews. The planned analysis of collected data was introduced, and research concerns were addressed as well.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter includes a review of the North Carolina Race to the Top (RTTT) proposal and plan for RTTT funds. Next will follow a review of the study's research questions, a description of the analysis and findings, and a conclusion of those findings.

Race to the Top in North Carolina

North Carolina first applied for RTTT funding in the first round of competition. However, their application was not accepted. After reviewing the scores from the first round, the state of North Carolina submitted an application for the second round of the Race to the Top (RTTT) competition in May 2010. Following the application, the state provided an addendum in June 2010, verifying that the North Carolina State Board of Education had voted unanimously to adopt Common Core education standards. As noted in the following findings, adopting Common Core was a key component of the state's RTTT effort. In addition to adding a commitment to Common Core standards, the second application included more detailed plans to align with the initiatives outlined in the request for proposals (RFP). The second North Carolina application, outlined key areas of focus should the state win the money. Included in the proposal were plans for increasing student achievement through the adoption of more rigorous standards, improving teacher and principal professional development (augmented to link professional development to the use of online resources), expanding technological innovation in education systems that support districts and manage data in the state, turning around low-performing schools. Added to the Phase 2 proposal was the expansion of Teach For America and the establishment of a state teacher

recruitment program, the North Carolina Teacher Corps. . The application cited North Carolina’s history of educational innovation and the state’s commitment to improvement, specifically,

...the NC RttT plan capitalizes on NC policymakers’ and educators’ history of pioneering school innovation, and establishes sustainable statewide capacity that will enable NC to respond to future challenges. NC has demonstrated an ability to implement fundamental, statewide education reform in each of the past four decades, as NC leaders continually have propelled the State’s public schools to higher levels of accomplishment (p. 14, State RTTT application).

The state application mentioned buy-in from all 115 local education agencies (LEAs) in the state, which indicated that all schools and students would benefit from the proposed improvements to be implemented using the RTTT funding.

A large component of North Carolina’s plan was the inclusion of a continuous evaluation plan, which resulted in several progress and evaluation reports produced by the Consortium for Educational Research and Evaluation – North Carolina. As noted in the overall summary, completed in 2015, “The ultimate goal of North Carolina’s Race to the Top (RttT) plan was to build statewide capacity that could support sustained, long-term improvements in public education; namely, increases in student achievement, reductions in achievement gaps, and increases in graduation rates” (p. 3, Final Report).

Conditions in the state during the economic downturn created an environment in which additional funding was necessary. Significant budget cuts greatly impacted education

in the state, including a “flexible furlough” plan that equated to a 0.5% teacher salary reduction for teachers and other state employees. The economic recession occurring across the country made the timing appropriate for the Obama administration’s fiscal stimulus for states, which in turn allowed the federal government to influence state agendas via funding. “The Obama administration utilized the stimulus policy to advance Obama’s educational agenda. However, the long-term sustainability of these reforms in their current form is unlikely without support from the states...” (Young & Fusarelli, 2011, p 212). While the applications and efforts by the state emphasized a look toward innovation, there can be no denying that much-needed funding was behind the motivation to apply for the RTTT grant.

Review of Research Questions

This study was intended to examine the policy process that took place in the application for, management, and post-funding legacy of North Carolina’s RTTT funds. To review, the first question involved the relationship between the federal government and North Carolina education policies, and how the RTTT funds may have affected policy decision-making and agenda setting at the state level. Specifically, how has the RTTT program encouraged certain education reforms at the state level? An examination of relevant documents and results of stakeholder interviews will provide findings for this question.

The second research question involved RTTT’s legacy in North Carolina; how did the funding impact state education policy in ways that could be long-term or impactful? Additionally, since the RTTT program has come to a close, do state education officials in North Carolina believe the reforms adopted under the state RTTT program will stay relevant and actionable, or will they be repealed? The discussion of these research questions will

begin with the effect of RTTT in encouraging education reforms at the state level, and conclude with a discussion of the longer-term legacy of RTTT in North Carolina.

As data were analyzed, particular themes emerged. Table 4.1 shows how these themes correspond with each of the research questions examined through this case study. The first research question, regarding how the RTTT has encouraged certain education reforms at the state level, examines *how* stakeholders went about implementing policy reforms in light of the RTTT evaluation standards. The second question examines whether and why the reforms may be more likely to be implemented and sustained in the future.

Table 4.1 *Research Questions and Corresponding Themes*

Research Question	Corresponding Themes
How has the RTTT program encouraged certain education reforms at the state level?	Money as Motivator during Economic Downturn Alignment with Education Reforms Underway Concessions
Do state education officials in North Carolina believe the reforms adopted under the state RTTT program will stay relevant and actionable, or will they be repealed?	Relationships and the Spirit of Collaboration Professional Development Lessons Learned/Legacy

RQ 1: How has the RTTT program encouraged certain education reforms at the state level?

Money As Motivator during Economic Downturn

Several interviewees referred to seeking the ARRA grant funding for state initiatives as, colloquially, a “no-brainer.” The country’s 2008 economic downturn and subsequent recession impacted North Carolina as well, and because the state has a centralized education

budget, education reform initiatives were greatly, negatively, impacted. The possibility of federal funds, though a relatively small amount compared to the state's full budget, would help create seed money to kick start initiatives aimed at improving education. A leading author of the proposal and participant in the evaluation process noted that,

It's hard to say without knowing what went on in other states in a lot of detail, but I think that we had a lot more engagement from across the spectrum than other states. That's not because we did it better, that's because that's how our state is structured... we are a centralized state... when a rule is established for one district, it applies to all districts. When there is an advocacy group for one issue, that advocacy group speaks for the state, typically. So the state is institutionally set up to get statewide response to things like this and to have statewide knowledge of all the stakeholders... what that speaks to more is whether or not a state is structurally prepared or advantaged to apply for something like this. It doesn't mean that North Carolina is better; it just means that North Carolina's institutions and systems and norms are more appropriate for this kind of thing. You see that in the winning states. So Delaware was an early winning state. It's a small state, it's 100,000 kids ...so structurally it's a manageable system to pull together all the pieces. Tennessee was another first round winner – they look a lot like NC.

These comments speak to how, in addition to the timing, North Carolina's norms and structures were set up to be appropriate to apply for the funding. Additionally, the possibility of winning the grant money helped to inform the process that was used to develop the plans for using the money. A high-ranking government official who was involved in the process discussed the motivation for applying the grant:

Race to the Top was a whole bucket of money that we could use in a significant, innovative way. The money drove the process. Obviously, we wanted the money, but we had a very thoughtful, well-conceived plan and an implementation schedule that was followed even after [a change in state administration]. And that really did result in measurable goals which could align objectively with analytical data that was gathered by NC State's Friday Institute.

A different high-ranking government official cited the economic downturn and state budget availability as reasons for seeking the grant.

There were three major reasons to go after funding for Race to the Top. One was, we were in an economic downturn. The chances of getting money from General Assembly to further the goals and strategies of DPI were very slim. Two, the state Board of Education had developed a strategic plan that very much aligned with the requirements of Race to the Top. The third reason is that the law, or the RFP, required a joint

application between the governor and the state superintendent or state agency. So, given those three things we thought that we had a real good chance of getting the grant, we had systems in place that we needed for us to go faster and further.

The circumstances at the time left no question that North Carolina would seek the funding offered by the federal government. It was sought because the money was needed, though participants argued that the money was also sought because North Carolina's goals and initiatives aligned well with the goals and initiatives outlined in the RTTT request for proposals.

Alignment with Education Reforms Underway

Manna argues that the federal government can influence state governments through a number of measures to enact particular policies, as long as those states have the capacity to act. Interviewees echo this sentiment, and noticed that the guidelines set out in the Request For Proposals for the RTTT program included several particular indicators that states would need to adhere to in order to receive funding. A government official noted that "there were a couple of things that they really wanted to see and so one could argue that that held us hostage to push their agenda." Specifically,

We felt pretty strongly that [indicating that] student achievement shouldn't be part of teacher evaluation is absurd, but to say student achievement is the *only* part of teacher evaluation is absurd as well. So there need to be multiple factors and then we had to change some language in our charter school laws ...for that as well. So there you could say the feds

pushed us a little bit in the direction that we weren't inclined to go my take has always been if they're providing the money they can make the rules...and if you take the money you've got to play by the rules.

While interviewees felt that they had to “play by the rules” and adhere to the federal government’s requirements for curriculum and professional development, overall, they still felt that the effort, and that any accommodations they needed to make, were worth it. When asked about making concessions to align with federal guidelines and whether or not the process was worth the effort, a high-ranking government official concluded that,

All in all was it worth it; it was worth every ounce of time and it wasn't just the money. It was the fact that we had such a flexible ability to change the rules and it wasn't so driven by federal policy decisions. In the real world of politics and power, there's nothing that drives decision making or focuses decision making better than money. And Arne Duncan, as the school officer for the country coming from the Chicago system, really believed in accountability and metrics – and the quantification of educational outcomes. He was smart enough and the president was supportive enough and smart enough to know that there was nothing better to drive change than money. That's where Race to the Top was conceived. He was very open about it and he told states that didn't want to comply to requirements not to bother to apply. Because the reviews of the

states' individual grants were going to be done in connection with the requirements that were set out in the law...going in it was fairly rigid and the judging process was very rigid around the quantifiers that they had demanded. So yes. 100% yes. And ESSA is doing the same thing today.

A different government official noted that North Carolina didn't have to make many concessions because what the state was already doing, or wanted to do, was based in research, as were the guidelines set out by the federal government. This notion aligns with the idea that North Carolina had the capacity to win the funding – which made it easier for the state's proposal to align with the reforms encouraged by the federal government.

You'll see that the components of Race to the Top really aligned with what we know in research, about public education: great teachers and leaders ... is one area. High standards. Strategy for accountability. Technological systems. All of those are research based, so that may have been part of the conversation when the RFP was developed. I was very much in favor of us going after the money because they because I know what research says about how to improve public education and it was a great opportunity.

When asked whether there were policy initiatives for which North Carolina had to go against the state's established beliefs or way of doing things, the same official responded,

No, not at all. The only thing in the entire grant about which we had heartburn was to eliminate the cap on the number of

charter schools. And no one ever said to us that we had to eliminate it. No one from the US Department of Education said we had to eliminate it. But people who were applying for the grant from other states said, “you better remove your cap.” And I thought that North Carolina did something that was very creative and really proven to be a savior in some respects.... We had legislation passed without too much difficulty. That schools could use one of 5 models in order to have a charter – like public school – fast forward to 9 years later, that helped some of our local school districts to maintain authority over low-performing schools-by having a reform-type school. And I think that will prove very helpful to students in those schools because with that legislation, they can extend the school day, they can extend the school year, they have the same flexibility as charters, and my contention is that some of our low performing schools would improve if they had flexibility that is now part of the reform legislation. So that’s the way North Carolina handled that seeming requirement of the RTTT.

Prior to 2011, North Carolina had a charter school law that limited the number of operating charter schools in the state to 100 schools. In 2011, the state lifted the cap to allow a greater number of charter schools. The interviewee was alluding to the fact that the cap may have been lifted to make the state’s RTTT application more appealing to reviewers.

One former government official did mention that adjusting the pay structure for teachers was something that may not have occurred if RTTT funding weren't being requested.

There were places where [another official] thought the United States Department of Education may have coerced us into doing, but I never felt that. The only thing that I felt coerced, that they did insist on, was that we had some kind of merit pay. And there was such little money. Research told us that that little dab of money wouldn't make much difference in attracting people [to teach in the state], but we put it in anyway. So that's the only place where I felt coerced by the U.S. Department of Education. Of course, we knew that it was in the grant.

Concessions

Despite the reportedly collaborative nature of the proposal development, participants conceded that there were a few minor concessions that needed to be made to state policies in order to secure the funding. Interviewees acknowledged that adopting the Common Core curriculum was something they struggled with, although all of those interviewed agreed with the standards and thought that the new Common Core standards would increase academic rigor for students in North Carolina. They were also all surprised at the amount of pushback Common Core received from parents, teachers, and other members of the public. A proposal author and member of the evaluation team noted that,

A lot of Race to the Top required changes that weren't necessarily in keeping with what we wanted as a state, and when I say, "we," I'm talking about the stakeholders, not the person who believes it's important for North Carolina in particular, how we handle district and school transformation. How we handle differentiation of teacher compensation based on outcomes and one of the big areas in which we did concede and that led to a tremendous amount of trouble was on Common Core. So that's a good example of one where we made the switch as a state largely because of the lever of Race to the Top. And it was not met with open arms.

Another government official also noted that adopting the Common Core curriculum was beneficial to North Carolina, and that it will have a lasting effect in the state, despite public outcry and complaints.

I also think that the standards work will continue to have an influence for a certain number of years. Or at least until the teachers who received the training work with other teachers – until they move forward ... I would visit schools – it was amazing to me how teaching is changing and we would not have been able to have that much change in the classroom without the support of Race to the Top dollars to do standards training. And we probably could've gone further if we had not been bombarded by the unknowing and the knowing about the

Common Core standards. To me, that is one of the most absurd things that has ever happened in education. I gave up on convincing people in education who thought they were the devil or it was intrusion...

Another government official who was in office at the time echoed the support for Common Core and its legacy.

I think in the student outcome areas... I think Common Core is a good thing... I do think it upped the rigor and upped the expectations of students. As a state, the design of new assessments, I think, was needed, and the conversations that occur because of those design of assessments, looking at, "are we just testing knowledge level-type questions?" versus, "are we trying to get at higher order thinking skills and moving toward performance tasks and constructed response?" I think that was a positive that came out of RTTT.

Overall, interviewees believed that Common Core was a positive addition to North Carolina, and that its adoption in the state benefitted schools and students. This was conveyed as well through RTTT documentation, though the 2015 closeout report did echo the sentiment of the participants, in that adopting the Common Core was difficult for some state education stakeholders to accept.

Despite a multi-faceted State effort to target need—to—know information to every level of the schools hierarchy, there seemed to be a combination of too much information..., not

enough time, and too many “filters” to ensure that all stakeholders were working from timely, accurate information. Adding to this logistical challenge has been the misinformation disseminated aggressively by some individuals who are opposed to aspects of the State’s remodeling agenda. The most publicly visible example of this is misinformation about Common Core State Standards (CCSS). (p. 6-7).

RQ2: Do state education officials in North Carolina believe the reforms adopted under the state RTTT program will stay relevant and actionable, or will they be repealed?

Relationships and the Spirit of Collaboration

A repeated theme throughout the interviews and in the documentation of RTTT in North Carolina was the extent to which many different stakeholders – hundreds, in fact – were involved with the development of the ideas put forth in the proposal, and in the continuing of efforts to enact those policies. Writing the proposal and developing the ideas for the use of the funding was, by all accounts, a very collaborative effort. While some in the process may have disagreed about the *use* of the funds, stakeholders agreed that it was prudent to seek the funding. Participants felt that it was imperative to include many different parties in the development of the proposal. An author of the proposal noted that, “It was important for us to put forward a story about the state that resonated with the stakeholders. And when it resonates with the stakeholders, that’s evident to the reviewers. So that was an important acknowledgement too – an important part of the development process.” In retrospect, a government official at the time also acknowledged the collaborative nature of the process. “You know, it was a good collaborative effort I’m proud of what the state came

up with. And I think we're better off for it." Another proposal author discussed the gathering of information from many groups in the state. "I do believe that what we did incorporated a lot of feedback from a lot of stakeholder groups." A high-ranking government official explained further:

I knew, first of all, that it had to be a collaborative process. So we brought everybody in – from all of the different areas. From higher ed, as well as the community colleges. And K-12. We had some providers in the education community, superintendents, teachers, and parents. No students, which was a problem for me, but we just decided it would be better not to have a student. And we had folks in the department, we had a federal advisor, we had folks from social services, all of the array of human services that had helped support, especially, in at-risk communities. We had all of the minority communities involved. And so our package was conceived and born in a very collaborative mindset and environment. And as a result, we didn't have any of the dissention as we thought to send it to Washington for approval. We didn't have the people yelling and screaming – screaming at us about teacher accountability. Because both the teachers' union and the NEA were at the table. The feds were remarkably impressed with the members of our concept team.

This official felt that as long as all stakeholders were permitted to have input, they were less likely to express dissent or raise issue about how the money would be invested. The same official reiterated that,

I think the best decision... is to have collaborative decision-making, and as long as you bring the principals into the process and let them actually have input and a voice in the final outcome, it doesn't usually take an incredible amount of energy to do whatever you want to happen... as long as they can see the positive results for children and teachers. And I think that was the prize. It held our RTTT application together. Folks who were involved believed that the prize, the outcome, overall was worth the effort and change.

Several interviewees cited the rich collaborative relationships as one of the long-standing benefits of the RTTT process and subsequent initiatives. In particular, that several different players were in a position to work together toward a common goal, when otherwise perhaps they would not have had occasion to collaborate. Interviewees indicated that the RTTT process was a catalyst for long-lasting collaborations and relationships. A high-ranking government official noted that "... I think it was also leadership styles. We had folks in elected and appointed positions that were strong enough to know they were better with good input from the players in education."

The North Carolina Closeout report also supports the sentiment expressed by interview participants—that involvement in RTTT helped to encourage a spirit of collaboration – and identified a need to better communicate among education stakeholders in

the state. Regarding the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "...agency staff have developed project management habits that include enhanced collaboration (both internally and externally) commitment to continuous process improvement, and increased cross-division dialogue on how best to help schools improving instructional practices" (p. 4).

Professional Development

In terms of RTTT's long-term effects in the state, many interviewees cited the benefits of the professional development that was provided to teachers and principals through RTTT funds, and expressed regret that those programs weren't able to continue on as large a scale. (Though all interviewees gave credit to NC State partners who secured funding to continue a principal professional development academy.) A former government education official stated that RTTT funds helped to establish professional development programs that may not have been initiated otherwise.

You know, are we better off because of it or not? I think we are ... I just don't think the money would've been there to get us going. I think in the area of professional development, I had hoped that we would have...we had so much professional development that we had to roll out... and we and I think part of our vision was development of a structure or a framework for professional development that school systems could use that framework and really personalize it more for their system...So I think school systems did some things around professional development that were supported by Race to the Top that enabled it.

Professional development was one of several areas in which the participants agreed that Race to the Top provided seed money that allowed programs to begin and be established.

Furthermore, many participants expressed regret that state legislators did not continue the funding for those types of programs. A former government official discussed this funding as well, especially as it relates to the Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) for leadership development training for principals.

See, with RTTT funds, we were able to have professional development for teachers. Now the sad part is, after we finished the first round and used all the RTTT money, the General Assembly did not provide funds for us to continue to help new teachers and to help seasoned teachers become better at implementing the new standards. And another major benefit, is that it started the process for paying attention to student achievement and school leadership. We were able to start NELA, and two other academies.

While the leadership academies were, according to interviewees, one of the largest benefits of receiving the RTTT funding, many expressed disappointment in their termination. (With the exception of NELA, which remained open via other grant funds sought out by its champion from North Carolina State University.)

NELA was, from my perspective, the most successful of the principal leadership institutes but it also created an interest with legislators in the western part of the state who wanted their own leadership institute...a legislator asked, how much

would it cost to continue to fund the three leadership institutes, and I said it's too late, now, to fund the existing institutes.

When we asked for the money, we did not get it so we had to close all of them except NELA, and of course NELA received a grant so that's the reason why it was open.

A former government official also praised North Carolina State's Friday Institute for their continued commitment to professional development.

Another indirect benefit is the involvement of the Friday Institute. I think that, with their involvement with Race to the Top, they could see the needs of professional development, so they have since advanced the professional development as it relates to technology...

The professional development that was put in place and established by RTTT funds is something that continues to be a source of pride for those involved with the RTTT process. The (2015) North Carolina RTTT Closeout report referenced the success of the professional development efforts made possible through the RTTT funding.

Throughout the life of the grant, the State's cadre of professional development leaders has delivered nearly 1,000 regionally-based face-to-face sessions spread across the State. The PD session topics have progressed from a prescriptive list of sessions designed to acclimate local personnel to the Race to the Top goals to a differentiated list of sessions based on the growth LEAs and charters have made over the last four years

and the idiosyncratic needs each district has subsequently identified. (p. 14)

Lessons Learned/Legacy

The North Carolina RTTT closeout report (2015) cited optimism that the state's participation in the program would have lasting effects in North Carolina. In reference to the reforms implemented through the RTTT, the report noted that,

While the effects of these reforms on the State's ultimate goal – higher student achievement – may not be apparent for several years, the initiatives have made tangible impact on every level of the education system...the extent and depth of these changes at each level hold promise that the desired results will not be short-lived, but rather will be sustainable and far-reaching (p.4).

Interview participants were asked about the long-term effects of the RTTT funding and what lessons were learned from the proposal's development and the program implementation. Many felt that it was a positive contribution to education in North Carolina, and that participating in the program continued to benefit educators, school leaders, and students in the state. Several mentioned that because the sum of money received (\$400 million) was relatively small in relation to the state's full education budget, but that what was done with the funding could primarily, "start" initiatives that could be continued after RTTT was over. Also, the collaboration aspect of writing the proposal, implementing the programs, and evaluating those programs created relationships that continue to benefit education.

A former government official spoke about how the legacy of RTTT may not have been “felt” by teachers and students directly, but the official asserted that it *did* benefit those who support education in North Carolina. “Not only was it beneficial to education directly, it was beneficial to *providers* of support for education. I think sometimes we overlook that ripple effect.” Another stakeholder in the process discussed what was learned by applying for the money, implementing the ideas, and evaluating the outcomes. “But we learned a tremendous amount in the process, which is good for the state, about the limitations and restraints and extents of value management systems that was part of our early work.” In fact, as part of the evaluation process, education stakeholders learned about how to create policies and learn about effective phrasing.

[Policies about differentiated pay] are better phrased and structured than they would have been without RTTT. I mentioned district and school transformation earlier as something that we wanted to keep ...in the state. At the same time, I think that RTTT also helped us to clarify, tremendously, for the state and for other states, what does and doesn't work.

A former state education official noted the benefits of RTTT in terms of professional development, but lamented that the state legislative leadership was not able to provide continued funding for these programs. The official also noted the benefit of the evaluation piece of the RTTT program.

Another major benefit is that we built in...we had an evaluation component that was really informative to the staff as we used those dollars over 5-6 years. So, it allowed us to make

some big adjustments to strengthen the work that we were doing.

A proposal author noted the benefits of what was learned from the evaluation aspect of the implementation, and the positive outcomes from having data to support education initiatives. The author did also, however, express concern over particular programs continuing when left to rely on state funding. “What Race to the Top provided for us is a tremendous amount of data and knowledge about how to and how not to do that kind of thing; how well the state listens is yet to be seen.” The participant added further, about the long-term benefits of the RTTT process, even if the initiatives themselves didn’t “survive” or if they weren’t successful.

So, ... at the initiative level, I would say the things that were probably more successful – and I’ll define success as here, as being efficient use of funds, were probably the smaller projects that didn’t need a lot of money but that were an opportunity to show – to demonstrate something. A good example here was one that did *not* work very well – and that was virtual home school efforts to incorporate more blended learning in to the curriculum. Mostly what our practice during Race to the Top showed was that the state’s virtual home school – which is the second largest in the nation – probably wasn’t prepared or equipped to handle that type of online learning. That’s a good positive lesson to learn. Part of that is because virtual home school has a number of third party competitors now, but part of

it was just because it was a small staff... to manage blended learning correctly requires a lot of “walking around” expertise and not just state level. So again, that was one where you know the outcome wasn’t particularly positive but the learning from it was.

One participant argued that the RTTT program came along at just the right time, given the economic downturn and the legislators in office, and the political timing. In fact, this participant suspects that if RTTT were to occur today, that North Carolina may not participate.

Would we pursue this now? Probably not. Because by 2012, we had different leadership, a different approach to education, different feelings about our interactions with the federal government, so in some ways there’s an accident of history here where the timing of the grant – and the academic term is a policy window – that we didn’t create, but that we happened to be in the right space for.

A former high-ranking government official again reiterated the lasting collaborative spirit—a culture change—that the grant money inspired.

Did it work? I think in some areas it worked and in some areas, it didn’t work. We still have collaborative teams across the state where stakeholders gather together frequently to talk about barriers and try to come up with innovative solutions to educational issues. That still goes on in all counties and cities.

This sentiment was echoed by a different former government official as well.

But I do think the collaboration with the districts, with the (Regional Education Service Alliances) RESAs, and other nonprofit organizations working on behalf of the state was a positive thing and I think those relationships will continue for as long as those in power, so to speak, want it to be a leverage factor.

Another former government official and proposal author emphasized the benefits of technology and professional development innovations, as well as the challenges of continuing programs after RTTT ended.

I think the technology will continue to grow and exist. Because of the reporting that's required for each state agency to do. So I do think that will continue to move forward. I think that the professional development that we did with teachers across the state; the one thing that, that will continue, because a lot of the monies the (Regional Education Service Alliances) RESAs used and the districts used with Race to the Top, they developed their own professional development modules and housed them ... My concern with that was, once RTTT funds are over, they may have some content, they may have some modules, to do that, but then how do you continue to train the new teachers that enter a school system or transfer from other school systems? How do you continue to professionally

develop? And I think that's the nut that everyone is trying to crack.

Other officials spoke about how North Carolina's experience influenced education in other states. When asked whether North Carolina may have influenced policies in other states, one former official noted,

Oh yes. Oh yes. The whole idea of integrated platform of three systems... New York copied our model... policy diffusion... around the integrated three-tiered assessment system formative benchmark and "summatives," that was diffused out, the technology system of Home Base was replicated, like I said, in New York, Hawaii, and there were 4 other states that actually used that as well. The idea of summer institutes and professional development scaled at the state level. When we went to ... meetings or peer network meetings, ... states shared what they wanted to do and looked at what other states were doing, so implementation tactics were shared across the nation.

While policy diffusion – the idea that one state may have influence over another state's policy – was not outlined as a goal of North Carolina's RTTT effort, this participant believed that North Carolina's reforms did have a positive impact on other states.

Summary of Key Findings

Overall, participants felt that pursuing the RTTT monies resulted in positive outcomes for the state, both in terms of collaborative relationships, and in more tangible outcomes. Most felt that the federal government encouraged particular reforms, as those

particular reforms were encouraged through the RFP. Fortunately for North Carolina, education leaders had already made steps in the directions that the RFP was suggesting they go. North Carolina's RTTT Closeout Report from 2015 includes language that indicates a hope for a lasting legacy of the programs implemented with RTTT funding.

Through ... RttT work, the State and districts have laid the groundwork for providing a higher quality education to all students going forward. While the effects of these reforms on the State's ultimate goal – higher student achievement – may not be apparent for several years, the initiatives have made tangible impact on every level of the education system, from classrooms to the State Education Agency (SEA). The extent and depth of the changes at each level hold promise that the desired results will not be short-lived, but rather will be sustainable and far-reaching (Closeout Report, p. 4).

All of the initiatives proposed through RTTT were not continued after RTTT ended. Most participants felt that the initiatives may have continued if state funding had been made available. However, participants felt strongly that the collaborations and relationships developed through the RTTT process continue to thrive, and that those relationships will continue to benefit North Carolina's school personnel and students.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter begins with an overview of the Race to the Top (RTTT) funding for programs in North Carolina. That overview will be followed by a further interpretation of findings of the study in light of previous research. Then, implications for additional research and implications for policymakers will be discussed. The purpose of this case study was to examine what reforms were made in North Carolina since RTTT's implementation, and, with the recent passage of the ESSA, whether these reforms are likely to remain relevant in North Carolina.

Funds available through competition by states was, in part, meant to ease the strain on state budgets and to provide needed funding for education initiatives intended, in the long run, to strengthen the economy which had been deeply affected by the recession of 2008. In 2010, North Carolina was awarded \$400 million of second round RTTT funding. States issued proposals that aligned with the program's selection criteria, which were outlined in the request for proposals. These five criteria included State Success Factors, Standards and Assessments, Data Systems to Support Instruction, Great Teachers and Leaders, and Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools. The authors of North Carolina's proposal set out to meet each of these criteria with specific programs designed to innovate and achieve positive outcomes in each criteria area.

Interpretation of Findings

Participants discussed activities in the above criteria and provided information about the motivation for each of the initiatives they proposed in the application. State Success

Factors were worth 125 points. This criterion applied to states' reform agendas, states' plans to obtain buy-in from stakeholders/local education agencies (LEAs) in the state through signed memoranda of understanding (MOUs), and states' plans to increase student achievement overall, including reading and math testing outcomes, high school graduation rates, and college attendance. North Carolina's broad evaluation plan, which included program evaluations for each of the state's RTTT plans, was included under the State Success Factors criteria. In terms of Standards and Assessments, worth 70 points, North Carolina agreed to transition to new assessments, including summative assessments, and train teachers and other staff to make sure they understand these assessments. The RFP also asked states to provide information on Data Systems to Support Instruction, for which states could earn 47 points.

In North Carolina, plans included two pieces: state use of data and an overhaul of the state data system. These components included professional development and a plan for improving state infrastructure, as well as increasing student achievement. The fourth criteria, worth the most points (138), was Great Teachers and Leaders. The cornerstone of North Carolina's plan included the proposal of Regional Leadership Academies, meant to train and develop school leaders' skills. In fact, one participant noted, "when I first went to work...[the] question to me was, 'What would it take to make all of our schools great?' And I said, 'a great principal in every school.'" Finally, Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools was worth 50 points. North Carolina planned to incorporate schools focused on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM), and improving schools so that each would be above a 60% performance level.

Participants discussed North Carolina's RTTT implementation by referring to the following areas: their motivation to seek the funding, whether the federal government influenced North Carolina policy through the RTTT funding, the incorporation of the Common Core curriculum in the state, and professional development. Additionally, participants discussed the long-term outcomes of North Carolina's participation in the program.

Participants largely felt that seeking funding through this program was imperative to make changes in the state that would improve education for students and education professionals. The data suggest that, while some in the education community are, at times, concerned with federal overreach in state education, the offering of additional funds meant specifically to support educational innovation was, in North Carolina, a welcome proposition. One of the goals for this study was to examine whether North Carolina's reasoning for inviting federal oversight and accountability was simply to supplement current state funding, or whether it was a sincere interest in education reform.

Data show that, in fact, in North Carolina, it was both. A high-ranking government official even noted specifically that, "When the announcement was made...because North Carolina had lost so many jobs, and there were so many Draconian cuts that had to be made about budgets, to education, from pre-K to postsecondary, and RTTT was a whole bucket of money that we could use in a significant, innovative way." The official mentioned both that the funding would help boost the economy by funneling money to the state, and that North Carolina had in mind innovative ways that the funding could be used to improve education. In other words, North Carolina had the capacity to make particular reforms in order to receive the funding. In fact, the closeout document also acknowledges that North Carolina

already had several systems underway, so that the RTTT funding could assist in bringing some of those efforts to reality. "Through effective management practices, rigorous and independent program and policy evaluation, and robust statewide IT infrastructure, the State has been able to build on its pre-RttT capacity to implement complex statewide reform initiatives and meet performance targets" (p. 8).

Federal Influence

In terms of whether or not the federal government influenced the state's education policies via the funding, most participants agreed that accepting the funding obligated the state to fall in line with what the federal government wanted. However, many participants indicated that they felt that North Carolina was already a leader in education innovation, though a lack of available state funding had slowed innovation. Participants were policy entrepreneurs who success depended on innovation, though, so one must consider whether "lack of funding" was truly the barrier to innovation prior to the receipt of RTTT funds. Many participants mentioned that education reforms and what was happening in the state was based on research, so that the goals of the state aligned with those of the federal government, which were also based on research. According to Manna's (2006) "borrowing strength" theory of agenda-setting, "A government is involved in a policy area if it makes laws, issues regulations, constructs bureaucracies, and appropriates funds to address the area in some way" (p. 14). In fact, federal government actors could:

borrow capacity from other levels of government to help achieve their objectives. Lacking the capacity to reform the nation's schools on their own, members of Congress may pass laws building on state efforts. In the process, they rely on, or

borrow, state capacity to make these initiatives work and to push their own agenda priorities. The result is that state capacity can enable policy entrepreneurs in Congress to build agendas in federal venues, something they could not have done by relying on capacity alone. (p.15)

Participants agreed that the RTTT program was an effort by the federal government to encourage states to implement particular education reforms, while also giving the states the opportunity to enact initiatives best-suited to state priorities and needs. Despite indicating that several of the requirements of the RTTT proposal fell in line with North Carolina initiatives already underway, participants asserted that seeking the funding during a recession that had major ramifications on the availability of state funds led to some changes in existing state policies. In this way, the federal government certainly did influence North Carolina policy. This notion is aligned with Finn's (2011) assertion that RTTT was

based on the bold hypothesis that sizable grants of federal dollars, disbursed via a competitive process, can indeed cause states to jump through reform-policy hoops that they likely would not otherwise have attempted, the more so when an economic downturn left them exceptionally hungry for the additional dollars from Washington (p. 228).

Participants indicated that several of the initiatives made possible through RTTT would not have occurred had the federal funding not been made available. In fact, several alluded to the lack of federal dollars as a reason for some RTTT programs to close, since the state would not continue to make funding available for continuing the programs. Some researchers

(Weatherford and McDonnell 2011, LaRock 2014) assert that RTTT was an example of the federal government “borrowing strength” *from* the states (not the other way around), since many of the participating, competing states already had initiatives underway but competed for the funding because of conditions the economic downturn. Participants’ discussion of policy diffusion supports that assertion. The fact that states helped to develop the Common Core standards, which were then encouraged by the federal government through the competitive grants, could be considered an example of the federal government “borrowing strength” from the states. Saultz (2014) maintains that states borrowed strength from the federal government, using the funding to increase their capacity for policy change. This also occurred in North Carolina, as evidenced by the changes in proposed reforms from one round of competition to the next, as well as participants’ discussion of particular reforms enacted specifically in pursuit of winning funding. Therefore, “borrowing strength” could be seen as both from federal to state *and* from state to federal. The federal government encouraged reforms with the provision of funding, but only those states with the capacity to participate in the program were likely to win funds. It is in that way that the states influenced the federal government. Without the funding, the federal government could not directly affect what occurs within the states; the directives laid out in the RFP were based on initiatives that had already been successful in states who had built capacity for change.

The findings, which indicate that North Carolina *was* willing to adopt new policies or change existing policies in anticipation of being awarded federal funds, are counter to Hirschland and Steinmo’s (2003) assertion that the federal government’s comparatively small contribution to state education funding (which they cite as approximately 10%) is not

significant enough to effect state-level change. "...Change that emanates from the center will prove to be difficult if not impossible" (p. 360).

Participants discussed that one of the challenges met when planning on uses for the RTTT funding was implementing the Common Core curriculum. According to the Common Core website, "The Common Core is a set of high-quality academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA). These learning goals outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade." (<http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/>). State officials and stakeholders received pushback from adopting this curriculum, although the state's governor endorsed them, as did other ranking state education stakeholders. The Common Core is still in effect in North Carolina public schools today.

Another question posed for this study was whether or not education officials will adjust or roll back the reforms adopted under the state RTTT program. In the 2016 election, a Republican, Mark Johnson, unseated long-serving Superintendent of Public Instruction, Democrat Dr. June Atkinson. Prior to that election, Democrats held the state superintendent's seat for over a century. Several participants expressed concern that the accomplishments seen as a result of the RTTT funding may be abandoned by the new administration. In particular, they noted that funding was not continued for the regional leadership academies; in fact, only one remains active today, through other funded grants.

Additionally, several participants noted that North Carolina's ideas were adopted in other states, so that one could conclude that the federal dollars not only affected education innovation in North Carolina, but in other states as well. Several participants mentioned the impact of North Carolina's implementation of RTTT funds as models for other states to adopt some components of North Carolina's initiatives. This is consistent with Kingdon's

concept of “policy diffusion,” in which policies are adopted in other states by expanding on successful practices in neighboring states. Lacy and Tanberg (2014) found that policy diffusion occurred in postsecondary education finance, and a similar phenomenon seems to have happened through RTTT. However, additional research is needed to determine whether that has actually occurred. In Meredith’s (2013) analysis of the influence of the RTTT program on state policy making, she argues that the success of RTTT could, in fact, lead to additional competitive programs because of its perceived success in influencing state policy diffusion.

Prior to 2011, North Carolina’s charter school law placed a limit on the number of charter schools permitted to operate in the state; the limit was 100 schools. This cap on the number of schools permitted was enacted along with the passing of the charter school law in 1996. Participants noted that, in an effort to win the funding, the cap on charter schools was lifted to gain favor with proposal reviewers. At this time, the cap has not been reinstated, and there are currently 173 operating charter schools in North Carolina (<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/charterschools/schools/>). It is unlikely that the cap will be reinstated, given the current administration and pro-charter school members of the state general assembly.

Implications for Further Research

With new administrations in both North Carolina and the federal government, further research would include examining the continuing relationship between the federal and state governments in education agenda-setting. The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act would be an appropriate policy to explore as states complete and implement their plans to comply with the law. In March 2017, newly-appointed Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and the United

States Department of Education issued a press release unveiling the updated template for states' plans for implementing ESSA. A statement issued by the Secretary included that

States, along with local educators and parents, are on the frontlines of ensuring every child has access to a quality education. The plans each state develops under the streamlined ESSA template will promote innovation, flexibility and accountability to ensure every child has a chance to learn and succeed. (Press Release, March 13, 2017.

<https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-secretary-education-betsy-devos-announces-release-updated-essa-consolidated-state-plan-template>)

Replicating this study to evaluate states' plans for complying with ESSA would be a relevant continuation of the work investigating the continuing role of federal-state collaboration in increasing achievement for American children.

Furthermore, on a smaller scale, it may also be worth examining how states can encourage innovation among nonprofit groups, institutes, and other education stakeholders, in addition to LEAs, through funding and competitive initiatives. Through this work on RTTT in North Carolina, the role of grant funding, foundations, and nonprofit institutes played a role in contributing to state education legislation, evaluation, and school improvement. Further examination of the relationships among state government, LEAs, and other education agencies would be prudent to further discover how agenda-setting occurs at the state level, and to what extent different actors become involved.

It is also worth investigating the longer-term effects of *all* federal funding provided to states and individuals, not only those dollars invested through competitive programs like RTTT. At all levels – from early childhood education to postsecondary outcomes – are monies invested in education by the federal government being invested wisely, and impacting educators and students in positive ways? For example, when the federal government issues recommendations or guidance for postsecondary education outcomes, how is the policy process developed? What actors become involved in setting postsecondary education agendas?

Additionally, this study was limited to the effects of one competitive federal grant program on North Carolina. Further research would be needed to compare the experience of North Carolina with other RTTT grantees, and to determine the true extent of policy diffusion across states and the lasting, reaching legacy of this program. Although the amount of funding was small, relative to state education budgets, the effects were likely wider-reaching. A comparative study of multiple states' experiences with agenda setting as it relates to the federal government would be a valuable contribution to the body of research on agenda setting and policy diffusion.

Implications for Policymakers

Although the RTTT program has now ended, and the administration that initiated it has left the White House, further research into the program itself is unlikely. However, it may be worth examining the continued collaborations and relationships that were developed in North Carolina because of RTTT. Participants noted the comradery and coalitions that were nurtured through the collaborative efforts extended to win the funding. All of them spoke with pride and fondness of the lasting relationships that were built from this effort. It would

be fruitful for policymakers to encourage more collaboration, as participants felt that it had positive effects for administrators, teachers, and students in North Carolina. Policy actors and agenda setters would be wise to make an effort to bring stakeholders to the table when creating or implementing policy. Participants seemed to feel that, too often, policy is created by individuals who do not necessarily have a close relationship with or full understanding of the needs and desires of the teachers, students, parents, and administrators who are on the “front lines” and who policies affect most greatly.

Additionally, RTTT showed that competition and funding can encourage innovation and engagement. Policymakers could possibly encourage additional innovation and ingenuity by making particular components of funding based on competitive efforts to prove entities’ commitment to change and expansion of education programs.

Conclusion

This study suggests that RTTT in North Carolina was the result of the federal government’s attempt to set agendas at the state level, and to encourage particular reforms. North Carolina participated in the program out of a basic need for more education dollars *as well as* a true desire to incorporate more innovation and more meaningful professional development. It appears that while some initiatives implemented as a result of RTTT monies have ended, others survive. With additional funding (public or private), public support, and encouragement from state education stakeholders, the systems and programs implemented as a result of RTTT could be re-enacted or continue to thrive to benefit educators and students in the state.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

STATE GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL/POLICYMAKERS

1. Describe your position and primary responsibilities.
2. On which committee(s) do you/your superior currently serve?
3. What was your involvement with policies/initiatives related to Race to the Top in North Carolina?
4. What were the most important outcomes of RTTT to education in North Carolina?
5. Now that RTTT is over, what policies/proposals do you think will remain in place, and which do you think will not?
6. What are your impressions of the impact of the Race to the Top competition?
7. What is your impression of public support/opposition for the program in your state?
8. Could similar innovations/reforms have been implemented at the state level without RTT funds? Will these innovations/reforms continue in the years after RTTT?
9. What additional information do you feel would be useful to me?
10. Is there anyone else I should speak to about this issue?

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW REQUEST/INVITATION

Dear (sample member),

I am a doctoral student at North Carolina State University, completing my dissertation in Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis. I am conducting interviews as part of my research study to learn more about the role that the federal government has played in affecting states' education policy through agenda setting, and whether those policies are likely to remain after the program's end.

As a (participant role), you will be able to provide a unique perspective. The interview takes around 30 minutes and is very informal. Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings. There is no compensation for participating in this study. However, your participation will be a valuable addition to research, and findings from this study could lead to greater public understanding, as this study is relevant to the relationship between the federal government and states in terms of the policy process – and how policies are initiated and carried out by states, districts, and schools.

If you are willing to participate, please suggest a day and time that suits you. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Nicole Tate
North Carolina State University

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of Study: A Study of Federal Education Reform through the K-12 Race to the Top Competition in North Carolina

Principal Investigator: Nicole Tate
Fusarelli

Faculty Sponsor (if applicable): Dr. Lance

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue.

You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of the study is to examine the policy process behind the initiation of RTTT, and will help to determine whether states, specifically, North Carolina, are leaders in policy development or followers of federally-guided initiatives encouraged by the offering of federal funds.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to I will conduct an interview with you at a time and location of your choice. The interview will involve questions about your role in and perspective on The Race To The Top policy process in North Carolina. It should last about 30 minutes. With your permission, I will audiotape and take notes during the interview. The recording is to accurately record the information you provide, and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you choose not to be audiotaped, I will take notes instead. If you agree to being audiotaped but feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, I can turn off the recorder at your request. You can stop the interview at any time. I expect to conduct only one interview; however, follow-ups may be needed for added clarification. If so, I will contact you by e-mail/phone to request this.

Risks and Benefits

There are minimal risks associated with participation in this research. There are no direct benefits to your participation in the research. The indirect benefits are contributing to the body of research on education policy in the state of North Carolina.

Confidentiality

The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely in in a locked cabinet, in a locked room. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study.

Compensation

For participating in this study you will not receive anything for participating.

What if you have questions about this study?

If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the researcher, Nicole Tate.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator at dapaxton@ncsu.edu or by phone at 1-919-515-4514.

Consent To Participate

“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Subject's signature _____ **Date**

Investigator's signature _____ **Date**

APPENDIX D

NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR THE USE OF HUMAN SUBJECTS IN RESEARCH

SUBMISSION FOR NEW STUDIES

Protocol Number 9390

In lay language, provide a brief synopsis of the study (limit text to 1500 characters)

The proposed research is a case study of a federal education policy program and its relationship to education reform at the state level. Specifically, assuming that the Race To The Top (RTTT) program is a political strategy intended to encourage certain reforms at the state level, what reforms did the federal government hope to encourage in state policies, and what reforms at the state or federal level have actually been made in North Carolina since RTTT's implementation? Furthermore, with the recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), will these reforms remain relevant in North Carolina? The researcher's goal is to understand how the federal government intended to effect change in state education policy through the implementation of the RTTT funding by exploring the policy processes involved in its creation, inception, and implementation. Outcomes (for example, whether a particular policy component resulted in increased test scores) of state program implementation at the district or student level are not a focus for this particular study.

Briefly describe in lay language the purpose of the proposed research and why it is important.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) is a unique opportunity for states to seek additional funding for educational innovation in an era of tight economic times and limited funding. Because of the competition for funds, the stakes are high for states to prove their worth as innovators and achievers. However, funding is tied to accountability, so states must verify that they will follow through on what they propose and that it will result in positive student achievement outcomes. The federal government has increased its involvement and control over state and local schooling significantly during the past decade. The Race To The Top (RTTT) program is a recently implemented and oft-debated program. Since components of the program are ongoing, it is relevant to current education policy and may eventually affect all states. It is known that states have altered their policies in light of the possibility of federal funding. But what is left unknown at this point is the process by which the federal government influenced the states to make changes in their existing policies. States' reasoning for allowing increased federal oversight and the need for accountability was the opportunity to supplement current state funding with much-needed federal dollars - or

was it because of a sincere interest in education reform with monetary guidance from the federal government? Additionally, now that the program has ended, and in light of 2015's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), will state education officials adjust or roll back the reforms adopted under the state RTTT program, or will they remain enshrined in state law? Specifically, given North Carolina's focus on teacher quality and education leadership, what are the long-term possibilities of reforms staying in place?

In submitting their proposals and requests for funding, states made alterations to their K-12 education policies in order to gain additional public school funding in the midst of a nationwide economic downturn. It is reasonable, then, that state policies would be affected and reflect the agenda set by the federal government. The purpose of this study is to answer questions about the role that the federal government has played in affecting states' education policy through agenda setting, and whether those policies are likely to remain after the program's end. I will use a document analysis approach, paired with stakeholder interviews, to examine particular components of the 2010 RTTT program and how they affected state policies. In this study, I seek to answer the following research questions: how has the RTTT program encouraged certain education reforms at the state level, and what reforms did the federal government encourage?

Additionally, since the RTTT program has come to a close, do state education officials in North Carolina believe the reforms adopted under the state RTTT program will remain enshrined in state law stay relevant and actionable, or will they be repealed?

Identify the type of consent (e.g., written, verbal, electronic, etc.). Label and submit all consent forms.

Written consent will be obtained from participants when possible; otherwise, verbal consent will be obtained. The attached form will serve as the consent form. The PI will present each participant with the form, explain the participant's rights, and obtain their signature. If participants are interviewed via telephone, then verbal consent will be obtained, after the PI reads the consent form to the participant.

Are you applying for a waiver of signed consent (consent information is provided, but participant signatures are not collected)? A waiver of signed consent may be granted only if: The research involves no more than minimal risk. The research involves no procedures for which consent is normally required outside of the research context.

Yes

Would a signed consent document be the only document or record linking the participant to the research?

Yes

Is there any deception of the human subjects involved in this study?

No

How will potential participants be found and selected for inclusion in the study?

Participants will be selected based on their involvement with the policy process of the implementation of the program as well as their knowledge of the program. Categories of interviewees will include policy writers, individuals at the federal government level (U.S. Department of Education), state policy stakeholders (state boards of education), congressional staffers, and other education policy stakeholders at the federal as well as state levels. Additional individuals will be identified through purposeful snowball sampling as interviewees may refer the researcher to other individuals.

For each participant group, how will potential participants be approached about the research and invited to participate? Please upload necessary scripts, templates, talking points, flyers, blurbs, and announcements.

Participants will be contacted via e-mail or telephone and interviewed via phone, Skype, or in person. See attached email interview invitation.

In the following questions describe in lay terms all study procedures that will be experienced by each group of participants in this study. For each group of participants in your study, provide a step-by-step description of what they will experience from beginning to end of the study activities.

Participants will receive an invitation to the study via email or telephone. Upon agreeing to be interviewed, a time and place will be agreed upon, and the PI will provide the participant with the consent form information, either in person or verbally. Once the participant consents to be interviewed, the interview will proceed, and should last approximately 30 minutes. If the participant consents, the interview will be recorded. At the conclusion of the interview, the participant will be thanked for their time. If a participant is interested in the final analysis and results, arrangements will be made to provide those once the study is concluded. If participants agree to further contact for clarification, follow up contacts may be required to clarify statements or follow up on provided answers. Documentation of these conversations will be included in transcripts.

Describe how, where, when, and by whom data will be collected.

The PI will send all invitations. Because the study focuses on North Carolina, most in-person interviews will be conducted in the local Raleigh area, as participants deem convenient. Phone or Skype interviews may also be conducted. The PI will conduct all interviews and code all data. Data will be collected in early 2017.

This case study will also employ document analysis. Documents will be selected based on their relevance to the policy process; materials, including states' application materials, and scoring outcomes, are all publicly available through the government. Conducting a qualitative document analysis of the RTTT online discussions and other publicly-available

coverage of this recent federal government initiative is one way to seek answers to the research question. When studying policy and policy change, it is necessary to review and examine the documents that record and establish these changes as well as the policy actors who initiated the reforms. All data are available online through www.ed.gov and other media coverage, including transcripts of speeches made by key policymakers at the national level.

Describe the nature and degree of risk that this study poses. Describe the steps taken to minimize these risks. You CANNOT leave this blank, say 'N/A', none' or 'no risks'. You can say "There is minimal risk associated with this research."

There is minimal risk associated with this research.

Describe the anticipated direct benefits to be gained by each group of participants in this study (compensation is not a direct benefit).

There is no direct benefit to participants for their involvement in this study.

If no direct benefit is expected for participants describe any indirect benefits that may be expected, such as to the scientific community or to society.

Participants will benefit indirectly by contributing to the larger body of research regarding state and federal education policy.

Will you be receiving already existing data without identifiers for this study?

Yes

Will you be receiving already existing data which includes identifiers for this study?

Yes

Will data be collected anonymously (meaning that you do not ever collect data in a way that would allow you to link any identifying information to a participant)?

No

Will any identifying information be recorded with the data (ex: name, phone number, IDs, e-mails, etc.)?

Yes

Will you use a master list, crosswalk, or other means of linking a participant's identity to the data?

No

Will it be possible to identify a participant indirectly from the data collected (i.e. indirect identification from demographic information)?

No

Audio recordings? Yes

Video recordings? No

Images? No

Digital/electronic files? No

Paper documents (including notes and journals)? Yes

Physiological Responses? No

Online survey? No

Restricted Computer? Yes

Password Protected files? Yes

Firewall System? No

Locked Private Office? Yes

Locked Filing Cabinets? Yes

Encrypted Files? No

Describe all participant identifiers that will be collected (whether they will be retained or not) and explain why they are necessary.

While not retained or revealed in results, participants' names, positions/roles, and contact information will be collected.

All existing data publicly available.

If any links between data and participants are to be retained, how will you protect the confidentiality of the data?

The researcher will address confidentiality concerns by keeping all interview transcripts and analyses in password-protected files or locked cabinets. All participants will be provided with informed consent that outlines the voluntary nature of their participation in interviews, and the identity of participants will be protected by describing their responses using pseudonyms or removing their names.

If you are collecting data electronically, what (if any) identifiable information will be collected by the host site (such as email and/or IP address) and will this information be reported to you?

Describe any ways that participants themselves or third parties discussed by participants could be identified indirectly from the data collected, and describe measures taken to protect identities.

For all recordings of any type: Describe the type of recording(s) to be made Describe the safe storage of recordings Who will have access to the recordings? Will recordings be used in publications or data reporting? Will images be altered to de-identify? Will recordings be transcribed and by whom?

The researcher will address confidentiality concerns by keeping all interview transcripts and analyses in password-protected files or locked cabinets. All participants will be provided with informed consent that outlines the voluntary nature of their participation in interviews, and the identity of participants will be protected by describing their responses using pseudonyms or removing their names.

Describe how data will be reported (aggregate, individual responses, use of direct quotes) and describe how identities will be protected in study reports.

All names will be redacted and identities concealed in any reporting of direct quotes. As mentioned above, pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of any participants.

Will anyone besides the PI or the research team have access to the data (including completed surveys) from the moment they are collected until they are destroyed?

No.

Describe any compensation that participants will be eligible to receive, including what the compensation is, any eligibility requirements, and how it will be delivered.