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“It’s Not a Gotcha”: Interpreting Teacher Evaluation Policy in Rural School Districts

Jane F. Gilles

Gilles Education and Policy Consulting

This multi-case study explored how local policy actors in rural school districts interpreted new teacher evaluation policies and how state-level policy actors influenced local policy responses. In the first phase of the study, teachers and administrators in four rural school districts in two U.S. states were interviewed about new state teacher evaluation policies and their own local efforts to meet policy demands, while the study’s second phase investigated the work of state-level policy actors. Shedding light on the realities of tackling reform mandates in rural schools, the study finds that teacher evaluation policy efforts are challenged by the tension between the formative and summative purposes of teacher evaluation, that teacher evaluation policies allowing local control in system design require a significant commitment at the local level, that local actors rely on and value the work of policy intermediaries, and that interpreting teacher evaluation policy and planning for implementation can be particularly challenging in small rural school districts.

Keywords: teacher evaluation, school reform, school policy, qualitative

Currently there is unprecedented focus on teacher evaluation as a strategy for improving teacher effectiveness. In the U.S., multiple policies initiated by the Obama administration emphasized reforms to teacher evaluation practices, including Race to the Top and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Waiver Program. Federal pressures have influenced state policy development, and presently all 50 states and the District of Columbia have teacher evaluation policies on the books, with the vast majority of these policies having been legislated since 2009 (American Institutes for Research, 2016). As a result, rural school districts across the country are in the first years of interpreting and implementing new teacher evaluation policies. Thus, it is critical that researchers, policymakers, and practitioners understand the impact of teacher evaluation reform on rural schools. This study explored how four rural school districts sought to interpret new teacher evaluation policies, each one addressing the context of its local school community.

Related Literature

Along with other educational reforms, teacher evaluation is under-examined in the rural context; indeed, most research on new education initiatives takes place in urban and suburban settings (Barrett, Cowen, Toma & Troske, 2015; Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). In addition, one-size-fits-all reform policies are rarely suited to the rural context (Budge, 2010). A recent study found that rural school administrators and national policy experts perceive

federal policies to be designed for urban and suburban settings, with a lack of priority given to their impact on rural schools (Johnson, L.D., Mitchel & Rotherham, 2014). As they face new policies, rural schools are challenged by limited capacity and a lack of alignment between policy demands and the realities of rural school communities (Battelle for Kids, 2016). Further, issues of strained budgets, limited professional development opportunities, and the pressures of accountability policies are especially acute in rural schools (Preston, Jakubiec & Kooymans, 2013).

As rural educators enact new teacher evaluation policies, they must confront the tension between the two primary purposes of evaluation, formative and summative. By definition, formative evaluation is aimed at professional growth, while summative evaluation serves employment decision-making and accountability goals (Millman, 1981; Darling-Hammond, Wise & Pease, 1983). For decades, researchers have documented the front-line tension between formative and summative evaluation, asserting that the two processes require uncomfortable shifts in the social relationships between teachers and evaluators; that the summative function of teacher evaluation can subvert the formative function because teachers view the evaluation process as punitive when it is linked to personnel decisions; that both principals and teachers question the validity of evaluation criteria; and that the conflicting purposes call for different types of data, with formative evaluation requiring rich,

descriptive data in order to prompt growth and change, and summative evaluation requiring objective, externally defensible data (Feldvebel, 1980; Darling-Hammond et al., 1983; Popham, 2013; Taylor & Tyler, 2012; Sinnema & Robinson, 2007). However, teacher evaluation systems focused on professional growth show promise for increasing both teacher effectiveness and student learning (Sojourner, Mykerezi & West, 2014; Taylor & Tyler, 2012; Jiang, Spote & Lupescu, 2015). The inherent conflict between the two main purposes of teacher evaluation is confounded by the fact that most U.S. states profess that the formative purpose is central to their new teacher evaluation policies (Minnici, 2014), but the political rhetoric has focused on the summative purpose, championing teacher evaluation as a way to remove “bad teachers” (Stern, 2013).

In recent years, as rural educators have prepared to implement new state teacher evaluation policies, they have been challenged by the need to comply with policy mandates while meeting the unique demands of the local context. Current research frames implementers as learners who are *interpreters* of policy, making meaning from policy, explaining it, and determining next steps (Ball, Maguire, Braun & Hoskins, 2011a, 2011b; Hill, 2000). Meaning making involves all those associated with a policy who must “negotiate a complex field of meanings and understandings” to interpret a new policy (Levinson, Sutton & Winstead, 2009, p. 779). Policy interpretation, then, is defined for this study as a distinct phase in the policy process, occurring after formal policy adoption and before full implementation.

Scholars recognize that outsiders – individuals and organizations beyond the school walls – play a key role in policy interpretation (Levinson et al. 2009; Ball et al., 2011a). Those policy actors¹ who function between policymaking and implementation, termed policy intermediaries, aid the policy process by translating, negotiating, adapting, and framing the policy and its requirements (Honig, 2004; Coburn, 2005). Policy intermediaries represent a wide range of individuals and groups, including academics, foundations, professional associations, consultants,

and others. It has been found that when intermediary organizations work together, they can expand their effectiveness by providing a support structure that capitalizes on each organization’s strengths (Honig, 2004). Many studies of policy intermediaries frame these individuals and organizations primarily as nongovernmental actors (Coburn, 2005; DeBray, Scott, Lubienski & Jabbar, 2014). However, Hamann and Lane (2004) found that State Education Agencies (SEAs) can function as policy intermediaries because SEAs have more discretion in policy implementation since NCLB and, thus, more latitude to work with districts to adapt federal policy demands to the state context.

Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this research was to explore the efforts of local policy actors as they interpreted new teacher evaluation policies and planned for implementation. The research questions addressed the policy interpretation phase, investigating how local policy actors interpreted the *meaning* of teacher evaluation policies, how they experienced the *process* of policy interpretation, and how state-level actors *influenced* local responses to teacher evaluation policies. An embedded, multi-case design (Yin, 2014) was employed for this qualitative study, involving participants from multiple school districts and multiple state-level stakeholder organizations. Addressing aspects of a larger study exploring the interpretation of teacher evaluation policy in six small school districts in two states, this article focuses on the four *rural* school districts that were part of the larger study, two districts from each state.²

The two states, Missouri and Oregon, are typical cases because they represent the 43 U.S. states that adopted new teacher evaluation policies as a requirement of their participation in the ESEA Flexibility Waiver program. These states also serve as diverse cases because of their differences regarding key characteristics that relate to the context of the research, with differing political cultures³ and contrasting political histories that reflect divergent ideologies (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). The new teacher evaluation policies in both states afforded

¹ A policy actor is an individual or group that is actively involved in the policy process (Fowler, 2009).

² In identifying districts for the larger study, attention was given to finding a mix of rural and non-rural districts. It happened that, in each state, two rural districts and one non-rural district agreed to participate. This study focuses on the four rural districts because

they were found to experience specific challenges (see Findings and Discussion).

³ Political culture is defined as the enduring political attitudes and behaviors associated with groups that live in a defined geographical context (Elazar, 1970).

considerable flexibility to school districts in decision-making about the local approach, and in both states, implementation of the new teacher evaluation policy occurred in 2014-2015. (See Table 1.)

The units of analysis for this study were four

small rural school districts in each state, a total of four districts overall. Small school districts were defined as districts with student enrollments of 2,500 or lower.⁴ Although most U.S. students attend large school districts, most of the districts in the country are small (Louis, Thomas & Anderson, 2010), and about one-third of public schools are rural (Johnson,

Table 1
Missouri and Oregon teacher evaluation policies and systems

	Missouri	Oregon
Original policy adopted	1983	1979
Current policy adopted	2010 (amendment to 1983 law)	2011 (amendment to 1979 law)
Current policy implemented	2014-2015	2014-2015
Key policy requirements ^{a, b}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Districts to evaluate each teacher through a performance-based system. • Districts to develop teacher standards; SEA to develop model standards. • Districts to adopt the state model or to develop/adopt/adapt a model that meets policy requirements. • Alignment to ESEA waiver guidelines. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State to adopt teacher standards. • Administrators, teachers, and exclusive bargaining representative to collaborate on local system design. • Districts to align system to state-developed framework. • Alignment to ESEA waiver guidelines.

^aFrom Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2015). Educator Growth Toolbox.

^bFrom Oregon Department of Education. (2014a). Oregon framework for teacher and administrator evaluation and support systems: Revised for 2014-2015.

J., Showalter, Klein & Lester, 2014). Once districts were identified by enrollment, superintendents were contacted, inviting the participation of the district and soliciting the names of personnel who had been involved in teacher evaluation efforts.

The first phase of the study (Phase I) involved semi-structured telephone interviews with local policy actors – the district administrators, principals, and teachers whom superintendents had identified. At least one district administrator, one principal, and two teachers were interviewed in each district, so that between the four districts, 18 local policy actors participated. Interviews took place during the first months of policy implementation, and interview questions addressed the meaning of the policy and its requirements, the content of the local plan, and decision-making processes and supports.

To investigate prominent themes from Phase I, a second phase of the study (Phase II) was conducted in which state-level policy actors were interviewed. Phase II participants were representatives of organizations that had been specifically identified during Phase I as trusted resources for information and support regarding the policy. In each state, four state-level policy actors were interviewed, representing the SEAs in each state, along with direct support organizations⁵, and professional organizations representing school administrators and teachers.⁶ Phase II questions addressed the same topics as the Phase I interviews as well as questions about certain themes that had arisen during Phase I.

Interview data were recorded, transcribed, and coded via an open coding approach, consistent with grounded theory (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The

⁴ This definition is commonly used in studies where district size is a variable of interest (for example, Louis & Leithwood et al., 2010).

⁵ Direct support organizations were defined as groups that provided teacher evaluation support directly to districts.

⁶ The study design limited the inclusion of state-level groups to those identified in Phase I as helpful resources regarding teacher evaluation.

data were interrogated repeatedly as new themes emerged. Because this was an embedded multi-case study, Phase I data were analyzed in terms of their relationship to the pertinent district cases and to the relevant state case, with all codes analyzed at both the local and state levels. Whenever possible, factual information was triangulated with data from succeeding interviews, policy documents, local teacher evaluation plans, news articles, and websites of relevant organizations (Merriam, 2009).

Teacher Evaluation Policy Interpretation in Four Rural School Districts

The four school district cases illustrate the complexity of interpreting new teacher evaluation policies and planning for implementation. The case summaries presented here focus primarily on the context and processes involved in teacher evaluation policy interpretation in Byrne Creek and Flores Valley, Missouri, and Meyers Grove and Nilsenville, Oregon.⁷

Byrne Creek, Missouri

More than 200 miles from a major population center, Byrne Creek School District is located in a rural community where farming is an important part of the town's history and economy. This low-income community is sparsely populated, and the school district covers a large area – more than 350 square miles. The percentage of nonwhite students is higher than the national average for rural schools, and the percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch is higher than both Missouri and U.S. averages. Due to pressures brought on by poor performance, Byrne Creek educators are focused on raising student achievement scores. In 2014, just as the new teacher evaluation policy was about to be implemented, the district fell below target by a significant margin in Missouri's Annual Measureable Objectives (AMO)⁸ calculation. (For data on each of the districts in this study, see Table 2.)

Byrne Creek assembled a committee of about 20 educators in 2012-2013 to work on both teacher evaluation and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and both initiatives were viewed as crucial for improving student achievement. The committee

included district administration, all building principals, and teachers from each school building. Yet during the summer of 2013, when the teacher members of the committee were not available, district and building administrators reviewed various teacher evaluation models, and the state model was chosen. It was the superintendent who pressed for the state model, and some participants felt the decision was heavy handed. A teacher on special assignment did have a voice in the process and later took on considerable responsibility for training principals and teachers on the data practices that were part of both the teacher evaluation and CCSS efforts.

In this low-performing district, participants viewed the policy through the lens of accountability pressures, and some saw the policy as a political tool for going after the teaching profession. A teacher explained that many of her colleagues viewed the policy as “just one more thing out to get teachers.” Nevertheless, participants seemed enthused about opportunities for dialogue about teaching and learning, improved collaboration, and the policy's potential to impact student learning.

Flores Valley, Missouri

Flores Valley School District is located in a rural community where health care and social assistance organizations are among the largest employers. The town is situated more than 200 miles from the closest large city, and residents are proud of the area's natural beauty. The community is a regional trade center, providing services to a broad area; thus, the population density is relatively high for a rural setting. The median household income here is the lowest of the four districts in the study – considerably lower than the average in U.S. rural communities – and over 60% of students qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch. The district performs about average on state mandated tests, and the community is proud of its schools. (See Table 2.)

During the 2009-2010 school year, before Missouri adopted its new teacher evaluation policy, Flores Valley convened a teacher evaluation committee of administrators and teachers to improve the existing system and to be ready for pending changes to state requirements. The district adopted a new plan in 2011. In 2013-2014, despite having

exams (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

⁷ School district names are pseudonyms.

⁸ Annual Measurable Objective is defined as the goal set by each state indicating the minimum percentage of students who must meet or exceed standards as measured by the state's achievement

Table 2

School district data^a in comparison to U.S., U.S. rural^b, and state data

	Community characteristics			Student characteristics			District outcomes		
	Proximity to major city	Population density (people per sq mi) ^c	Median household income ^c	Nonwhite students	English learners	Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	State exams where more students scored proficient or above than state avg	4-year graduation rate	Graduates attending post-secondary
U.S.		82.73	\$53,046	50.1% ^d	9.3% ^d	51.3% ^e		81.9% ^e	65.9% ^e
U.S. Rural			\$57,987	26.7%	3.1%	46.6%			
Missouri		86.48	\$47,764	26.8%	3.3%	50%		87.3%	68%
Byrne Creek	100-200 mi	10-20	\$30,000-40,000	30-40%	< 3%	60-70%	< Half	Over 90%	50-60%
Flores Valley	200-300 mi	100-110	\$20,000-30,000	0-10%	< 3%	60-70%	> Half	Over 90%	50-60%
Oregon		39.65	\$50,229	36.1%	10.24%	54%		69%	54.7% ^f
Meyers Grove	< 100 mi	10-20	\$30,000-40,000	20-30%	3-7%	50-60%	About half	80-90%	50-60% ^f
Nilsenville	< 100 mi	30-40	\$40,000-50,000	30-40%	15-20%	50-60%	< Half	80-90%	50-60% ^f

Note. Unless otherwise noted, Missouri state and district data are from 2013-2014, accessed at Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2014) Missouri comprehensive data system; and Oregon state and district data are from 2013-2014, accessed at Oregon Department of Education (2014b) Report card. (2013-2014 was the year before teacher evaluation policy implementation in both states.)

^a School district data are intentionally inexact in order to protect district anonymity.

^b U.S. rural data are included in cases where available. Data are from Johnson, J. et al. (2014) and represent 2010-2011, the most recent year available.

^c Data are based on 2010-2014 data from World Media Group, LLC. (2016).

^d Data are from 2013-2014, published by National Center for Education Statistics (2016).

^e Data are from 2012-13, the most recent year available, published by National Center for Education Statistics (2016).

^f Data are from 2011-2012, the most recent year available, accessed at Oregon Department of Education (2014b) Report card.

recently implemented a new teacher evaluation system, Flores Valley participated in a pilot of the state's model teacher evaluation system. During the same year, the committee was reconvened in response to the new teacher evaluation mandate. District officials issued multiple invitations for teachers to participate, and before assembling the new 40-member committee, the administration reviewed several possible teacher evaluation systems and set up a choice between two models: the state model and the model developed by the University of Missouri's Network for Educator Effectiveness (NEE).⁹ Feedback from the entire teaching staff was reviewed by the committee before the NEE system was chosen. An assistant superintendent led the teacher evaluation effort, and both he and the superintendent were trusted and considered strong leaders. Participants expressed satisfaction with the process, which was considered inclusive and fair.

Despite consistent student performance and broad community support for the schools, fear and skepticism about Missouri's new teacher evaluation policy was an issue; teachers suspected that the policy would become a means for removing teachers using unreliable methods and that student performance would be tied unfairly to employment decisions. A principal explained his view of the district's intent: "[We are] trying to create a culture where there's an open-mindedness, and [teachers] realize you're not in there to get them. It's not a gotcha." In the face of this challenge, local actors were enthusiastic about the policy and the NEE system. As one teacher stated, "We're on the right path with what we've chosen."

Meyers Grove, Oregon

Meyers Grove School District covers a large area, incorporating multiple communities. The district's schools are spread out, with at least half an hour's drive between the furthest flung schools, while the nearest major city is nearly two hours away. The median household income is considerably lower than the average for rural communities, and the area is very sparsely populated. School performance is mixed, with AMO targets being met in some areas and not in others. The 2014 graduation rate was high – significantly higher than the state rate – but only

about half of Meyers Grove graduates go on to post-secondary education. (See Table 2.)

The teacher evaluation committee in Meyers Grove was fairly small, but it included representation from district administration, building principals, teachers, and the school board.¹⁰ The committee met at least monthly beginning in fall 2012, seeking an approach suited to the district's culture. Participants praised the cooperative nature of the process, crediting the highly-respected superintendent as well as the atmosphere of trust between district administration and the teachers union. Even so, a participant stated that a general lack of support for education in the community complicated teacher evaluation work. In addition, there were concerns about the influences behind the policy. A principal commented, "It's really hard when politicians try to tell educators how to do their job . . . I don't think you can always take a business model and apply it to education." Meyers Grove chose to adapt the Kim Marshall evaluation rubrics, a popular teacher evaluation model used in districts across the U.S. After piloting the model in 2012-2013, the committee "made a lot of tweaks" before full implementation the following year, and local actors reported being unified around the policy goal of professional growth throughout the process.

Nilsenville, Oregon

Nilsenville School District is located in a region where agriculture, timber, and natural beauty have contributed to the economy of the community. Student performance on state mandated tests is a concern in Nilsenville, and participants reported feeling intense pressure from the community to improve student achievement. In 2014, the school district failed to meet AMO targets in either reading or mathematics at any level – elementary, middle, or high school. The district has a high percentage of nonwhite students, and the percentage of English learners in Nilsenville is far above the U.S. average for rural schools. (See Table 2.)

Nilsenville designed its teacher evaluation system through a grant sponsored by the Chalkboard

⁹ NEE is a research-based teacher evaluation system that meets the requirements of the state policy. It is made available to school districts for a cost, which covers a range of supports, including training.

¹⁰ This was the only district in the study where the teacher evaluation committee included someone who was not employed by the district (the school board member mentioned here). This individual was not interviewed.

Project.¹¹ The district received over \$800,000 during the three years of the project, which began several years before Oregon passed a new teacher evaluation policy. Participants described the process of designing a new teacher evaluation system as collaborative, and both administrators and teachers mentioned the positive influence of a strong relationship between administration and the teachers union. The teacher evaluation team included district and building administration as well as teachers, and the team brought ideas to the broader staff for feedback more than twenty times. A district administrator commented: “That sense of buy-in from staff was hugely important.” Although participants reported their experience to have been positive, it wasn’t without its challenges. Outside the committee there was resistance to the notion that Chalkboard represented business leaders telling schools what to do. A principal explained:

You have these people coming in from business and telling you . . . “This is really how you should be evaluating your employees” . . . But all that the people who were not on the design team heard was, “This is how you should be teaching.” They’re thinking, “What do you mean? You make windows! Why are you telling me how to teach?”

Because Nilsenville developed its teacher evaluation system before the new state policy was enacted, the district became a model for teacher evaluation design in the state. Local actors reported that the district’s new teacher evaluation system and other recent innovations had resulted in a positive change in the district’s culture, toward a focus on teacher effectiveness as central to student success.

Findings and Discussion

Tension Between the Formative and Summative Purposes

This study supports the notion, established in the literature, that tension exists between the formative and summative purposes of teacher evaluation. At the local level, this tension was manifested in the contrast between local actors’ perceptions of the policy’s intent, which for most was associated with the formative purpose, and their understanding of the reasons for its adoption, which was related to the summative purpose. In the main,

administrators and teachers from the four participating rural districts embraced teacher evaluation’s formative purpose and were optimistic about the potential of the policy to contribute to professional growth. However, for several participants in the two low-performing districts – Byrne Creek and Nilsenville – summative issues explained *both* the policy’s goals and the motivations behind the policy. Though these educators personally valued the opportunity for professional growth provided by the policy, it appears likely that the pressures related to low test scores in these districts influenced participants to view public accountability as the primary intent of the policy.

Regarding the reasons for the policy’s adoption, there was consistency in local actors’ perceptions; in all four districts, nearly all participants cited only summative goals in explaining the policy’s adoption. They felt that policymakers advanced teacher evaluation reform primarily to make schools and teachers more accountable, and they were wary about the potential that the policy was driven by a business mindset. Further, local policy actors reported that many of their teaching colleagues perceived the policy as part of an agenda aimed at “getting teachers”; thus, teacher evaluation committee members were challenged to alter this perception.

In contrast with local policy actors, state-level actors in both Missouri and Oregon were unanimous in their emphasis on the formative purpose as they described their interpretation of the policy’s goals. State-level participants stressed the central importance of professional growth, and they explained that their organizations intentionally communicated this message in promoting the policy. In addition, state-level actors described their own efforts to ameliorate fears among educators. The SEA representative in Oregon explained, “[We] try to allay fears that . . . evaluation is about getting rid of bad teachers . . . That’s not the message that we want to convey; that’s not the intent. It’s about helping teachers improve.” State actors expressed concerns about the tension between teacher evaluation’s two purposes, noting that some local educators were slow to embrace the formative purpose because it represents a shift in the culture surrounding teacher evaluation – away from a focus on employment decision-making to a focus on continuous

¹¹ The Chalkboard Project is an independent education reform group funded by a consortium of philanthropic foundations in

Oregon. The group funded select districts to innovate educator evaluation and other practices.

improvement of instruction. A state actor in Missouri commented:

You're trying to develop people, but at the same time you're trying to be critical of them, which mixes what I call growth and development with employment decisions. And so I think there's a natural conflict there . . . When you're trying to develop teachers . . . you need [to give] good quality feedback, but then you have to step over that line into summative evaluation, which really is an employment decision.

Local Flexibility Brings Difficulties and Variations in Approach

This study finds that state teacher evaluation policies affording local control in system design require a significant commitment by local policy actors. Because of the flexibility afforded by the new state policies in Missouri and Oregon, districts devoted significant effort to local decision-making; the new policies found local policy actors engaged in detailed, exhaustive work over multiple years, and though the work was considered rewarding and fruitful, it required a considerable investment of resources. With both Missouri and Oregon historically exhibiting a preference for localism in policy matters (Louis, Gordon, Meath & Thomas, 2009), most participants embraced the policy's flexibility. However, some were frustrated by the need to invest so much time in system design, wishing for more direction from the state.

The study also illustrates that local processes of policy interpretation vary widely, yet commonalities exist. In all four districts, a teacher evaluation committee was assembled, though the size of these groups varied, ranging from less than 10 to about 40. Teacher evaluation committees utilized the policy's flexibility to choose an evaluation approach that suited the local context. Flores Valley and Nilsenville utilized a direct support organization to aid their efforts; Meyers Grove reviewed a variety of plans before selecting a publically available model; and Byrne Creek chose to adopt the state plan. The degree to which district administration controlled key decisions varied across the districts. It seems that in Byrne Creek, principals were heavily influenced by the superintendent in choosing a plan, while teachers were kept out of decision-making. In Flores Valley, district and building administration narrowed potential plans to two, and the 40-member committee was then given the task of choosing between them.

By contrast, in both Oregon districts, decision-making was marked by collaboration between administrators and teachers throughout the process. Partly in an effort to address teacher fear and skepticism, in two districts – Flores Valley and Nilsenville – local policy actors were intentional in repeatedly soliciting feedback from the broader staff.

Policy Intermediaries Relied Upon and Valued

Supporting research on policy mediation and interpretation, this study finds that state-level policy actors served as policy intermediaries, interpreting the policy themselves and aiding districts in policy interpretation. Local actors relied on policy intermediaries to assist them in interpreting the teacher evaluation policy and planning for implementation. After the passage of the teacher evaluation policy, local policy actors in these rural districts were hungry for resources from trusted state-level organizations, and these resources served as trail guides for the local journey toward implementation; in them, local actors found details about policy expectations, research on best practices to aid local decision-making, optional “routes” for successfully meeting policy demands, and checklists to help chart progress.

Further, this study finds that the efforts of policy intermediaries to collaborate on policy interpretation and implementation planning had a positive impact at the local level. This finding is related to Honig's (2004) research demonstrating that intermediary organizations expand their effectiveness by working with other intermediary groups to provide coordinated supports to implementers. State-level stakeholders in Oregon exhibited a much deeper, more sustained level of collaboration on teacher evaluation than did their counterparts in Missouri, but in both states local actors appreciated the efforts of policy intermediaries to work together.

In Oregon, collaborative efforts began before the policy was developed and continued through the rollout of the policy, with state groups offering joint training, issuing consistent guidance, and teaming to assist local districts. Local actors appreciated stakeholder groups' efforts to cooperate in interpreting the meaning of the policy. It was acknowledged by some local actors that the state-level groups did not always agree, but that they worked out their differences in order to benefit Oregon school districts. According to a state actor in

Oregon, the collaboration served as a model for teacher evaluation efforts at the local level:

It's been a good model for having issue driven collaboration . . . We're going to put aside other things right now and focus on this and come to the table as equals. That's been a good model, I think, for districts to look at.

The modeling was found to be especially helpful in Oregon's rural remote districts, which were characterized as having strained relationships between labor and management.

In Missouri, collaboration among state-level stakeholder groups on teacher evaluation policy activity was limited. However, there are signs that a new spirit of collaboration is alive in Missouri, as groups representing both P-12 and higher education are working together on multiple new initiatives. A state actor reported that local educators have expressed enthusiasm for these collaborative efforts: "People like that a lot. They feel like, you know, educators are pretty powerful when we can come together and agree on a strategy or plan."

Difficulties in Certain Settings

This study finds that the task of interpreting teacher evaluation policy and planning for implementation can be especially challenging in small rural school districts, supporting previous research findings about the negative effects of limited capacity in small rural schools, along with the tendency for policy mandates to be designed for suburban and urban settings (Budge, 2010; Johnson, L. D. et al., 2014; Battelle for Kids, 2016).¹² State-level actors were especially attuned to this issue, explaining that small rural districts experienced challenges related to lack of capacity in small schools, challenges related to establishing inter-rater reliability among evaluators in small and/or rural schools, and a concern about limited training opportunities in rural and remote districts. One state-level actor in Oregon expressed serious concerns over the "practical reality" that every district must meet the same policy expectations, regardless of its capacity to do so. Other state-level actors, both in Missouri and Oregon, noted that small districts lack the administrative structures and accompanying staff expertise to lead the work of designing a local approach. Like most of the new state teacher evaluation policies that have been developed in

recent years, Missouri and Oregon's policies are complex, involving changes to both administrative and classroom practices, and requiring new teaching standards, multiple measures of teacher performance, professional development supports, evaluator training, and ties to personnel decision-making. It is fair to argue that the new state policies, like some others that have been developed in response to federal requirements, have been designed without consideration to the limited administrative and professional development supports commonly available in rural districts compared to urban and suburban districts.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study examined how local actors are responding to a new chapter in the accountability movement and how rural educators, in particular, are experiencing the demands of new teacher evaluation policies and the challenges of interpreting them for the local context. As a case study, this research is not generalizable to the broader population of U.S. states and rural school districts, but instead is intended to inform future research and theory building. Findings are further limited by the reality that the study was conducted in only two states, and only a small number of local and state-level policy actors were interviewed within each state. The participating districts were not randomly selected, nor were they selected with the intent of representing geographic regions within the two states. Further research in this area might be broadened to include more states and, within each state, a purposive sampling approach aimed at tapping the perspectives of educators from particular regions might strengthen the research. Another limitation is that, in the study's second phase, only four state-level stakeholders were interviewed in each state, and they represented only those organizations identified by local actors as helpful resources on teacher evaluation. A follow-up study might seek input from more stakeholders, perhaps including some that represent business and political interests, potentially deepening results regarding the policy context.

Acknowledging the reality that most U.S. states have only recently enacted new teacher evaluation policies, this study reveals potential areas for further research. Few studies have investigated whether

¹² This theme was more prevalent in Oregon than in Missouri.

teacher evaluation achieves its formative purpose, the improvement of teaching practice, regardless of the setting. In rural schools specifically, much is to be learned about whether educators are able to capitalize on the promise of teacher evaluation to improve teaching and learning despite the one-size-fits-all nature of most state policies and the limited capacity of rural districts. It will be important to explore whether the challenges faced by small, rural, and remote districts identified by this study will ultimately confound the policy's intent. In highlighting the value of policy intermediaries, this study raises important questions about the need for intermediary support in policy interpretation, the nature of the work of policy intermediaries in the rural context, and the explicit ways in which rural districts may benefit when multiple intermediary organizations collaborate in the rollout of a new policy. In particular, the issue of collaboration across intermediary organizations is under studied, and further research in this area may uncover specific strategies and approaches that can help to guide the work of intermediary organizations as well as the policymakers and school districts that rely on them.

Conclusion

The policy focus on teacher evaluation as a means of improving public education finds multiple actors at multiple levels of the education policy system wrestling with new mandates. This study's findings about the tension between teacher evaluation's formative and summative goals, the intense commitment required when state policies

offer local flexibility, the positive influence of intermediary organizations on policy interpretation, and the difficulty of enacting new teacher evaluation policies in small, rural, and remote school districts help to illustrate the realities associated with teacher evaluation reform. It is important to note that, although they faced challenges in interpreting teacher evaluation policies and planning for implementation, rural educators in this study were optimistic about the potential of the new policies to become meaningful systems for teacher growth. However, local policy actors remain wary about reform efforts that smack of a business mindset, and they are concerned about the potential that unreliable methods may be utilized to remove teachers.

The environment surrounding the implementation of teacher evaluation systems has been altered by the December 2015 reauthorization of ESEA, which eliminated the federal policy influence on teacher evaluation, leaving it up to states to maintain or modify their policies. Some state legislatures began reviewing their teacher evaluation mandates in 2016 and 2017, with several states rethinking the common requirement for measures of student academic growth to be a central component of teacher evaluation systems (Hewitt, 2016; Felton, 2017). It remains to be seen how states will respond to the decreased federal emphasis on teacher evaluation, but it is hoped that state policymakers will consider the complexities of enacting teacher evaluation reform in rural schools as they review and potentially update these policies.

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About the author:

Jane Gilles is a veteran educator with experience in both PreK-12 and higher education. She holds a Ph.D. in education policy and leadership from the University of Minnesota. As an independent consultant, Jane provides services in the areas of policy interpretation and implementation, teacher and leader effectiveness, educator preparation, and professional development.