Orienting Schools Toward Equity: Subgroup Accountability Pressure and School-Level Responses

Rachel Garver
Montclair State University, garverr@mail.montclair.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/educ-leadership-facpubs

Part of the Educational Leadership Commons

MSU Digital Commons Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Educational Leadership at Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Department of Educational Leadership Scholarship and Creative Works by an authorized administrator of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@montclair.edu.
Orienting Schools Toward Equity: Subgroup Accountability Pressure and School-Level Responses

Rachel Garver

To cite this article: Rachel Garver (2017) Orienting Schools Toward Equity: Subgroup Accountability Pressure and School-Level Responses, The Educational Forum, 81:2, 160-174, DOI: 10.1080/00131725.2017.1280756

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2017.1280756

Published online: 01 Mar 2017.

Article views: 293

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Orienting Schools Toward Equity: Subgroup Accountability Pressure and School-Level Responses

Rachel Garver
Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, New York University, New York, New York, USA

Abstract
This article examines school-level responses to subgroup accountability pressure through an ethnographic case study of a school cited for failing to make adequate yearly progress for student subgroups. Concerns about the calculations and measures used to derive the citation and reservations about acting on accountability data delegitimized the citation and rendered the identified subgroups irrelevant to daily practice. Under district guidance, compliance with subgroup accountability was independent of the school’s internal efforts to promote equity.

Key words: accountability, compliance, data-driven decision making, diversity, equity, policy implementation, political aspects/governmental influence, school districts, subgroup accountability pressure.

The role of U.S. federal policy in promoting educational equity has expanded since the Civil Rights Act of 1964, most recently through an accountability regime focused on tracking outcomes of student subgroups (Superfine, 2013). The 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), referred to as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and its most recent reauthorization in 2015 as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), require states to identify and intervene in schools where any subgroup based on race, economic disadvantage, disability, or English proficiency is lagging. Cited schools must take action to improve the achievement of identified student groups for subgroup accountability pressure to fulfill its intended effects. However, federal education policy’s ability to orient school-level practice toward particular aims has been found to be tenuous or conditional (Honig, 2006).
Orienting Schools Toward Equity

In this article, I draw on an ethnographic case study of Germaine Middle School (GMS) to understand how schools interpret and respond to subgroup accountability pressure. (The names of the school and individuals are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.) At the time of my study, GMS had been cited for several years by the state for failing to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for three of its subgroups. To what extent, if at all, did the citation (a) draw attention to subgroup equity and (b) focus efforts on the state-identified subgroups at GMS? What mechanisms either facilitated or inhibited the relationship between policy and practice? I show that while subgroup accountability pressure encouraged GMS to focus on the comparative performance of subgroups, it did not concentrate efforts around the state-identified subgroups. GMS was committed to addressing its achievement gaps, yet school-based—rather than state-based—analyses of which subgroups were most in need drove instructional reforms. The staff’s confusion, skepticism, and hesitance with regard to utilizing the state’s measures delegitimized the state findings. However, the district insisted on aligning compliance efforts to state expectations, making compliance symbolic and irrelevant to daily practice.

Subgroup Accountability Pressure

The introduction of subgroup accountability under NCLB reflected lessons learned from state accountability systems in the 1990s. States that did not disaggregate their monitoring and interventions by subgroup saw schools take actions that improved overall performance at the expense of equity. Staff focused on students in the “bubble” just below proficiency, while other students lacked support. Low-performing students were advised to stay home on testing days and, because students with disabilities (SWDs) were excluded from testing, were referred at an increased rate to special education to boost school ratings (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Vasquez Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). The inclusion of subgroup accountability pressure in NCLB was widely supported as an important mechanism for ensuring that ESEA would promote equity as it sought to raise standards (Center on Education Policy, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Hanushek & Raymond, 2005).

Subgroup accountability pressure remains a central component of ESEA with the reauthorization of the law in 2015. In the years preceding the 2015 reauthorization, NCLB waivers granted states the ability to create “super subgroups,” aggregating some subgroups for the purposes of accountability and thereby introducing the possibility of masking inequalities within a composite category. However, ESSA re instituted the requirement to calibrate data reporting and interventions by individual subgroups. Under ESSA, states are expected to define when a school has a subgroup that is “consistently underperforming” and thereby subject to intervention.

The failure to meet AYP for one or more subgroups—typically SWDs—was the most common reason that a school became cited under NCLB (Eckes & Swando, 2009; Hamilton et al., 2007). Researchers in turn found that schools were effectively punished for diversity, since the more subgroups a school had, the more at risk it was for a citation (Kane & Staiger, 2003; Kim & Sunderman, 2005). Moreover, a school with high needs across its student body that failed AYP for overall performance saw a decrease in achievement the following year, while a school with one low-performing subgroup could more effectively focus its efforts (Hemelt, 2011; Krieg, 2011). Indeed, some scholars found that identified subgroups did show
Garver

significant gains the year following a citation in comparison to subgroups that were not identified, although improvement was not equal across subgroups (Hemelt, 2011; Lauen & Gaddis, 2012). Accountability policy has most often been studied through large data sets that speak to its effects on standardized test scores; however, uncovering the mechanisms that connect a citation to subsequent student performance is necessary to explain prior findings and to design policy reforms that may more effectively link policy and practice (Booher-Jennings, 2005).

Linking Policy and Practice

Policy implementation lies at the intersection of individual meaning-making and organizational constraints. “Loose coupling” between federal, state, and school levels has allowed for the flexibility necessary to enact policy within vastly different contexts, but has also made the relationship between policy and practice indirect and unpredictable (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Weick, 1976). Those in charge of enacting policy have a significant influence on its impact through the exercise of discretion and resistance, both often necessary to bringing inflexible mandates into the world of practice (Lipsky, 1980). With the rise of the standards and accountability movements, federal policy has arguably been more closely tied to classroom practice, marking a curtailment of local agency and requiring a nuanced reconceptualization of loose coupling (Spillane, 2006). Staff members’ beliefs, personal histories, and sense-making of regulations remain nonetheless as important to examine as school capacity, demographics, and the specific language of legislation in comprehending the processes linking policy and practice (Coburn, 2005, 2006; Cohen & Ball, 1990; Cohen, Moffitt, & Goldin, 2007; Spillane, 2006; Spillane, Diamond, et al., 2002; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Only by examining schools as inhabited institutions, or products of individuals’ meaning-making and interactions within organizational constraints (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006), can we adequately account for the mechanisms that chart the pathways “from the capital to the classroom” (Center on Education Policy, 2003).

Methodology

By contextualizing day-to-day processes within their social and organizational environments, an ethnographic case study is well suited to reveal the school-level mechanisms that shape the reception and response to a citation under subgroup accountability. I selected GMS as my site of study because of the acute needs and unique diversity of its student body, which exacerbated the staff’s dilemma of how to distribute resources, supports, and interventions—an ongoing challenge shaped in part by the school’s citation. Asian, Black, and Latino students each constituted more than 20% but less than 50% of the student body. GMS was diverse, but racially segregated; less than 3% of the student body was White. Approximately 15% of students were classified as English Learners (ELs) and 15% as SWDs, and the entire student body received free lunch. Located in a high-poverty neighborhood of a U.S. city, the public Grades 6–8 school reflected the segregated minority schools that have been growing in number with resegregation (Frankenberg, 2009).

During the 2014–2015 school year, I was embedded within GMS and its district for 122 days. I observed interactions and instruction in all common areas of the school building (e.g., the library) and in classrooms and offices where the teacher or occupant provided consent. Fifty-three staff members allowed me access to their classroom or office throughout the
Orienting Schools Toward Equity

school year, and I observed more than 80 lessons across grade levels and content areas. On select days, I trailed administrators and teacher leaders who were key figures in the school’s negotiation of policies such as subgroup accountability. In this article, I draw heavily upon my observations of staff and parent meetings (Table 1), which were the most common sites where GMS’s citation was referenced or the school’s alternative efforts to identify the student subgroups most in need were carried out. I also conducted 73 semistructured interviews: 26 with classroom teachers, 21 with students, 12 with other school staff members, five with district administrators, five with parents, and four with school administrators.

Field notes and interview transcriptions were analyzed through several iterative rounds of open coding, during which emerging themes were defined with increasing precision and mapped in relation to one another. For this article, I drew upon data that directly related to the school’s citation and that spoke to GMS’s efforts to identify which of its student groups were most in need. My analysis was attuned to how subgroup accountability pressure shaped GMS’s deliberations and decisions regarding the distribution of interventions and supports—in other words, how subgroup accountability impacted daily opportunity provision (Pollock, 2008).

GMS and Its Citation

During the 2014–2015 school year, GMS was cited by the state for failing to meet benchmarks for three of its subgroups: SWDs, Asian students, and multiracial students. GMS had one more year to demonstrate adequate subgroup growth to rid itself of the citation before advancing to the next set of interventions, according to the school’s principal.

The citation brought both additional demands and resources. The district had recently shifted from a punitive to a supportive approach in monitoring cited schools, but assistance came with increased oversight. For example, GMS received extra funding because of its citation, but it was in turn required to create a detailed academic plan that documented how these funds were being used to target the state-identified subgroups. Other consequences of the citation were more symbolic. The school’s citation status was public and thereby affected the reputations of the school, public education in GMS’s neighborhood, and the district as a whole. Parents were offered few measures of school quality, and a citation from the state was one clear indication of a weakness. The Parents Association (PA) president understood the school’s citation as a stain on their community and beyond: “We are not
Garver

meeting the requirement for yearly progress, we didn’t do that well, unfortunately. ... [It is] not a good criteria to be in. ... One school can affect [the] district [rating].” The citation negatively characterized the school, threatening the community’s faith in GMS’s ability to adequately educate their children. It also contributed to the perception that schools in GMS’s neighborhood were inferior to schools in more affluent parts of the city—a belief that led some parents to join multiyear waiting lists for scarce subsidized housing units in more desirable areas. For the district, a concentration of cited schools meant additional state oversight, which was time-intensive and costly.

Subgroup accountability pressure more tightly tied the reputations and fates of the school and the district. Such alignment is built into accountability policy and potentially encourages investment in subgroup equity at all levels of school governance. Below, I show that this broadened and unified accountability encouraged a commitment to equity at GMS, but it did not bring additional attention to the state-identified subgroups.

“Focus on the Gaps”: A Commitment to Equity

GMS’s principal immediately established that “achievement gaps” would be the focus of the school year at the initial administrative, teacher leader, and whole-staff meetings. According to him, this attention to equity among subgroups was new. “We absolutely neglected the gaps from a leadership perspective last year,” he reflected with the assistant principals.

Apart from the school’s citation, several factors may have informed the principal’s recent commitment to equity. In the past, the school had practiced a philosophy described by the principal as “a rising tide lifts all ships.” GMS had sought to raise expectations and the quality of instruction for all students. However, this approach had been unsuccessful, according to the principal’s analysis of the state test data and as evidenced by the school’s citation (to the extent that the state’s determinations could be considered valid):

I do feel like the tide rose, [but] I don’t feel like it lifted all ships. I feel like there were kids that had needs ... that had to do with a different kind of quality of instruction, not just the overall quality of instruction, [that] doesn’t go down there and get their feet out of the mud, and that needs to happen.

GMS’s initiatives to raise achievement were unsuccessful because they were homogenously focused on all students. The principal had spent time over the summer analyzing the school’s standardized test scores: “I had a moment of truth when looking at the data that the gaps need to be the focus.” He also reported reading print media and educational research that stressed the importance of equity. GMS’s citation was one more reason—one with the force of heightened district and state scrutiny and of specific compliance tasks requiring attention to equity—for the principal’s commitment to address achievement gaps.

Teacher leaders and assistant principals were key figures in translating and transferring the school’s new focus to the rest of the staff during department meetings. Taking up the principal’s charge, talk at staff meetings, planning during teacher collaboration sessions, and analyses of student data testified to a widespread concern for equity among GMS’s teachers or, at the least, an effort to respond to their supervisor’s expectations.
At the end of the school year, the principal was cautiously proud about the progress made in changing the school culture to prioritize achievement gaps. He believed that the staff had accepted greater responsibility for inequalities among student groups and that equity had gained prominence in the teachers’ consciousness. He reasoned that because the achievement gaps were precipitated by several factors, including some outside of teachers’ control, getting his staff to accept their contribution to or reinforcement of the gaps was a necessary precursor to changing instruction and seeing results in student outcomes.

**Delegitimization of State Determinations and Irrelevance of State-Identified Subgroups**

The disparities in growth among student groups distressed the staff at GMS, but they showed no special concern for the performance of the state-identified subgroups. When I asked the principal which subgroups GMS had been cited for, the inattention given to the state’s analysis was made explicit as I received two distinct answers at different times during the year: once, SWDs, ELs, and Hispanic students; at another time, SWDs, low-income students, and Hispanic students. Neither of these accounts aligned with the publicly available data concerning GMS’s citation. Why did the state-identified subgroups hold little weight in the school’s work of determining who was in need of interventions, resources, and additional supports? The state’s lack of transparency in calculations, the staff’s lack of faith in state measures, and the perception that a direct response to state findings was unethical delegitimized the state determinations and made the state-identified subgroups irrelevant at GMS.

**Lack of Transparency in State Calculations**

From the perspective of staff members at GMS, the state’s process for identifying lagging subgroups was opaque. The principal expressed to me his confusion about how the state came to give GMS a citation: “Whatever progress targets we had … I don’t know how they calculated it. … I’m not completely versed on how they came up with it, but we didn’t meet whatever target … they had for performance.” Despite the principal’s lack of clarity, he was the actor at GMS with the greatest access to information about the school’s citation and with the most training in data analysis. Therefore, other staff members relied on him to explain the state’s process, illustrating the importance of school administrators as interpreters of policy for teachers (Coburn, 2005; Spillane, Diamond, et al., 2002). In conversation with one teacher, the principal sought to explain how the citation came about, but quickly succumbed to his confusion:

> I don’t know what the formula is now, with how they come up with groups. … They are not very transparent about it. … Is it growth percentile? … I don’t know what their basis was. … Their formula for it is not transparent. … Their basis for it is not transparent. … They just give you your groups.

The lack of transparency in the state’s analysis meant that schools were left with the option of simply accepting that the state-identified subgroups accurately pointed to the students who were most in need. However, the time, organizational reshuffling, and financial resources that GMS would dedicate to targeting its most needy students discouraged a
Garver

ready acceptance of the state’s conclusions. Without an understanding of the calculations that led to the school’s citation, staff gave the state-identified subgroups little weight in their daily practice.

Lack of Faith in State Measures

The state based its citation on comparative subgroup growth as measured by standardized state tests, but the staff at GMS had limited faith in the state exams and scores. Teachers and, to a somewhat lesser extent, administrators held the view that ongoing interactions between teachers and students and regular classroom assessment made teachers the superior experts of students’ abilities and needs in comparison to the state test scores’ one-time snapshot of student performance. Accordingly, interventions and supports based on students’ state test scores faced criticism from teachers and were often supplemented with teacher recommendations. For example, Jon, an eighth-grade math teacher well respected among students, colleagues, and administrators, explained that the math intervention program was problematic because they had the “wrong kids.” He told me that some of his top students were pulled out for additional support and others who struggled with basic computation were not. Despite the reliance on test scores to select students, Jon submitted a list of the students he believed needed math intervention to the program’s coordinator—recommendations that were not put to use. Teacher referrals, according to Jon, were more reliable than the state test in identifying students in need of additional support. Moreover, the citation was based on state test scores several years old, on the performance of students who had since matriculated to high school. According to the principal, the state offered no updates to the list of subgroups using more recent tests, further undermining the relevance of the citation.

The validity of the state test scores was particularly suspect at the time of my study because of the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The state test had been significantly revised to align with the recently embraced standards, and it continued to be refined annually to more closely measure students’ mastery of the Common Core curriculum. The state test’s ongoing modification, teachers’ evolving confidence in teaching to the CCSS, and students’ adjustment to the new process-based focus of the Common Core all cast doubt on the reliability of the state scores in the years preceding my study that were drawn on to determine the school’s citation. The principal suggested that the change could at least contextualize, if not justify, the school’s citation. “It was the first year of the Common Core testing,” he noted when I asked why the school had been cited by the state.

Several GMS and district staff members understood the adoption of the CCSS as contributing to the school’s citation because they believed the shift was a challenge that not all students faced on equal footing; it was particularly hard for certain subgroups. This perspective—that the CCSS contributed to achievement gaps—was in tension with the intention of the Common Core to hold all students to the same high expectations. One district administrator explained the Common Core’s impact on ELs:

I strongly believe that the Common Core has really said, “We’re all the same. We all need to meet the standards.” Many years ago, we used to go to schools that the bilingual class was either in the basement, or in the attic, or hiding in a little closet. We can’t do that anymore. We can’t. We can’t afford it because now we have the same levels
She then noted that schools in the district had been frequently identified for the inadequate growth of their ELs, linking the equity-minded CCSS to greater inequality between ELs and non-ELs and, thereby, to a school’s citation. Schools with subgroups that may struggle to adjust to the CCSS, such as ELs and SWDs, are more likely to be cited under the purview of subgroup accountability pressure. Moreover, a school with 20 ELs is less likely to be cited than a school with 40 ELs because states have selected different subgroup size cutoffs, ranging from 30 to 100 students. Further research is needed to understand the role of Common Core adoption in the relationship between the number and type of subgroups in a school and the likelihood of receiving a citation under ESEA (Kane & Staiger, 2003; Kim & Sunderman, 2005).

Ethical Considerations in Responding to State Determinations

Staff members at GMS may not have taken action in direct response to the state determinations even if they had perceived the state-identified subgroups as legitimate indications of the students most in need. With extensive media attention to instances of cheating on state standardized tests (e.g., Freeman, 2015), as well as widely disseminated research on gaming practices that engineer advantages within the incentive structures of accountability policies (e.g., Booher-Jennings, 2005; Vasquez Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008), the case of GMS suggested that efforts to reform practice according to accountability data have been stigmatized. When I asked the principal what the school needed to do or show to get rid of its citation, he responded with some resistance:

It’s not that I don’t think we need to service populations better. … It’s that I don’t believe in trying to manipulate data to make the state happy. … The thing is because it’s growth-based and not performance-based. When it was performance-based you really saw bad practice. You saw this whole concept of “pushable” and “slippable.” Who are our kids that we can bump up and prevent from bumping down? I always felt that was a disingenuous way to approach teaching and learning, so that you can manipulate a score to make the state happy.

Invoking educational research that has revealed strategies schools use to improve their evaluation, the principal was hesitant to take action in direct response to the school’s citation, even as he remained attentive to the equitable growth of student subgroups.

Although the state’s determinations could have been considered a helpful tool for GMS in identifying the subgroups most in need of additional supports, using the test data in this straightforward way was framed as manipulative. The application of data created for the purposes of accountability was perceived as disingenuous, even as data-driven decision making (DDDM) was embraced at GMS. The school was committed to creating and using its own interim assessment growth data, which it saw not only as more informative, but also as ethically superior. The logic of subgroup accountability pressure encouraged GMS to take action in direct response to the state’s citation, but the integration of data usage for accountability and for informing practice was undermined by the conflation of disingenuous manipulation and responsiveness.
The Right Groups: School-Level Determinations of Subgroup Needs

The principal led GMS through its own process of determining which subgroups were lagging while the state’s assessment was considered illegitimate for reasons explained above. Adopting the emphasis on DDDM from district administrators and from his leadership program, the principal and his staff analyzed the state data as well as the school’s interim growth data. (Each content-area team at GMS determined what would be used to assess student learning over time. Both unit tests and short assessments designed specifically to measure growth were employed.) The principal worked closely with one teacher who also served as the school’s data specialist, assigning her analyses to run and regularly monitoring her work. By precisely identifying its gaps, the principal reasoned, GMS would efficiently focus its efforts: “I am going to look at the data more closely and make sure that the groups that we are identifying are the right groups.” Skeptical of the state determinations and confident in his own abilities with data, he expressed a need to come to his own conclusions: “I don’t think their methodologies are as meaningful. … Otherwise I wouldn’t do any of this.” By constructing their own understanding of who was most in need, rather than accepting the conclusions handed down by the state, GMS’s data analyses would be endowed with the legitimacy and relevance necessary to drive daily practice.

“The Disengaged Minority Male”

GMS’s staff determined that boys, and Black boys in particular, were most in need at GMS, which diverged from the state’s findings. The principal’s confidence that Black boys were at the center of the school’s worst gap increased over the school year: “I have a sense of what the profile of [the child we are not supporting] is … [the] disengaged minority male. … That’s where the biggest gap is. … The more that I look at the evidence … this is the population.” He often referred to Black (or Black and Latino) students as “minorities,” which is notable considering the absence of White students at GMS as well as the fact that Black and Latino students together constituted the majority of the student body.

GMS’s focus on “minority males”—born from conversations concerning but not determined by the state and school data—drove staff members’ equity work. In the seventh-grade literacy classrooms, where the gap was identified as particularly stark, teachers revised the curriculum to better engage Black boys, swapping in texts written by male authors or with male protagonists and replacing content with topics the teachers believed would appeal to boys. The literacy coach explained how they revised a unit on public addresses—by replacing a speech by Nobel Prize–winner Malala Yousafzai with one by singer John Legend—and another unit on beauty: “We added two more male speeches and we’re trying to do more. … We had the beauty unit but it was too much about girls.” Money was spent to purchase resources aimed at engaging Black boys. The literacy coach, who had significant discretion in ordering books for GMS, focused on stocking the shelves with Black male authors. One eighth-grade math teacher used March Madness to teach probability in order to appeal to her male students.

According to the principal and GMS’s data specialist, the curricular changes made in the seventh-grade literacy classrooms were effective. The interim school-level growth data showed that boys were improving at a faster rate than girls. The data specialist explained,
The boys were doing worse than the girls. Why is that? … The curriculum was on beauty, on things that were more girl-oriented, so the girls were performing better. They switched it this year, and that gap closed. … They changed the curriculum. … They also added more boys’ topics.

The principal noted that seventh-grade boys were improving faster than the girls, and he explained to the staff that it was a positive turn—when one group was behind, their growth needed to exceed the improvement of others: “In the seventh grade, the boys were catching up when you looked at the midyear data, and the seventh-grade curriculum had been deliberately addressed because last year’s curriculum was very female-centric, so … very deliberate adjustments were made.” School-based determinations about which subgroups were most in need drove GMS’s equity work, while the state-identified subgroups remained irrelevant to daily practice.

“Put Yourself in the Position of the State Auditor”: District Pressure to Use State Measures and State-Identified Subgroups

All schools in the district had to craft an Annual Academic Plan (AAP), but cited schools such as GMS had to follow a more intensive and detailed template that was sent to the state for review. The principal convened a committee of teachers to assist him in writing the AAP, directing them to center the school’s goals, action plans, and measures of success around its new commitment to addressing achievement gaps. The committee drew on the interim classroom assessment growth data to set goals and measures of success in an effort to make the AAP a meaningful document that represented the understandings and practices at GMS.

However, the pressure GMS was under to conform to the state’s measures and determinations became clear one week before the document was due, when the district held a workshop to support principals in writing their AAPs. The presentation provided an overview of the format and the district’s expectations for the document, including how to write measurable goals and to substantiate a needs assessment. For both of these tasks, the district facilitators emphasized the use of state test scores as data points. GMS’s principal raised his hand to object. He shared with the district administrators and the other principals present that he was planning to make his AAP more actionable by utilizing internal data to measure progress instead of state tests whose results were not produced quickly enough to be of use in the same school year:

GMS’s principal: [Using] school-based assessments … we have a better sense of understanding where students are and understanding whether our instruction is having an influence on students. … [The] state assessments are something we are accountable to … [because we are a cited] school. … Is it a requirement that we have a state assessment goal?

District administrator: If a school is identified by the state for a subject area or subgroup, it is in their best interest to refer to state data. … If a school is in good standing, there is flexibility of using internal markers. … The state is going to be looking for this. … [The school] is receiving funds
based on the understanding that these state funds and federal funds are going to be used for [the] area of identification. … I make that distinction between a school that’s identified versus a school that’s in good standing. … Some of our state liaisons are very anal. … The state is on us. … The only way they can impact us is to hold up our money. … Cite something that’s published. … If it’s two years ago, so be it. … It has to be something that can be opened up and checked. … [The AAP for cited schools] has to specifically focus on the state findings. … They need to see that you are making reference [to their findings and recommendations]. … Put yourself in the position of the state auditor. … If you reference something internal, [they] cannot access that. (Excerpt from field notes)

The district administrator rebuffed the principal’s attempt to make the AAP, a central mechanism of compliance, more relevant by using internal data. The utility of the data was deprioritized in relation to its accessibility and legitimacy from the state’s perspective. Despite the various audiences of the publicly available AAP, including parents and community members, the administrators advised that the document be written from the singular perspective of the state. The district’s interest rested in avoiding increased intervention from the state, such as a state audit. (See Coburn & Talbert, 2006, for how organizational position impacts perspectives on data use.) As interpreter and intermediary for the state, the district derived its leverage in part from the extra funds afforded to cited schools such as GMS, demonstrating that a more supportive approach to school change (as opposed to earlier policies that sought to shut down underperforming schools) did not come with diminished external intervention. The citation brought increased oversight from the state and more intensive guidance from the district.

At GMS’s next AAP committee meeting, the news of the district’s guidance had spread, and it was understood as nonnegotiable. Before the meeting began, one teacher informed another that they had to use an “external measure” in setting their goals. When the data specialist objected that such measures are problematic, the teacher explained that the principal had argued against using external measures in the meeting, but that the district administrator made it clear that because GMS was a cited school, they had no choice. The committee members were frustrated by how the district undermined their efforts to make the AAP more relevant and resentfully acknowledged the constraints entailed by their citation.

The imposition of state data that lacked legitimacy made the AAP an instrument to symbolically comply with subgroup accountability pressure (Edelman, 1992), rather than one of leverage to orient schools toward equity and cited subgroups. Forced to focus the AAP on subgroups different from those the principal thought were most in need, the document lost authority within GMS: “I know that we have a performance gap when it comes to SWDs and ELs; I am leery of Hispanic [students being a cited subgroup]. … They don’t say gender. … I’ll take what they say and throw it in [the AAP], but I don’t think their methodologies are as meaningful [as ours].” The document’s insignificance was made clear by its rare mention following its submission to the district. The PA president lamented the wasted opportunity that the AAP had become at GMS: “We are so far behind on really using that
Orienting Schools Toward Equity

[AAP] and really doing some work through it monthly.” She expressed her disappointment that the AAP was not driving practice at GMS nor serving as a standard to measure progress.

The AAP was made public after it was submitted to the district and state, but transparency was marred by the document’s irrelevance to daily practice. The process that was responsible for the AAP’s lost importance has implications for the transparency built into much of the accountability regime—including the public release of test scores, school climate survey data, teacher value-added measures, and school and district ratings. While the consequences of transparency can be significant (e.g., teacher reputation and family residential decisions), the validity of the artifact made public may be low, constituting “symbolic transparency.” Guided by the district to cater to state interests, the AAP lost not only its utility for GMS, but also its integrity for the public.

Conclusion

Drawing on an ethnographic case study of a public middle school, I show how subgroup accountability pressure encouraged attention to inequalities within the student body, but did not lead to practices that targeted the state-identified subgroups. Confusion about the state’s calculations, lack of faith in the state’s measures, and concerns about the ethics of using accountability data to inform practice delegitimized the state determinations and made the state-identified subgroups irrelevant to daily practice. Staff at GMS engaged in their own data analyses and assessed that Black boys were most in need—a conclusion that drove curricular and instructional reforms. GMS’s attempt to make compliance relevant by foregrounding its own data practices and its understandings of which subgroups needed additional supports was undermined by the district, which insisted that GMS prioritize the interests of the state. As a result, compliance became symbolic and irrelevant to daily practice at GMS.

Federal policy has been important for promoting equity across the wide variance in states’ politics and practices. The case of GMS indicates how subgroup accountability can be implemented more effectively to fulfill its aims by accounting for the importance of staff beliefs and the utility of accountability data for informing instruction. Calculations that lead to a citation need to be presented to schools with transparency and clarity. When school-based staff understand the process behind state determinations, the list of cited subgroups will be perceived with greater legitimacy. Schools such as GMS that serve a diverse, high-needs population need to apply their resources efficiently, and they are unlikely to take action in response to state findings without coming to understand their foundation. Increased transparency would help legitimize state determinations and thereby bridge the divide between data use for accountability and data use to inform practice.

The district’s role in shaping GMS’s data use illuminated the power relationships that imbue data practices. Henig (2012) challenged the typical characterization of DDDM as objective by drawing attention to the actors and interests within decisions concerning which data are used, how data are analyzed, how findings are explained, and to what ends data are put to use. The district pressured GMS to prioritize data designed for evaluation that were ill suited to informing instruction. Since 2001, ESEA has attempted to make schools more data driven, but as the case of GMS suggests, the potential for accountability data
Garver
to drive practice is impacted by the beliefs and capacities of school staff as well as school–district and school–state relationships, which are affected by federal policy (Datnow, Park, & Kennedy-Lewis, 2012).

GMS’s citation justified the district’s heavy-handed guidance regarding the AAP, illustrating that subgroup accountability can affect school–district relationships. Some have argued that the standards and accountability movements have more closely aligned federal, state, district, and school administration (Diamond, 2012; Spillane, 2006); however, the tighter coupling entailed by GMS’s citation did not lead to implementation that more closely fulfilled the policy’s intentions, challenging previous theories that have linked unintended consequences to the loose coupling of the various levels of educational administration.

Districts play a critical role as interpreters and intermediaries for the state, as the case of GMS demonstrates. They co-construct federal and state policy by requiring practices of cited schools that are not detailed in the original regulations. District meetings are powerful sites for shaping school-level actors’ understandings of policy. These gatherings can homogenize ideas, practices, and terminology horizontally across schools, leading to isomorphism in schools’ responses to subgroup accountability pressure. Districts need to be thoughtful about the intermediary role they play and conscious of their impact on policy outcomes (Honig & Hatch, 2004). They can account for significant differences in implementation (Spillane, 2006), and further study is needed to understand to what extent the variation in subgroup accountability implementation and subsequent student outcomes is due to schools, districts, or states. Districts that prioritize the avoidance of a state audit may sacrifice the possibility of guiding schools through the compliance process in a way that ameliorates achievement gaps. Familiar with the school context, districts are well positioned to provide support to schools that need suggestions for practices proven effective in assisting identified subgroups—guidance that is absent at the federal and state levels.

Despite initial tensions, GMS cooperated with the district to present an image of compliance to the state. Symbolic compliance was a necessity for GMS to manage its citation within the constraints created by the district, rather than a strategy of regulatory avoidance. While “symbolic compliance as evasion” has been portrayed as undermining equity, the consequences of “symbolic compliance as organizational coping” may not have the same impact. GMS contradicts the image of schools as organizations incentivized to sacrifice substantive reform for better external evaluations under accountability policy, as symbolic compliance did not stop GMS from pursuing what the staff believed was important equity work internally. At the same time, GMS’s response to its citation legitimized subgroup accountability as a policy for promoting equity, despite its ineffectiveness in encouraging attention to identified subgroups. By making subgroup accountability appear effective, symbolic compliance detracted from alternative policy approaches to educational equity that focus on equal inputs or systemic factors, such as wrap-around models that attend to the impacts of poverty or desegregation programs.

Acknowledgments
The author thanks the anonymous reviewers for and participants of the 2016 Sociology of Education Association conference and the participants of the 2016 New York University
summer dissertation writing program in Paris for their thoughtful feedback on earlier versions of this work.

**Funding**

This article is based on research that was made possible in part by financial assistance from the Ruth Landes Memorial Research Fund, a program of the Reed Foundation.

**References**


Garuver


