HIGH LEVERAGE POLICY FRAMEWORK

A NEW ENGLAND SECONDARY SCHOOL CONSORTIUM RESOURCE

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CENTER FOR EDUCATION POLICY ANALYSIS

NEW ENGLAND
SECONDARY SCHOOL
CONSORTIUM

The New England Secondary School Consortium's *High Leverage Policy Framework* was created by the Center for Education Policy Analysis at the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education, in conjunction with the Great Schools Partnership and the Consortium's Working Group, a diverse team of policy makers from the state departments of education in Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. For more information about the New England Secondary School Consortium, visit newenglandssc.org. For more information about the Center for Education Policy Analysis, visit education.uconn.edu/research/cepa.

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HIGH LEVERAGE POLICY FRAMEWORK

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INTRODUCTION

Drawing from the fields of education policy, school redesign, organizational change, leadership development, and program evaluation, the New England Secondary School Consortium's *High Leverage Policy Framework* is a detailed exploration of education policy from rationale to development to implementation. By taking into account the larger social and political "ecosystem" in which policy is formed, written, and implemented, this tool provides policy makers and educators with a step-by-step framework they can use to identify and develop effective, high-impact policies in their states, districts, and schools. Using a common definition of high-leverage policy—i.e., policies that not only increase educational equity, aspirations, achievement, and attainment for all students, but that also generate positive change throughout the educational system—the *Framework* is a first step toward a more holistic view of education policy, and more thoughtful and sustainable guidelines for learning in the 21st century.

The *Framework* draws upon research on policy formulation, implementation, and efficacy, and it is intended to serve as a guide for policy makers and educational leaders working to enact transformative change in public schools.

During the development of this tool, the Center for Education Policy Analysis surveyed the research literature on large-scale policy implementation and its impact on school reform, and the *Framework* is designed to be a practical tool for applying this research in real-world policy development. The Center also validated the *Framework* with school-reform specialists, state education agency staff, district administrators, and secondary educators from Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. Please contact the Center for a more complete description of the methodology.

DEFINING HIGH LEVERAGE POLICY

The *High Leverage Policy Framework* was created to guide policy makers and educational leaders as they develop new policies or refine existing laws, rules, and regulations. The tool's robust analytic framework provides a first-of-its-kind, step-by-step process for analyzing and developing education policy. It is designed to be accessible, user friendly, and practical.

The definition of "high leverage policy" used in the *Framework* is intentionally goal-oriented, focusing on desired outcomes and the processes that will attain those outcomes. Keeping the end goal at the forefront of policy development is critical to policy design and implementation.

A high leverage policy:

1. Increases academic aspirations, achievement, or attainment for all students.
2. Promotes greater equity in learning, performance, or life outcomes for students.
3. Generates positive ripple effects throughout an educational system.

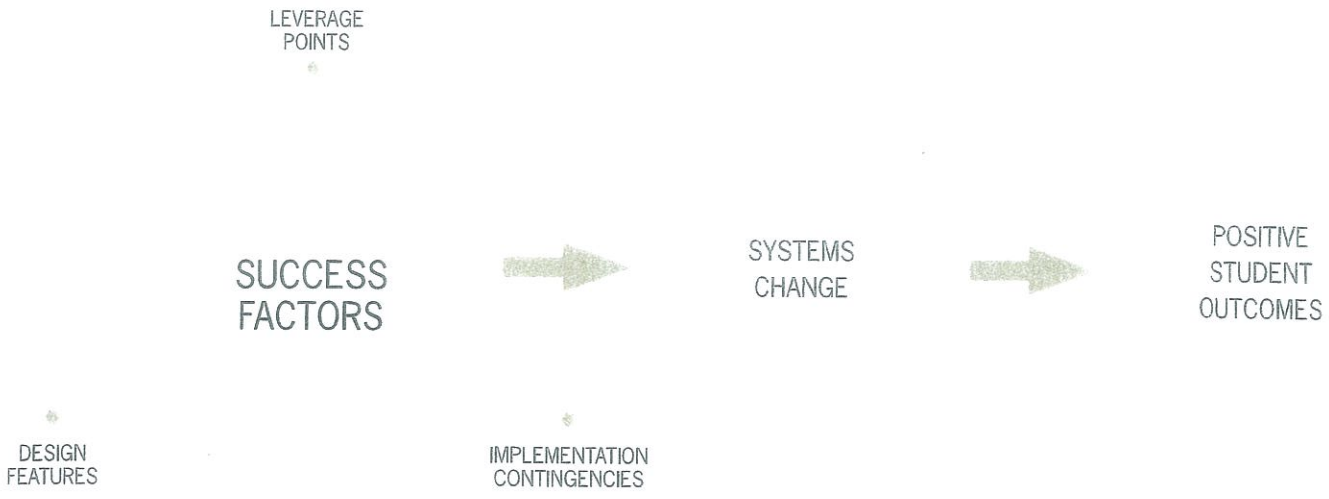
The first two outcomes focus on the results that matter most—the benefits ultimately experienced by students. These outcomes may include measures of achievement reflected in standardized state assessments, but they also move beyond test scores to include broader indicators of effective learning and educational attainment. The third outcome illuminates another critical dimension of "high leverage policy"—that it is a catalyst for systemic improvements in districts, schools, and classrooms. If a policy affects only a narrow feature of the educational system, it is not considered to be high leverage.

The above definition asserts that high leverage policy does not simply improve learning, achievement, and attainment for some students, but increases educational equity for students of all social backgrounds and ability levels, including those who have been historically underrepresented at the postsecondary level. Again, the positive ripple effects of a high leverage policy should not be constrained to a small subset of students, but should be experienced by every student in the system.

THE FRAMEWORK

The *High Leverage Policy Framework* (FIGURE 1) recognizes that myriad political, contextual, and human factors inevitably influence whether a policy will produce the desired results: systemic, sustainable improvements in districts, schools, and classrooms that will have a direct and positive impact on student learning and educational outcomes. While accounting for these real-world influences, the *Framework* identifies three critical success factors essential to effective policy development: LEVERAGE POINTS, DESIGN FEATURES, and IMPLEMENTATION CONTINGENCIES.

The interrelationship of these three factors has a substantial influence on the success of a policy. By considering new and existing policies in the context of larger educational, social, or political factors, the *Framework* helps policy makers design thoughtful guidelines and procedures that achieve a synergistic balance with other elements of an educational system or school, from organizational models and classroom practices to student needs and community demographics.



Policy Theory of Action

THE FRAMEWORK DEFINED

LEVERAGE POINTS: *The intended objectives of an educational policy or the entry points within the educational system that policy makers desire to influence.* A LEVERAGE POINT can be a performance goal (reducing achievement gaps, enhancing personalization and student engagement, increasing college preparation and enrollments) or a feature of the educational system (teacher-quality regulations, grading and assessment practices, graduation requirements).

DESIGN FEATURES: *The intentional, predetermined features of a policy—both written and unwritten—as it was initially crafted.* DESIGN FEATURES may include the specific language in a statute, guidance on how a policy should to be enacted, the requirements for compliance, or the implementation timeline.

IMPLEMENTATION CONTINGENCIES: *The contextual factors and foreseeable contingencies that may arise during the implementation of a policy and influence how it is interpreted and enacted.* IMPLEMENTATION CONTINGENCIES include potential conflicts with existing policies, the success or failure of similar policies in other states or districts, potential disconnects between policy mandates and the feasibility of compliance at the local level, or the capacity of the authorizing agency to monitor and support effective implementation.

SYSTEMS CHANGE refers to transformative actions that produce organizational and pedagogical innovations, which in turn positively affect the quality of student learning, opportunities, and outcomes. As illustrated in FIGURE 1, the interrelationships among a policy's success factors influence the degree to which the policy will result in positive systemic changes. Specifically, systems change can be defined as transformation that:

- Shifts the fundamental structure, practices, or culture in districts, schools, and classrooms, and which, in turn, positively influences the relationship among teachers, students, and curricula (Cohen & Ball, 1999); and
- Generates ripple effects throughout an educational system by positively influencing a variety of policies, practices, and programs.

POSITIVE STUDENT OUTCOMES refers to higher educational aspirations, achievement, or attainment; enhanced learning opportunities and instructional quality; and greater equity in learning, performance, or life outcomes for students. As shown in FIGURE 1, the overarching goal and motivating rationale of policy development and systems change is significant, measureable improvement in student outcomes. Examples of student outcomes that policy makers might aspire to achieve include mastery of 21st century learning skills, higher graduation rates, or increased postsecondary enrollment and completion rates.

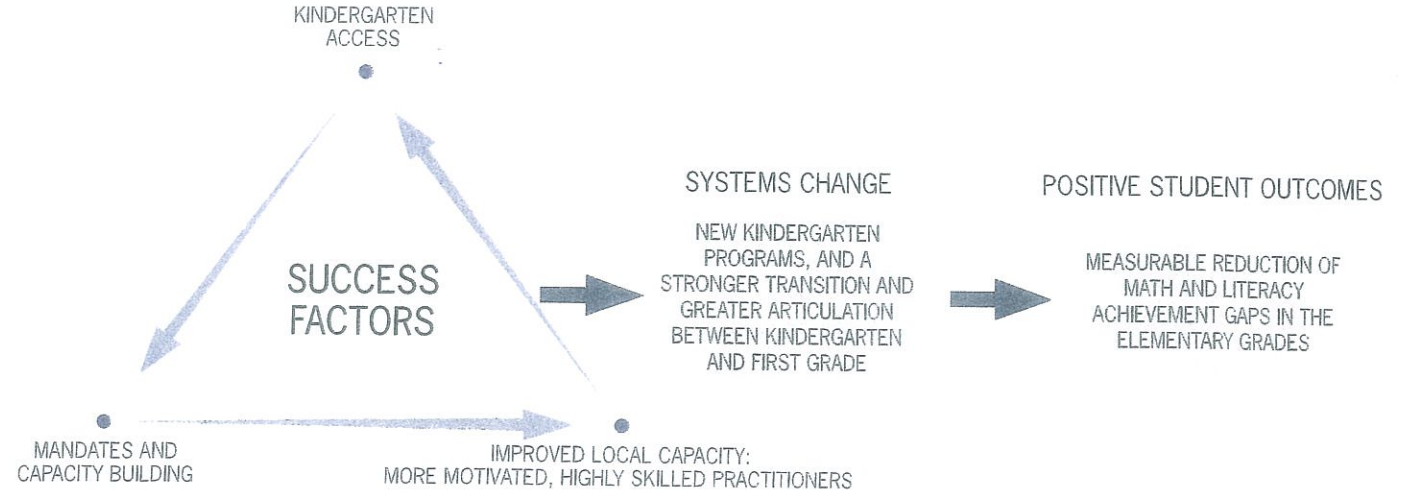
THEORY OF ACTION refers to the undergirding logic, beliefs, and assumptions that describe what a policy will produce and how it will achieve its intended objectives. Specifically, the theory of action describes what policy makers believe to be the relationship among the leverage points targeted by a policy, the features of a policy's design, and the contingencies that might arise when a policy is implemented. The theory of action should also address how, specifically, policy makers believe a policy will lead to positive systemic changes and improved student outcomes.

HOW TO USE THE FRAMEWORK

The *High Leverage Policy Framework* invites policy makers to ask important questions about a proposed policy and its theory of action: What is the policy's guiding rationale? What evidence suggests that the policy will be effective? What has worked or not worked when similar policies have been implemented elsewhere? What research suggests that the policy will be successful? What values does the policy reflect? How does the policy cohere or conflict with existing policies? In the process of articulating a theory of action, policy makers need to consider the leverage points the policy will address and what design features are most likely to be effective given existing contextual conditions and any foreseeable factors that might influence its implementation: Where are the achievement gaps in the system? Does the policy promote greater equity? How will principals and teachers comply with the new requirements? What resistance can be expected from special interest groups?

FIGURE 2 shows a hypothetical example of a state policy designed to expand full-day kindergarten. Since this example is not directly related to secondary-school reform, it was purposefully chosen to illustrate how a policy—any policy—can be analyzed using the *Framework*. Note that the theory of action provides a "causal chain of logic"—i.e., a series of statements that articulate the critical relationship between a policy's success factors and its intended or desired results. According to this theory of action, the targeted leverage point for improving achievement in kindergarten is student access. The policy makers are considering the use of a state-financed mandate and attendant capacity-building strategies as the primary mechanisms of the policy's design. In this framework, mandates must be combined with support to ensure successful implementation. These specific success factors will, according to the theory of action, positively influence local educational systems (districts, schools) by creating new learning experiences and practices, particularly expanded, higher-quality kindergarten programs. Ultimately, this coherent policy framework and presiding rationale will improve student outcomes and reduce achievement gaps in the early elementary grades and beyond.

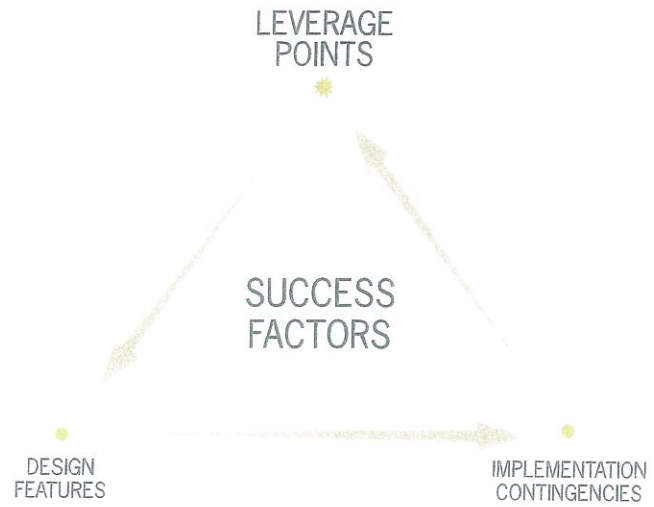
FIGURE 2: Operationalizing the Framework–Full-Day Kindergarten



Theory of Action

If the state mandates and funds full-day kindergarten, and provides professional development on how to design effective kindergarten programming and instruction, then districts will implement high-quality, full-day kindergarten programs that will increase student preparation for elementary learning and reduce numeracy and literacy achievement gaps.

THE THREE SUCCESS FACTORS



LEVERAGE POINTS

The intended objectives of an educational policy or the entry points within the educational system that policy makers desire to influence.

SAMPLE LEVERAGE POINTS

Student Assessments

Incorporating and measuring 21st century skills in state assessments, for example, could shift what is tested, how it is tested, and how student achievement is defined, potentially leading to the development of large-scale performance assessments that can capture a broader range of student learning and preparation.

Teacher and Administrator Preparation and Certification

Embedding established best-practice research, proven reform strategies, and high-impact leadership skills in educator preparation programs and certification requirements will connect job preparation with 21st century teaching and learning.

Curricular Frameworks

Modifying curricular frameworks (including strategies such as Model Curricula, Replacement Units, and Anchor Assignments) to explicitly incorporate and prioritize 21st century skills directly affects how teachers teach, what content is taught, and what professional development they require or seek out.

Early College High Schools and Dual-Enrollment Programs

Developing early college high schools and dual-enrollment programs can strengthen the alignment of secondary instructional practices, assessments, and learning standards with the demands of collegiate education, while also raising student aspirations and educational attainment by providing collegiate learning experiences to high school students.

Student Portfolios and Exhibitions

Student portfolios, exhibitions, and other performance-based demonstrations of learning, particularly when adopted as a graduation requirement or extension of a standards-based assessment system, can significantly modify and improve how instruction and learning take place in a school or school system.

LEVERAGE POINTS

SUCCESS FACTORS

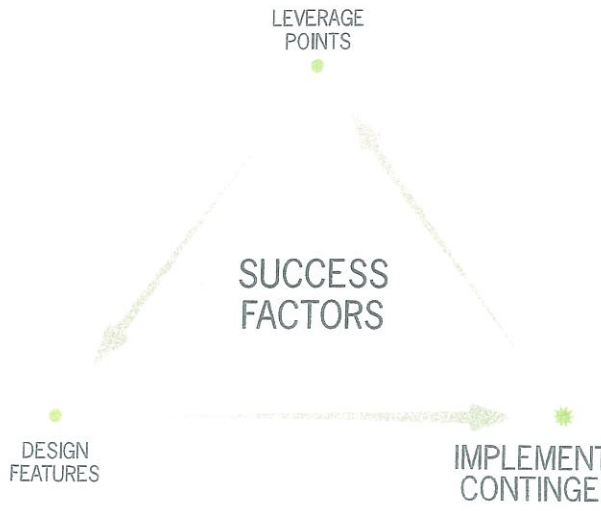
DESIGN FEATURES

The intentional, predetermined features of a policy—both written and unwritten—as it was originally crafted.

DESIGN FEATURES

IMPLEMENTATION CONTINGENCIES

FEATURES	RELEVANT RESEARCH
	▪ Appropriately matching policy mechanisms—mandates, inducements, capacity-building strategies, or system reforms, for example—with target problems or mediating conditions increases the likelihood of policy success (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987).
Policy Mechanisms and Instruments	▪ Compared to direct control, multiple policy mechanisms are more effective in influencing local practice (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990). ▪ Policy pressure alone is generally insufficient when attempting to change attitudes, beliefs, and routine practices (McLaughlin & Elmore, 1982; Fullan, 1985, 1986; McLaughlin, 1987; Montjoy & O'Toole, 1979; Zald & Jacobs, 1978, as cited in McLaughlin, 1987).
Policy Scope	▪ Ambitious and systemically focused policies are more likely to stimulate changes in teacher behavior or efficacy than policies with more modest aspirations or narrow objectives—i.e., policies with a narrow scope become ends in themselves, therefore serving as diversions from broader goals (Fullan, Bennett, & Rolheiser-Bennett, 1990; McLaughlin, 1990).
Coherence Within and Across Policy Contexts	▪ State-level policies exert far greater influence when the policy design and objectives are aligned with those of districts and schools (Abelmann & Elmore, 1999; Furhman & Elmore, 1990; Zald, 1978). ▪ New policies are most likely to succeed when they cohere with existing district or school policies and practices (Cohen & Hill, 2001).
Research-driven and Practice-tested Policy	▪ Policies focused on research-based goals that offer working models of new practice are more likely to exert a positive influence on the system (Clune, 1991).



IMPLEMENTATION CONTINGENCIES

The contextual factors and foreseeable contingencies that may arise during the implementation of a policy and influence how it is interpreted and enacted.

CONTINGENCIES	RELEVANT RESEARCH
District and Principal Leadership	▪ The active commitment of and support from district leadership is essential to a policy's success (McLaughlin, 1989, 1990). ▪ The district plays a key role as the interpreter of policy and the mediator in local implementation (Louis, Febey & Schroeder, 2005). ▪ Principals play a crucial role in helping teachers understand a policy and influencing how they comply with a policy (Coburn, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002).
Capacity	▪ Sufficient capacity (adequate staff, leadership, expertise, training, etc.) at all levels—state, district, and school—is needed to implement and ensure compliance with a policy (Abelmann & Elmore, 1999; Firestone, Fuhrman & Kirst, 1989; McLaughlin, 1987, 1989; Zald, 1978)
Local Will	▪ The existence of adequate motivation (positive attitudes, supportive actions, aligned beliefs) is critical to policy implementation, whether that motivation is present from the beginning or developed over time (Elmore, 1995; McLaughlin, 1990). ▪ The degree to which a policy is accepted by or persuasive to those responsible for implementing the policy directly affects its ultimate success (Desimone, 2002; Desimone, Smith & Phillips, 2007; Zald, 1978).
Stability of Policy and People	▪ The stability of policies and people (policy makers, administrators, faculty) over time influences both the quality of implementation and the degree to which it is successfully implemented (Berends et al., 2002; Huberman & Miles, 1984). ▪ Accurately and effectively communicating a policy's intent and design to those responsible for implementation directly affects a policy's success (Louis, Febey & Schroeder, 2005; see also Zald, 1978).
Communication of Policy Intent	▪ Policy that is framed to promote local agency and creative interpretation has a better chance of success (Louis, Febey & Schroeder, 2005). NOTE: The more divergent a new policy is from past practice, the more communication, leadership, and training is required to generate the support and capacity needed for successful implementation.

CONCLUSION

The *High Leverage Policy Framework* was created to help policy makers design or refine policies and create effective implementation plans that will lead to desired outcomes in states, districts, schools, and classrooms. Successful policy making requires a deep understanding of how policies can bring about fundamental change, how they are interpreted and implemented at the local level, and what factors (whether political, human, financial, or contextual) may hinder or help successful implementation. By illuminating the complexities of policy implementation and surfacing critical elements of the policy process most likely to produce results, the *High Leverage Policy Framework* advocates a holistic approach to policy design and implementation, one that promotes greater coherence and cohesion across the three-tiered system of state, district, and school. Policy makers who have a clear understanding of their theory of action, and who attend to leverage points, design features, and the contingencies of policy implementation, are more likely to realize gains in student outcomes. The New England Secondary School Consortium and the Center for Education Policy Analysis hope this tool will promote greater dialogue about and understanding of policies that seek to fundamentally transform secondary schooling in Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

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The New England Secondary School Consortium is a pioneering regional partnership committed to fostering forward-thinking innovations in the design and delivery of secondary education across the New England region. The five partner states of Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont believe that our bold vision, shared goals, and innovative strategies will empower us to close persistent achievement gaps, promote greater educational equity and opportunity for all students, and lead our educators into a new era of secondary schooling. The Consortium's goal is to ensure that every public high school student in our states receives an education that prepares them for success in the colleges, careers, and communities of the 21st century.

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