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Educational Policy 2004; 18; 527

DOI: 10.1177/0895904804266640

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Where's the "Up" in Bottom-Up Reform?

MEREDITH I. HONIG

Bottom-up reform as a policy strategy for decades has faltered in implementation. This article starts from the premise that these disappointing results stem from researchers' and practitioners' almost exclusive focus on implementation in schools or on what some call "the bottom" of hierarchical education systems but not shifts in policy makers' roles that might enable school change—the "up" in bottom-up reform. These gaps are addressed with a strategic, comparative case study of city-level policy makers in bottom-up reform implementation in Oakland, California, during the 1990s. The author demonstrates that organizational learning theory defines basic dimensions of policy makers' roles in implementation and that they faced four paradoxes in adopting these roles. Over time, they tended to favor avenues consistent with traditional top-down, not bottom-up, policy making. Findings highlight policy makers as important participants in bottom-up reform implementation and suggest that new institutional supports for them may enable implementation.

Keywords: *implementation; bottom-up reform; policy makers; school-community partnerships; Oakland*

EDUCATION POLICIES TO EXPAND school site decision-making continue to proliferate in policy design but remain elusive in policy implementation. Consider the following examples:

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Versions of this research were presented at the annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA, in April 2003 and the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, Washington, DC, in November 2003. The author thanks the following people for their helpful comments on previous drafts: Michael Fullan, Mike Knapp, Betty Malen, Morva McDonald, the *Educational Policy* editorial team, and two anonymous reviewers.

EDUCATIONAL POLICY, Vol. 18 No. 4, September 2004 527-561
DOI: 10.1177/0895904804266640
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- Urban school districts such as Chicago and Milwaukee in the 1990s launched significant policy initiatives to increase schools' autonomy over basic administrative, fiscal, and curricular decisions. These initiatives resulted in new school-level governance structures but reportedly limited transfers of decision-making authority from district central offices to schools and, accordingly, incomplete implementation (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1998; Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990; Raywid & Schmerler, 2003).
- Schoolwide or comprehensive school reform programs call for schools (often in partnership with community agencies) to develop and implement their own improvement plans and for district central offices to become school improvement coaches. In practice, district central office roles have tended to remain limited to information sharing and contracting out for school support; school leaders report significant constraints on their choices of goals and strategies (Bodilly, 1998; Datnow, 1999).
- State and federal governments have designed waiver programs to free schools from regulatory requirements that appear to impede school decision making. However, in practice (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990), "waivers or exemptions for regulations have traditionally been used to give implementers facing emergency circumstances some latitude or additional time to come into compliance" with policy makers' external mandates, not to expand schools' decision-making authority (p. 281; see also U.S. Department of Education, 1998; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1998a, 1998b).

The policy strategies in these examples go by various names in education policy implementation literature, including site-based management, school restructuring, school-community partnerships, or more broadly, bottom-up reform. According to this literature and to policy designs, bottom-up reforms, as a distinct class of policy approaches, aim to flip traditional roles for policy makers and implementers on their heads (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Fullan, 1994; Marsh & Bowman, 1988; Sabatier, 1986; Shields, Knapp, & Wechsler, 1995).¹ Implementers such as schools become key decision makers rather than mainly agents of others' decisions, roles traditionally held by policy makers. Policy makers become supporters rather than directors of others' decisions, roles traditionally held by implementers. Calls for these role redefinitions stem in part from decades of research and experience with social policy implementation that teach that policy makers might improve policy implementation and schools' performance if they increased schools' discretion over basic school operations as a central reform strategy; such discretion might result in decisions that better address local needs and tap local

resources than strategies developed by policy makers outside schools (Darling-Hammond, 1998; McLaughlin, 1990, 1998; Shulman, 1983).

However, as the examples above suggest, these role shifts typically have not been realized in practice. Scholars have offered many reasons for these disappointing results often related to schools' limited capacity for implementation and to weak political support from district office policy makers (e.g., Malen et al., 1990). This article starts from an alternative premise: Bottom-up reform falters in part because implementation efforts largely focus on changes in schools or at the bottom of hierarchical education systems but not the up in bottom-up reform—changes in policy makers' practice that might enable school decision making. Why do policy makers impede implementation? What policy making roles might enable implementation? What challenges do policy makers face in taking on these roles? In short, where is the up in bottom-up reform?

This article aims to enhance knowledge about bottom-up reform by addressing these questions about policy makers' participation in bottom-up reform implementation. I focus specifically on policy makers in school district central offices and city agencies (sometimes called administrators) because implementation studies often feature these nonelected city-level policy makers as primary curbs on schools' implementation of bottom-up reform (e.g., Malen et al., 1990).

First, I draw on concepts from the new institutionalism in sociology to explain that policy makers impede implementation in part because policy making in public bureaucracies as a field of professional practice rests almost exclusively on assumptions that policy makers should direct implementation from the top down and not support schools' decisions about educational improvement goals and strategies from the bottom up. Then, I demonstrate that concepts from organizational learning theory, seldom applied to public policy making or implementation, help define policy makers' roles in bottom-up reform implementation. Specifically, organizational learning theory highlights that such roles involve the ongoing search for information about implementing sites' chosen goals and strategies and the use of that information to drive decisions about city and central office policy specifically to support sites' decisions.

Third, I present findings from a strategic, comparative case study of policy makers' participation in four bottom-up reforms in Oakland, California, between 1990 and 2000. My analysis of the Oakland case confirmed that policy makers' roles in bottom-up reform involved the information management activities highlighted by organizational learning theory. In addition, I demonstrate that policy makers faced four paradoxes or fundamental dilemmas

about how to use site information to advance implementation. Specifically, policy makers grappled with whether to use site information to develop policies that left terms of compliance opened or closed; treated sites equitably or equally; aimed to procreate (expand the number of participating sites) or to incubate (deepen implementation at schools already participating); and bridged sites to or buffered sites from particular policy makers and elected officials. When faced with these paradoxes, policy makers tended to favor closed rules, equality, incubation, and buffering—options consistent with traditional top-down policy-making roles.

This analysis contributes to the research and practice of policy implementation and public administration by elaborating an empirically based model of policy makers' participation in bottom-up policy implementation and the importance of organizational learning theory as initial conceptual grounding for this new practice. I do not evaluate the effectiveness of bottom-up reform as an educational improvement strategy. Rather, I show how policy makers with bottom-up reform goals can participate productively in implementation. Accordingly, this research aims to inform summative evaluations of bottom-up reforms by defining an essential dimension of full implementation: policy makers' participation.

BACKGROUND

The disappointing results of bottom-up reform implementation should come as little surprise: Policy makers' primary institutions—their professional knowledge-base, practice, and workplace norms—reinforce policy makers' top-down control over school operations, not their support of school decision making. To elaborate, institutional theory, specifically the new institutionalism in sociology, emphasizes that formal and informal social rules shape individuals' conceptions of themselves as professionals, their interpretations of workplace problems, and their choices of on-the-job responses (e.g., Barley, 1996; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 1995). These rules of professional practice, sometimes called institutional scripts or logics, inform individuals' views of what implementation entails and how they should participate, often irrespective of policy intentions. As scripts accumulate over time, particular practices become appropriate or successful based on such factors as the frequency of the practices and their endorsement by legitimate authorities rather than objective performance outcomes (Edelman, 1992; March, 1994a; March & Olsen, 1989; Westphal & Zajac, 1994). The conflation of frequent or endorsed practice with appropriate or successful practice is particularly common in complex policy sectors such as education where relationships

between governance reforms and performance outcomes have been tenuous at best (Downs, 1967). The availability and use of such scripts help decision makers act with confidence in the face of such means-ends ambiguity (March, 1991; March & Olsen, 1975).

These theoretical concepts call attention to the models of appropriate or successful practice that undergird policy making as a profession and policy makers' workplaces and suggest that bottom-up reform demands may be generally incompatible with these public policy-making institutions. Specifically, policy literature for the past 40 years has elaborated that policy making as a field of professional practice and a knowledge base rests on concerns that policy makers (sometimes called principals) design specific policies and programs that implementers (sometimes called agents) carry out (Radin, 2000; Wildavsky, 1996). Traditional models of policy analysis emphasize the importance of particular regulatory structures and cost-benefit calculations in reducing implementation errors—gaps between policy makers' decisions and implementers' actions (Arrow, 1974; Bardach, 1996; Kreps, 1990; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Stokey & Zeckhauser, 1978; Williamson, 1975; Wood & Waterman, 1994).² Even so-called alternative models feature policy makers using information about implementers' goals, strategies, and experiences to expand policy makers' control over implementation and to limit implementation variation (Elmore, 1979-1980; Honig, 2001; Radin, 2000; J. Weiss & Gruber, 1984).

Likewise, public policy-making bureaucracies long have reinforced workplace norms that emphasize centralized expert authority (Aberbach, Putnam, & Rockman, 1981; Barton, 1979; Blau & Meyer, 1994; C. H. Weiss, 1979; Wood & Waterman, 1994) and routinized procedures specifically to curtail implementers' influence over policy decisions (Downs, 1967). Activities that depart from such procedures tend to be delegated to offices on the margins of bureaucracies where they could be tested and translated into routine procedures before being instituted on a broader scale (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Various theories promise to shed light on certain aspects of policy makers' roles in bottom-up reform implementation. For example, critical and political theories call attention to hierarchical power relationships between policy makers and implementers that may shape implementation dynamics. Given the nascent stage of theory development with regard to policy makers' roles, however, I looked to organizational learning theory because it helps to elaborate specific information management activities consistent with policy

makers' demands in bottom-up reform that can serve as a broad base of departure for subsequent research. In this section, I explain how I used these concepts to ground an empirical investigation of city-level policy makers' participation in bottom-up reform implementation.³

Organizational learning theory comes in several iterations across disciplines (e.g., Argyris & Schon, 1996; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Huber, 1991; Levitt & March, 1988). However, scholars typically agree that organizational learning at root is a theory of how individuals in organizational settings manage information from internal and external environments to guide individual and organizational practice. Such information management involves two broad activities: the search for information and the use of that information (or deliberate decisions not to use that information) as the basis for organizational decision making. In the context of bottom-up reform, policy makers search for information about schools' goals, strategies, and experiences and use that information to guide their provision of implementation supports with the specific aim of enabling schools' decisions.

To elaborate, search, also called exploration (Levitt & March, 1988) and knowledge acquisition (Huber, 1991), refers to a variety of processes by which information enters an organization. For example, an organization may hire staff who carry information with them or designate individuals, organizational subunits, and other so-called "boundary spanners" to gather information (Gladstein & Caldwell, 1985; Huber, 1991; Kanter, 1988).

Use, sometimes called exploitation, refers to the incorporation of that new information (or deliberate decisions not to employ that information) into organizational rules. Although terms vary, theorists generally agree that using information involves the following subactivities.

Interpretation. Once information has been brought into an organization, organizational members decide whether and how to incorporate it into organizational rules and routines (Weick, 1995). This sense-making process is essential because, typically, numerous policy responses or nonresponses may fit a given situation (Yanow, 1996).

Storage. Interpreted information is encoded as rules or "any semi-stable specification of the way in which an organization deals with its environment, functions, and prospers" (Levinthal & March, 1981, p. 307; see also Argyris, 1976; Argyris & Schon, 1996; M. D. Cohen, 1991; Huber, 1991; Levitt & March, 1988). In policy contexts, information may be viewed as stored when it becomes part of agency policy. Agency policies take various forms including administrative procedures, resource allocations, and individual agency staff decisions about their own work (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977).

Retrieval. Organizational members draw on the information, reformulated as organizational rules, to guide their subsequent choices and actions (Levitt & March, 1988).

Both search and use make up organizational learning (March, 1991). When organizational actors only or mainly search, they increase the likelihood that they will search endlessly for new guides for action but never take actions that could improve their performance. When organizations focus almost exclusively on using information they have already collected, they risk improving their performance with a finite set of competencies and overrelying on outdated information (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Levitt & March, 1988). Literature on organizational learning does not present an optimal level of search and use but rather suggests that the productive balance between them will depend on local circumstances.

Organizational learning theory highlights two other factors that shape the information management process: ambiguity of outcomes and risk taking.

Ambiguity. Search and use are riddled with ambiguity concerning how to use information as the basis for decision making and whether particular decision outcomes mean success. Particularly in complex social policy arenas like education, such ambiguity results because interventions can take significant periods of time to generate feedback, improvement often lags behind effort, and feedback on performance may be interpreted in multiple ways (Feldman, 1989; March, 1994a). Organizational learning under conditions of ambiguity occurs, then, when organizations engage in the information management processes highlighted above regardless of objective performance outcomes.

Risk taking. Organizational learning involves risk taking. In classic economic terms, risk may be measured by the variance in the distribution of possible gains and losses associated with a particular choice. During search, policy makers cast broad nets into their environments to fish for new information. Search thereby increases the amount of information policy makers have to consider and widens the distribution of possible decisions and outcomes. Broader distributions mean greater risks of achieving extreme successes and extreme failures. The converse is true of use (March, 1994b; March & Shapira, 1987).

Literature on organizational learning suggests several conditions that are necessary but not sufficient for organizational learning. In particular, organizational learning will not occur without intentionality—unless organizational members set out to search for and use information through purposeful exchanges between their organizations and their environments over time

(Kanter, 1988; Lave, 1993; Wenger, 1998). Past experiences with particular forms of information increase an organization's internal receptivity to new information and help explain whether and how organizational members recognize information as important, bring that information into the organization, and use that information as the basis for policy development (W. M. Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Kimberly, 1981; Weick, 1995). Past experiences with search may increase the likelihood that individuals will experience search as less risky and search more readily than others even though, by definition, search increases risk (March, 1994a). The designation of individual members or organizational units to specialize in search—particularly those with an inclination to risk taking—can increase the likelihood of search in particular and organizational learning more broadly (Gladstein & Caldwell, 1985; Kanter, 1988; March & Olsen, 1975; Scott, 1995). Opportunities for organizational-environmental interactions over time facilitate the ongoing exchange of information at the heart of organizational learning (Lave, 1993; Rogers, 1983; Suchman, 1995; Wenger, 1998).

Organizational learning theory framed my empirical investigation into policy makers' participation in bottom-up reform implementation in several respects. First, search, use, and their subactivities focused data collection and analysis on the extent to which policy makers engaged in these activities and what happened when they did. Second, the ambiguity inherent in such activities underscored the importance of using process-based indicators of organizational learning—whether policy makers engaged in search and use—rather than objective performance measures such as academic achievement. Third, the conditions conducive to organizational learning provided criteria for the selection of a strategic research site—a place likely to demonstrate organizational learning in action. Fourth, organizational learning theory points to three interrelated units of analysis for study: individual policy makers who search for and use information; city-level policy-making bureaucracies as organizations whose policies that information may influence; and policy maker-implementer interactions where information may transfer.

METHODS

I used organizational learning theory to anchor a qualitative, embedded, and comparative case study of bottom-up reform implementation in Oakland, California. I examined events that occurred between 1990 and 2000 through field work conducted between 1998 and 2000. A qualitative case study design allowed me to focus on how events unfolded in real-life contexts over time and to describe, define, and analyze little understood phenomena

such as policy makers' participation (Yin, 1989). Policy makers' participation in the implementation of four contemporaneous bottom-up reform initiatives allowed me to compare across and between initiatives and increased the number of data points for observation while holding city, county, and state constant.

Site Selection

Oakland, a mid-sized, urban California school district, provided a strategic research site (Merton, 1987). Findings from strategic sites are not directly generalizable to practice but they may result in theoretical ideas that others can use to guide practice and reveal patterns with such little deviation that they could reasonably represent populations (Hartley, 1994; Merton, 1987; Phillips & Burbules, 2000). Among Oakland's specific advantages in the 1990s, Oakland was implementing at least four policy initiatives whose designs reflected the theory of change underlying bottom-up reform: that if schools—or, in this case, schools in partnerships with community agencies—make fundamental decisions about educational improvement, they will strengthen student outcomes. Between 1990 and 2000, more than one third of Oakland's schools participated in at least one of these initiatives, also known as school-community partnership initiatives.⁴

Healthy Start School-Linked Services Initiative. Originated in 1992, this program of the California Department of Education (CDE) awards time-limited grants to school-community partnership sites annually through a competitive grant process. In their applications, school-community leaders outline their chosen goals and strategies and a plan for their implementation. The CDE holds school district central offices accountable for enabling implementation of these school-community level decisions and for sustaining partnership sites over the long term.

Oakland Fund for Children and Youth. Launched in 1996 and supported by an annual set-aside of the city general fund, this policy initiative awards grants to community agencies and school-community partnerships based on their local plans for improving youth development and learning along specific indicators.

Village Centers Initiative. With funding from the DeWitt Wallace-Readers Digest Fund, a consortium in Oakland (including the school district central office, city government, and community-based organizations) awarded grants to school and community leaders to develop and implement school-

community partnerships (i.e., Village Centers) governed by locally chosen school-level collaborative boards.

Oakland Child Health and Safety Initiative. This initiative, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, supported the reform of city-level governmental agencies to improve student outcomes. Oakland's plan focused on ongoing support for Village Center implementation.

Early data collection suggested that Oakland met conditions theoretically conducive to organizational learning.⁵ For example, various respondents reported that they intended to help policy makers' adopt the information management roles highlighted above. Oakland had a relatively long history of efforts to promote central decision-making roles for citizens and schools (McCorry, 1978). Oakland's policy makers had multiple opportunities to retrieve implementers' information as elaborated below. The district central office and the city manager's office designated policy makers to assist implementers' goal and strategy setting.

Units of Analysis and Terminology

I focused on policy makers in two city-level offices, the school district central office and the city manager's office, because the design of the four focal bottom-up education reform strategies called for their participation and because this cross-agency scope promised to increase the power of study findings for commenting on policy makers' practice beyond a single agency. Organizational learning theory prompted me to distinguish two distinct types of policy makers across both agencies.

Frontline policy makers. Analogous to organizational learning theory's boundary spanners, these individuals had titles such as Village Center director and policy analyst and were assigned specifically to provide hands-on assistance with implementation including the collection of information about implementers' goals, strategies, and experiences (i.e., search). Their authority primarily encompassed discretion over their day-to-day work.

Senior policy makers. These individuals had titles such as assistant superintendent, superintendent, assistant city manager, and city manager and held authority to determine broad policy direction for their agencies.

Implementers were schools and community agencies (e.g., health human services providers, youth organizations) who worked together to devise school-community goals and strategies to strengthen youth development and learning. I refer to these implementers as "sites" in my report of findings in

keeping with the common term of usage in Oakland. "Site directors" were directors/staff of community agencies and school principals who typically interacted with policy makers about implementation.

Data Collection

I triangulated data concerning policy makers' participation in the four bottom-up reform initiatives using information from self-reports (interviews and conversations), direct observations, and records (written policies, plans, procedures, and official meeting minutes), thereby addressing potential problems with construct validity (Yin, 1989). I interviewed 14 policy makers and 8 site directors as well as others involved in implementation including elected officials (the mayor and city council and school board members) and directors of nonprofit organizations. In all, I conducted 42 interviews with 33 people. Each interview lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. Interviews focused on policy makers' and other participants' experiences with implementation, conceptions of their professional demands, and their own explanations of particular events. I also participated in 17 conversations—less structured, inquiry-based discussions between individual respondents and myself that I systematically documented in field notes (Patton, 1990). Conversations lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and provided background information about the policy initiatives and updates on events.

Between 1998 and 2000, I directly observed formal meetings (approximately 160 hours) between policy makers and sites convened by nonprofit organizations specifically to support implementation. These meetings allowed me to document regular, formal interactions between policy makers and site representatives.⁶ During observations, I wrote almost verbatim transcripts to capture the transfer of information between policy makers and site representatives and observed contextual factors that seemed to affect policy makers' participation. For the same reasons, I reviewed record data dating back to the early 1990s. Records included implementation reports, evaluations, newspaper archives (*Oakland Tribune*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and neighborhood papers), and city and school district policies.

Data Analysis

Using concepts derived from organizational learning theory, I systematically coded all text with NUD*IST software, which allowed me to analyze data within and between the four policy initiatives. I coded the data reported in this article in three phases. First, I identified instances of learning as defined above including search, use, and their subactivities. In plain terms, these data included examples of policy makers collecting information about sites' goals and strategies and using that information to make policy deci-

sions specifically to advance sites' decisions. Policy decisions included allocations of resources and changes in procedures as well as decisions to keep allocations and procedures the same provided those choices aimed to reinforce sites' goals and strategies. I tracked data by type of policy maker involved, either frontline or senior, to examine differences in policy makers' participation by role.

Second, I looked for patterns in policy makers' decisions as they engaged in these learning roles. I considered a set of decision patterns when they appeared over time during the implementation of at least three of the four focal policies. I captured these patterns using four codes developed inductively and through constant comparison (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These codes referred to paradoxes policy makers' faced when deciding how to use site information to develop policy supports: "open-ended/closed rules" (whether to leave terms of compliance with new policies flexible or limited); "equity/equality" (whether to confer site supports on a site-by-site basis or uniformly); "incubation/procreation" (whether to deepen implementation at existing sites or expand to other sites); and "bridging/buffering" (whether to expand/limit other policy makers' involvement in implementation).

Third, I coded how policy makers managed these paradoxes using codes corresponding with the dimensions of each paradox (e.g., whether the policies that policy makers developed featured open-ended or closed terms of compliance). I also coded circumstances, conditions, and other factors—both reported and observed—that seemed to explain policy makers' choices.

FINDINGS

In the following subsections, I present three sets of findings. First, I show that Oakland's policy makers repeatedly demonstrated organizational learning in practice—instances of searching for information about sites' chosen goals, strategies, and experiences and of using that information to guide the provision of implementation supports with the specific aim of enabling sites' decisions.⁷ Second, I found that, in the process, policy makers, particularly frontline policy makers, faced distinct paradoxes concerning how to use site information. Third, when confronting these paradoxes, over time, frontline policy makers in particular were more likely to favor avenues that reflected traditional top-down policy-making practice.

Policy Makers' Roles as Organizational Learning

Between 1990 and 2000, policy makers frequently sought information about sites' goals, strategies, and experiences and tried to use that informa-

tion to guide their provision of implementation supports. Data concerning single instances of search and use typically spanned multiple interviews, meeting observations, and documents over time, making discrete display of data challenging. Accordingly, in this subsection, I present in narrative form one extended example of policy makers adopting these new roles.⁸

This example is typical in several respects. Among them, frontline policy makers are the main policy actors in this and most other examples of search and use in action, in keeping with their specific assignment to support site implementation on behalf of the school district central office and the city manager's office. Second, the site in this example received funding from all of the bottom-up reform initiatives that provided grants directly to sites for a comprehensive school and community improvement strategy. Oakland's sites typically received funding from multiple sources, which respondents indicated reflected the nature of bottom-up reform initiatives as broad movements to enable site decision making rather than discrete top-down programs. Accordingly, this example reflects the experience of one site participating in all of the bottom-up reforms featured in this study.

The school principal at the Forest Glen Middle School⁹ and his main community partners—directors of a community-based organization and parents—reported difficulty with implementing their school-community partnership. The site's locally chosen goals and strategies involved the provision of enrichment programs for students and parents before and after the regular school day. However, students and parents reported significant reluctance to spend time near the school campus during nonschool hours because of frequent fights among students and other safety concerns. Interviews, document reviews, and observations revealed that for years neighborhood leaders had tried to direct the attention of Oakland Unified School District and the city manager's office to neighborhood safety through advocacy campaigns and public hearings. However, these traditional avenues for influencing city-level policy had not led to actual policy changes in the school district central office or city agencies or to improved neighborhood safety by other means. According to the assistant director of community organization, "It was still as it always was. That they [policy makers] are telling us what we need rather than asking us what's needed."

The assistant director and others pointed to their participation in one of the bottom-up reform initiatives as a turning point in implementation. As part of the initiative, a citywide nonprofit organization convened regular meetings of frontline policy makers from the district central office and city manager's office, site directors, representatives of citywide nonprofit organizations, and county government staff. In the words of one nonprofit director, these

meetings were about “providing technical assistance immediately and capturing that information on what people [sites] are needing and sorting it to translate to broader policy.”

Over a 6-week period, participants reviewed safety data from the community organization directors and a safety report written by community residents. Through this process, the frontline policy makers, site directors, and others identified fights on a two-block radius around a specific street intersection as a sort of tipping point for leveraging broader improvements in neighborhood climate. Community organization’s assistant director committed to increasing the presence of parents near that intersection before and after school hours. Policy makers from the school district central office and city manager’s office pursued changes in the safety policies of their agencies related to that neighborhood. In particular, they worked with the citywide nonprofit director to convene a series of meetings between site directors and the chief of police, an assistant city manager, and the interim superintendent (senior policy makers) to offer Forest Glen as a pilot site for a broader reform of city/school safety services already in the planning stages. Several frontline policy makers reported enthusiasm for these developments but also concerns that the high profile reorganization of city and district safety services made site participation in those plans a potentially contentious and politically charged option that site directors might want to avoid.

Several aspects of this extended example illustrate organizational learning in action. First, frontline policy makers’ participation in meetings and informal conversations illustrates search—regular interactions to collect information about sites’ practice—and the use of that information as the basis for policy responses. As part of the use process, policy makers worked together with site directors to make sense of a variety of information about sites’ goals, strategies, and experiences and to store that information in agency documents for later retrieval. For example, the community safety report became part of Oakland Unified School District’s policy manual in progress for implementing sites. Frontline policy makers from the city manager’s office drafted memos to the interim superintendent, the city manager, and the chief of police with options for focusing the broader safety reforms on sites’ neighborhoods in the short term. The interim superintendent and assistant city manager acknowledged the viability of featuring community organization’s neighborhood as a test case for the broader safety reforms and agreed to use safety there as one measure of the effectiveness of the broader policy changes. Accordingly, those reforms too may be viewed as part of an effort to store sites’ experiences. As evidence of ongoing search and use, community

organization's directors used their weekly meetings with policy makers, nonprofit directors, and others to revisit their implementation concerns.

Policy-Making Paradoxes

Across all documented examples of search and use, the instances of policy makers searching for information outnumbered the instances of their using that information to develop implementation supports approximately four to one. One former site director who recognized this pattern in general commented,

It's been really easy to focus on the day-to-day . . . but then we rarely, never get to *doing* . . . to . . . policies. What have we learned to really create the policies that really get the systems that we currently have to change to work toward better outcomes?

On one level, this pattern makes intuitive sense. Decision making in public policy settings typically is characterized by extended periods of data collection, debate, and analysis; policy scholars have observed that such instances, called *search* in organizational learning terms, do not have a one-to-one relationship with policy development (use) (Bardach, 1996; Kingdon, 1984; Majone, 1989). Sustained observations and interviews in Oakland revealed an additional explanation consistent with organizational learning theory: Policy makers struggled to use site information as the basis for their own decisions about implementation supports because how to translate that information into supports appeared ambiguous. As elaborated in this section, policy makers found it difficult to discern which of the following alternatives for using site information might best support site implementation: whether to enact policy changes with open-ended or closed rules with regard to terms of compliance; whether to treat all sites equitably (to each according to its needs and strengths) or equally (all the same); whether to dedicate limited public resources to expand the number of sites (procreation) or to deepen implementation at existing sites (incubation); and whether to involve senior policy makers and elected officials in implementation (bridging) or whether to limit their involvement (buffering). I call these sets of alternatives *paradoxes* because neither alternative in each pair provided an unambiguous avenue toward improved site implementation and, often, both avenues seemed essential to implementation success (Deal & Peterson, 1994; Ford & Backoff, 1988). Like Stone's (1997) "policy paradoxes," these alternatives reflected competing values that could not be reconciled by additional information or tradeoffs. Debates about these alternatives consumed significant

amounts of policy makers' time and in part account for the lower frequency of instances of use.

Open-Ended Versus Closed Rules

Policy makers' decisions about how to use site information centered in part on whether to establish new policies and resource allocation formulas with open or closed terms of compliance—what I call, simply, open-ended or closed rules.

Open-ended rules promised to foster the site-level decision making at the heart of bottom-up reform designs. For example, many policy makers and site directors advocated that the district central office develop a data system to help sites track their progress and to ensure that sites understood the terms by which the city and central office might evaluate them. Some argued that the data system should leave evaluation criteria open-ended so that sites could track their progress along dimensions sites defined for themselves according to their own goals and strategies. Several site directors reported that they planned to use such flexibility to involve neighborhood leaders and school staff in designing their evaluations to help build broad investment in implementing the evaluation. These site directors noted that the bottom-up reforms in policy designs likewise promoted open-ended principles precisely to encourage sites' local collaborative decision making. One nonprofit director captured this view:

We have a dilemma here. There is a push to structure and define and specify. The ambiguity is nerve wracking for me. But we have left enough flexibility to allow sites to build what makes sense to them. If [policy makers] had structured everything without sites' participation, that would have ruined everything.

One frontline policy maker from the city manager's office supported this perspective. She highlighted that over time she had learned the importance of "not trying to build a lot of architecture around the TA [technical assistance] provision [to sites] but letting it evolve more organically and by asking people [sites] 'what do you need?'" as a key strategy to enabling sites' local collaborative decision making.

Others argued that open-ended rules weakened implementation. In the evaluation example, several site directors demanded that the district central office provide specific outcomes and indicators for sites to use in their evaluations. These directors indicated that they lacked expertise in evaluation and doubted that their investment in developing evaluation criteria would actually "pay off" (i.e., that policy makers would actually adopt their criteria). Two site directors commented that specific rules invited local decision

making because they provided a framework for action. As one of these directors explained, "We [sites] need policies and procedures in place so we can do what we do best which is challenge them." Several site directors indicated that they viewed open-ended rules as a sign of policy makers' lack of responsiveness. One argued,

We've [policy makers have] had a hard time making decisions and the rebuttal to that has been an aversion to bureaucracy [establishing specific rules]. . . . But if we had more formal rules and some high-level specific rules we may be able to avoid some of the decision-making challenges we've had.

Some respondents argued for closed rules on the grounds that open-ended rules threatened to weaken site accountability. For example, one policy maker explained that district central offices faced pressures to hold schools accountable for particular outcomes and that such accountability demands necessitated closed rules:

It has been difficult . . . to know when something is rotten in Denmark. . . . I don't ever want to make that leap, but if it gets to a point where we [site directors and policy makers] can't at least come to some simple agreement about a simple thing like what is the evaluation plan other than [sites telling us] we [sites] are going to do an evaluation plan, then I have a problem with that.

Likewise, several local foundation program officers and school board members expressed interest in investing in site implementation provided that Oakland's policy makers' delineated a relatively specific set of activities to which they would direct the funds. As one central office policy maker explained, the bottom-up policy initiatives risked falling out of favor with the school board because central office policy makers failed to establish specific terms of compliance for sites. He argued that as far as board members were concerned, "We [policy makers] don't have products, something that is tangible and concrete."

The example of neighborhood safety presented above also highlights policy makers' difficulties in reconciling competing demands for open-ended versus closed rules. Several participants in the neighborhood safety discussions indicated that any one of a number of supports promised to help site implementation. Deciding to institute parent patrols before and after school signaled for some an immediate, tangible response to a serious implementation challenge. As the community organization director explained about the climate in his neighborhood, "We need to do this to make sure the community is involved and we need to build confidence that this [bottom-up reform

initiative] is for real.” However, the director also expressed concern that the decision to take this course of action might deflect attention from a search for potentially better solutions over the long term.

Equity Versus Equality

Policy makers reported and demonstrated in meetings that they faced competing demands to support site implementation equitably (i.e., to each site according to its needs and resources) and equally (i.e., at the same level across all sites).

Many respondents highlighted the importance of equitable treatment by pointing out that bottom-up reform designs posited that sites’ local decisions should drive city and district central office decisions about implementation supports and that, accordingly, such supports should vary by sites’ needs and resources. As one frontline central office policy maker explained,

It [implementation] is about working with sites on what they need and then helping each site with whatever they need to move to the next level. Don’t send [particular] textbooks to a school site if they are not using [those] textbooks. We aren’t doing anyone any favors if we try to deploy funding for after-school programs to schools that already have those programs but need reading specialists. Besides which we would need to document that schools need these new resources before we could get them and we haven’t done that homework but even if we did the data wouldn’t be there to prove the case [that all schools need certain resources] because needs vary. That’s the whole point [of bottom-up reform].

For example, sites in two neighborhoods, one featured in the safety example highlighted above and another across town, began implementation by launching a neighborhood-wide after-school initiative. Directors of both sites expressed concerns about safety during nonschool hours. As indicated above, an extensive study in one neighborhood led to parent patrols and changes in police schedules at a particular street intersection. Site directors in the second neighborhood reported that their safety concerns stemmed from different roots: weak relationships between the police, school staff, directors of community-based organizations, and students. The previous spring, the school principal had called the police to remove a “suspicious adult” from the school campus. The adult turned out to be a staff member of a community agency providing on-site after-school programs and his temporary hold in police custody significantly strained relationships between the school and the agency. Site directors indicated that their safety issues were “personal” between particular police officers, community agencies, and the school principal. They specified that increasing the presence of police in their neigh-

borhood would “do more harm than good” and requested that police officers attend special community meetings “to start to help heal those relationships.”

One staff member of a county public agency agreed with the view that addressing sites’ needs equitably was the key to implementation success:

It seems like from my observation of [bottom-up reform] efforts across the country that different sites need different things and it happens that some sites know more than the TA [technical assistance] providers. One need to be responsive is to address different needs at different stages. That to me is the key to capacity building.

A city policy maker likewise agreed:

I worry sometimes that what we’re doing is overlaying that universal model on every other community when in fact it’s not really the model that works for that community. . . . It’s my personal belief from years of social services that we have a real tendency to look for successful models and then duplicate it [to spread resources uniformly]. And that’s not good, that’s not what really works. [The challenge is] how do we support people [adults] to support young people but that lets them [sites] invent for themselves what works for that . . . set of circumstances.

Policy makers also faced demands to treat sites equally—to use site information to institute a set of policy changes or resource allocation decisions uniformly across all sites. Several site directors were primary supporters of equal treatment. In some instances, these were the same site directors who advocated for equitable treatment—a data trend that magnified this paradox. As one of Oakland’s first site directors explained, some site directors believed that his site had already discovered what works and they wanted the same city and central office resources that his site had received, even if those resources did not fit their own goals and strategies:

Well the tendency is [for site directors] to say, “What is [my site] doing? Yeah, we want to do that. We want to be that.” Rather than do their own work they would say, “Oh, yeah, a [health] clinic, that’s cool, we want a health clinic, yeah, out-stationed social workers, yeah, makes sense, we want that too.”

Some site directors also expressed concerns that equitable treatment created disincentives for them to seek other funds or resources. For example, because one site had been able to raise a considerable amount of funding from local foundations, a district central office policy maker proposed to decrease the central office allocation to that site for the 1999-2000 fiscal year. The site’s codirector balked, “If you tell me that [the other site] will get more

of the funding than we will because we were able to raise outside funds I am going to throw a hissy [fit].”

Similarly, another site director, in a debate with a former central office policy maker, argued that all sites faced significant needs for additional funding and that the level of funds provided to one site should be provided to all, regardless of the size of their operating budgets. The following text transcribed during a meeting observation provides a snapshot of that debate:

Former central office policy maker: Depending on your [the site's] vision and what you are doing, costs can vary greatly. I know some places that would die for your budgets. . . . I'm saying it [the funds the district central office should provide to sites] varies widely.

Site director: You have never even been to my site. You don't even know our budgets. You make us crazy every time you talk like this. I don't care what my total budget looks like to you, if I can't make my payroll because I may not receive the check you promised this is all going to hit the fan.

Incubation Versus Procreation

Interviews and observations highlighted that, given limited individual and organizational resources, city and central office policy makers could not respond to all the site information they received. Debates about how to respond often concerned whether to devote limited resources to deepen implementation at sites already participating in the bottom-up reform initiatives, a choice I call *incubation*, or whether to expand resources to other sites to increase the number of participating sites, a choice I call *procreation*. One nonprofit director explained this paradox:

If the [bottom-up reform] initiative is going to be a locally driven initiative, we need to generate capacity at the site level [i.e., incubation]. We can't generate the capacity we need at the site level without an initiative [i.e., procreation]. That's the tension.

Many frontline policy makers and site directors reported in interviews and expressed at meetings that they favored incubation. These respondents argued that the newness of bottom-up reform as a policy strategy increased their urgency to demonstrate improvements in student achievement or risk losing political and fiscal support and that incubation, not procreation, promised to produce these improvements in the short term. For example, site directors frequently indicated that increasing the number of sites would heighten competition for already limited city and central office attention and resources. They reported that they were still early in their implementation

and needed basic resources such as cash to meet payroll or reliable school campus lighting—site-specific issues that might go unaddressed with the addition of new sites. The county superintendent of schools captured this view in a public hearing on bottom-up reform implementation:

We create change by going deeper not by going broader. Sometimes that seems counterintuitive. . . . It's if you work on a few things and do it well—then the learning you do is more meaningful to you.

The reported and observed experiences of frontline policy makers confirmed that the addition of new sites to the initiative threatened to weaken implementation at existing sites. For example, the district central office funded several sites using revenue from a parcel tax. Each year, frontline policy makers negotiated sites' allocation with the board appointed to oversee disbursement of funds. In 1999, when frontline policy makers brought a proposal to fund three additional sites, they faced stiff competition. One frontline policy maker explained,

When I took it to the . . . [parcel tax board] meeting, we saw that there was \$7.5 million total. Oakland Unified School District was asking for money for textbooks, class-size reduction, science equipment, etc. in addition to [sites]. We realized that if we each went in asking for more than we currently have allocated to us, it would all be over the \$7.5 million. If this happened, we wouldn't be able to fund . . . [existing sites at an adequate level]. I decided to scale down our proposal to the [existing sites] to make sure we could at least be sure we would get that.

On the flipside, some respondents indicated that the greater the number of participating sites, then the more legitimate the reform strategy appeared and the more politically persuasive participants could be when seeking additional funds and other resources. One nonprofit director explained that the fate of current sites actually depended on policy makers' and other Oakland leaders' willingness and ability to expand the initiative to include new sites:

There is something akin to urgency in what is in front of us. There has been a lot of conversation around [this bottom-up reform initiative] since 1995. You can only sustain an idea for some time without demonstrating it in practice and developing it to some scale. The longer this initiative remains small, the more likely it will be programmatic in how it is viewed rather than something that is really catalytic. If we don't do this soon [procreate], [other sites] will cease to be interested. . . . To keep sidelining that potential and that experience ignores what we are trying to do which is build some momentum.

Such pressures in favor of procreation stemmed in part from political concerns expressed by elected officials who frequently asked frontline policy makers for explanations concerning the scope of the reform. For example, one school board member made a typical remark in a meeting convened around one of the bottom-up reform initiatives: "How many [sites] can we do? [This initiative] is supposed to be citywide. If we are only doing two [sites], I will feel insignificant."

One site director expressed concerns that bottom-up reform implementation was an ongoing process and that waiting for existing sites to be "fully implemented" before expanding to other sites was a recipe for disaster. As she argued at a meeting with policy makers, "We are trying to make sustainability in an unsustainable world. It feels like a train wreck." By this, she meant that site sustainability was an ongoing process by its very nature and that incubation to reach that goal reflected a fundamental misunderstanding about what sustainability entailed and that it would lead to missed opportunities to advance site implementation overall.

Bridging Versus Buffering

Frontline policy makers in particular also grappled with a fourth dilemma: whether to share information about sites' goals, strategies, and experiences with senior policy makers and elected officials, a decision I call *bridging*, or whether to buffer sites from them.

Observations and interviews suggested that bridging to senior policy makers and elected officials occasionally enabled the use of site information to guide implementation supports because frontline policy makers themselves had limited authority to make policy decisions beyond their discretion over their own day-to-day activities. Examples of site supports that frontline policy makers pursued between 1998 and 2000 included alternative uses for categorical funds and waivers of city fees for use of school campuses beyond regular school hours. Frontline policy makers relied on senior policy makers and elected officials in their own and other city-level agencies for assistance with such policy changes because they surpassed their own decision-making authority.

Frontline policy makers reported that bridging to senior policy makers and elected officials on an ongoing basis gave frontline policy makers an opportunity to educate their senior colleagues about what bottom-up reform implementation entailed and to prime them for involvement when sites' needs warranted their intervention. As one frontline policy maker explained with regard to informing the school board about sites' implementation progress,

[Implementation] is developmental and we need to be careful [about involving the school board]. But they [sites] only go to the school board once a year when they have to make presentations for money. You can't just once a year. You have to constantly. . . . And it all goes back to we are a large institution. Information has to keep flowing up and down. It cannot just keep at this [frontline] level, which I call more horizontal. It's just not going to work. Because the danger is that you [frontline policy makers and sites] are going to get too far out there and you are making decisions and they, being executive staff, are going to say, "That's not what we want to do. That's clearly not what the [school] board's direction is."

This frontline policy maker also indicated that some senior policy makers discouraged bridging. As a result, frontline policy makers faced significant difficulty in marshalling the assistance of those senior policy makers because it meant that senior policy makers were generally unaware of and not invested in site implementation:

[The stance of several senior policy makers has been] kind of—don't bring me any mess. So I generally don't bring sites' issues up [with those senior policy makers]. That's unfortunate because while there is what we call tacit approval it's not out in the front. [These senior policy makers don't say,] "Yes this is how it is and I fully understand," you know. You can see the downsides of that because, for example, when we go to them for . . . funding, they are always asking, why are you doing this?

On the other hand, buffering—limiting contact between sites and senior policy makers/elected officials—provided sites with freedom from scrutiny and intervention that also seemed essential to site implementation. As one frontline policy maker admitted, senior policy makers' involvement did not always translate into benefits to sites in part because senior policy makers often sought to control rather than to support sites' decisions. This policy maker commented that frontline policy makers are "going to have to find out and develop a strategy that is going to connect [senior policy makers and elected officials] with the community . . . but that takes the threat of it [senior policy makers' involvement] away and that is hard."

For example, in the fall of 2000, school board members dedicated most of a special hearing to a discussion of two of the bottom-up reform initiatives. Noting in meetings and conversations that this was the first school board hearing devoted to bottom-up reform, many site directors welcomed the opportunity to present their implementation progress to board members. However, many sites had just begun implementation and, accordingly, their directors struggled to answer board members' questions about the effect of their work on students' academic achievement. When school board members

asked site directors which specific school board actions might help sites strengthen student achievement, site directors, unfamiliar with school board policy, did not respond with concrete suggestions. At the end of the hearing, the school board did not recommend allocating new funds for implementation and, later in the year, did not convene a second promised hearing on implementation. One site director commented that such communications with the school board—a form of bridging—may have come too early in implementation for sites to make good use of the opportunity and that sites should have been buffered from such inquiries from school board members in the short term.

Similarly, one site director expressed concern that the testimony of another site director before a board appointed by the city council may have harmed and not helped implementation:

We are not presenting ourselves well in front of the [board]. One of the program partners had a bad day in their presentation and it reflected badly on us [other sites]. We need to do some damage control to make sure they [the city council members and their representatives] know that [our sites] are an exciting thing.

The importance of buffering seemed particularly acute in the mid-1990s when the school district's superintendents had reputations among study respondents for not supporting bottom-up reform. For some respondents, the 1998 election of Jerry Brown as mayor, a politician of national proportion with radical reform plans, meant high levels of impermanence and confusion at the top of public bureaucracies that sites potentially could do better to avoid. One frontline policy maker corroborated that buffering sometimes meant greater opportunities to use sites' information for policy changes. As she explained,

I think there's a lot of opportunity because [bottom-up reform is] not on everybody's radar. . . . I think that since everybody is so focused on [another policy strategy] that it leaves a lot of room for this office to be creative and to put things into place that might be more difficult to get approved if everybody wasn't so focused on something else. And maybe that's not the best way to get things done, but I think sometimes when you're talking about this kind of bureaucracy, anyway you can get it done is a good way.

In sum, Oakland's policy makers faced four paradoxes when deciding how to use site information to support implementation. I characterize these choices as paradoxes because both avenues in each pair represented fundamentally different approaches to supporting implementation and both rested on compelling arguments and evidence concerning their potential to support

implementation. It is important that, as suggested by the review of traditional policy-making roles highlighted above, each pair essentially asked policy makers to choose between traditional and nontraditional policy-making approaches. Specifically, closed rules, equality, incubation, and buffering reflect traditional orientations of public policy-making bureaucracies to specify terms of compliance, to ensure the uniform distribution of resources, to keep nontraditional reform activities on the margins of their operations such as by limiting the number of participating implementers, and to shield top-level bureaucratic decision makers from various interest groups. Open-ended rules, equity, procreation, and bridging, conversely, might be viewed as nontraditional policy-making avenues. Accordingly, this set of findings suggests that although, on the whole, bottom-up reform demands that policy makers engage in nontraditional activities, some traditional activities remain essential dimensions of these roles.

CURBS ON POLICY MAKERS' PARTICIPATION IN BOTTOM-UP REFORM

I found that when policy makers faced these paradoxes early in implementation, their choices were essentially evenly distributed between the two options in each pair. Over time, however, they tended to choose avenues consistent with traditional top-down policy-making activities: closed rules, the equal distribution of resources, incubation or keeping an innovation at the margins of public systems, and buffering or limiting policy makers' contact with outside interests such as sites.

For example, when developing Memoranda of Understanding—contracts between sites and the city or district central office with regard to use of city and central office funds—policy makers in the late 1990s tended to delineate specific terms of compliance rather than the broad-based principles of practice that sites could tailor to local circumstances that had characterized the initiatives in prior years. As one frontline central office policy maker explained when reflecting on his decisions about how to use site information, accountability systems did not accommodate open-ended rules:

There has to be some level of concreteness, because how do you hold people accountable for something that isn't even clearly defined. . . . So I . . . define bullet A one way and you define bullet A another way. If we are not clear about what those are, I can't hold you accountable for not doing what I thought you were supposed to do because you were doing what you thought you were supposed to do. We can't proceed that way. We are going to have to come to a meeting of the minds where we agree about what is what.

One staff person to a county agency emphasized that he had learned over the past 5 years that county and municipal budgeting systems did not allow allocations to sites for general activities:

They [sites] want people [policy makers] to be engaged in their thinking with them. . . . I think it's very difficult when we [policy makers] have to balance our budget and we have to make all the widgets fall into place, the reporting that's required from the categorical funding. We have to demonstrate all these things to get the money [for implementation]. And those things are based on traditional sort of funding . . . cycles.

Even Mayor Jerry Brown, nationally recognized for his campaigns promoting school- and neighborhood-level decision making throughout his career, in the mid-1990s, emphasized that his agencies should base their policy decisions on specific terms of compliance. As Brown explained to the *Oakland Tribune* in 2000,

I don't accept the word comprehensive [as an organizing idea for city policy]. That means you have planners, they write all this stuff up, and nothing happens. [General] Patton didn't have a comprehensive plan. . . . He had a strategy and it was highly focused. Comprehensive can just be the rationale for never achieving. . . . You've got to make stuff happen.

Likewise, especially as the number of sites increased over time, policy makers' decisions favored equal rather than equitable site support. For example, in 1999, the district central office pledged a flat amount of funding for each site participating in one of the bottom-up reform initiatives regardless of their costs and other funds. The district central office and the city seemed to lack an administrative infrastructure for equitable distribution of resources. Supporting this assessment, a state audit found that the district central office during that period lacked basic systems and staff training necessary for school site decision making (Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, 2000). Some senior policy makers reported skepticism about the quality of the site information they received and that they erred on the side of the equal distribution of resources to avoid excess spending. As one county agency director commented,

Until we have people out in the field doing . . . analysis then we just have conjecture. Then you get 100 providers in line who want to provide certain services. They [sites] will find problems that feed those solutions.

Frontline policy makers tended to highlight that providing site supports equitably increased their workload beyond their capacity even though they

were dedicated specifically to providing individual site supports and that as the number of sites increased over time they tended to avoid such choices. For example, when asked how much time he spent addressing sites' individual needs, one frontline central office policy maker explained, "Zero. . . . Well, actually, maybe five percent. I processed a payment. . . . That was about as deep as I was able to get into it last week even though I needed to get deeper into it." A frontline city policy maker commented that under such circumstances, she tended to focus on services the city could provide to all sites rather than site-specific supports: "I think less about what sites need and I think, I guess I tend to think about it more in terms of what we can offer."

For related reasons, as each of the bottom-up reform initiatives proceeded with implementation, policy makers tended to favor incubation over procreation. As reported in a 10-year history of one of the bottom-up reform initiatives and in interviews, policy makers discovered that even sites chosen through a competitive grant process to participate in bottom-up reform initiatives—and school principals in particular—had limited experience with and capacity for making collaborative site-based decision making (Oakland School Linked Services Work Group, 1999). Many frontline policy makers commented that sites were chosen primarily based on the needs of their students rather than school or community readiness for implementation and, accordingly, existing sites required significant subsequent investments just to achieve a basic level of operations.

Frontline policy makers also indicated that they tended to buffer sites from senior policy makers and elected officials more often than they bridged sites to them. In the most extreme case, a long-standing frontline central office policy maker reported that he never brought information to senior policy makers or school board members for higher level policy decisions. He attributed this track record to constraints on his time: "[It's] just a time issue. . . . Since 1997 [bridging] is just one of the things that's nice to do but frankly there's just no time to do it." Observations suggested that such time constraints may have stemmed in part from frontline policy makers' weak relationships with individual senior policy makers and elected officials and limited regular meetings with them—both of which increased the time that bridging required (Honig, 2003).

One frontline city policy maker reported that, generally, she had regular access to her agency's director through weekly management meetings but that over time she limited the site information she shared at those meetings. She explained,

The tone of those meetings is changing and I don't know where these kinds of [site] issues will get addressed. . . . They're kind of really much more focused on reports and

dates and things to be done, rather than [site] contact, it feels to me. . . . There's just been huge resistance to that, both intention, and I think, just bureaucratic resistance. That's just not how they work. And I haven't felt much room to influence that, you know.

In sum, policy makers over time tended to reconcile the four paradoxes by choosing the avenue in each pair that reinforced policy makers' traditional activities or professional scripts. Consistent with concepts from the new institutionalism in sociology presented above, frontline policy makers, in particular, frequently explained that these choices stemmed from their limited institutional resources for the alternatives. For example, these policy makers highlighted that procedures for contracting with schools and community agencies, accountability and budgeting systems, and staffing/workload patterns shaped their choices over time. Accordingly, although Oakland's policy makers were able to participate in some of the information management activities that the bottom-up reforms demanded, the institutional resources of their public agencies constrained their full participation.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

This article addressed two key questions: What are appropriate and productive roles for policy makers in bottom-up reform implementation, and what challenges do policy makers face when adopting those roles? These questions stemmed from the observation that implementation of bottom-up reform has faltered for decades in part because of the disappointing participation of policy makers in public bureaucracies, particularly at the district/city level. Research and practice primarily have focused on school-level change and not the up in bottom-up reform—changes in policy makers' roles that might enable school-level reform.

The Oakland case demonstrated that theories of organizational learning under conditions of ambiguity highlight broad information management processes fundamental to policy makers' roles in bottom-up reform. At root, these processes involve policy makers using implementers' decisions rather than policy makers' preferences as guides for implementation supports. In this conceptualization, policy makers do not simply carry out implementers' decisions. Rather, they work with implementers to make sense of implementers' goals, strategies, and experiences and which resources, policies, and other supports might enable implementation. This sense-making stage is essential, particularly given the ambiguity inherent in interpretation and translation.

The Oakland case revealed that one consequence of this ambiguity is that policy makers face a variety of conflicting choices when deciding how to use site information. More information did not reconcile these conflicts and actually may have raised more issues for policy makers to consider. In this case, policy makers struggled with how to make sense of competing evidence and arguments that they would advance implementation if they maintained both open-ended and closed rules with regard to terms of compliance; treated sites both equitably and equally; both procreated and incubated; and both bridged sites to and buffered sites from senior policy makers and elected officials. As highlighted above, one goal in each pair represented traditional policy-making practice whereas the other involved nontraditional practice. Accordingly, policy makers' new roles in bottom-up reform did not call for completely eliminating traditional practices but for expanding policy makers' traditional repertoire of activities. Over time, policy makers favored the choices that reflected traditional top-down policy-making practices. Although I did not observe that these choices had adverse consequences on site implementation during my study period, respondents' strong arguments in favor of the alternatives raise cautions about these biases over the long term.

Implications for Research

This study highlighted the importance of featuring policy makers as a central focus of implementation research. Often, policy makers appear in the background of school studies as curbs on implementation. This study suggested that a focus on policy makers can shed new light on how they might enable school reform implementation and the challenges they face in the process. This study also highlighted the importance of organizational learning as a basic framework to guide the study of policy makers' roles and raised a number of questions for future research.

First, this study highlighted paradoxes that policy makers face when deciding how to use site information as the basis of implementation supports and curbs on policy makers' choices about those paradoxes. I present Oakland's policy makers' choices as problematic because they systematically excluded certain types of choices, not because the observed outcomes of their choices actually foiled implementation during the study period. With these paradoxes as a theoretical framework, subsequent research can examine how particular choices play out in implementation. Specifically, when do open-ended rules, equitable treatment, procreation, and bridging enable/constrain implementation? When do the other choices enable implementation? Do specific types of implementation challenges warrant one choice in each pair over the other?

On a broader level, this study highlighted that policy makers' roles in bottom-up reform involve managing paradoxes. Related research suggests that managing paradoxes, regardless of the details of the conflicting choices and values, is nontraditional work for public sector leaders of various stripes (e.g., Deal & Peterson, 1994). Paradoxes may foil decision making or generate productive conflict that strengthens individuals and institutions (Ford & Backoff, 1988). Future research might examine how policy makers grapple with their roles as managers of paradoxes. Related research in private firms suggests that decision makers seek to simplify their decisions and limit conflicts inherent in paradoxes (March, 1994a). Do public policy makers follow this pattern? Under what conditions do they use the paradoxes to advance implementation?

Third, this study suggests that the absence of particular institutional supports such as certain accountability and budgeting structures systematically curbs policy makers' choices about how to support site implementation. If these institutional supports were available, would policy makers buck the trends presented here and make different choices about site support? Implementation studies have long suggested that the opposite of a constraining condition is not necessarily an enabling condition (e.g., Nelson & Yates, 1978). Would an entirely different set of supports lead policy makers to make different choices?

Also, this study raises important questions about the hierarchical power relationships within public bureaucracies that likely affect frontline policy makers' roles and, in particular, their choices about using information from sites. Alternative conceptual frameworks such as those from critical theory or micropolitics of bureaucracies may help elaborate these implementation dynamics.

It is important that findings from this study come from a single, albeit strategic, research site. As discussed above, findings from strategic sites are not directly generalizable to populations but may define concepts that inform theory and guide future research. This study presents a set of concepts—information management activities and paradoxes—that can focus research in other settings. Research that starts with these concepts as part of the theoretical framework for data collection may deepen understanding of how these concepts play out in practice in other districts/cities and broaden knowledge of their applicability to other levels of government.

Implications for Practice

This study has a number of implications for what policy makers who want to support bottom-up reform should know and be able to do.

First, Oakland case highlights that bottom-up reform asks policy makers to operate in ways that depart from policy-making-as-usual. Namely, policy makers' participation does not involve traditional top-down command-and-control relationships or lesser roles in implementation. Rather, such participation involves active engagement in organizational learning activities. Policy makers may find the organizational learning concepts highlighted here and in related publications initial guides for this nontraditional practice (Honig, 2003).

Second, this study suggests that supports for policy makers in implementation may include the provision of new institutional resources. For example, site-by-site support demanded significant staff time and funding that other districts might consider augmenting. School district leaders might consider building these institutional supports for policy makers as essential parts of bottom-up policy design.

It is important that policy makers who participate in bottom-up reform implementation in the ways highlighted here likely will experience the work as difficult. Not only does bottom-up reform place nontraditional demands on policy makers. In addition, paradoxes by their very nature present conflicts that leaders of various stripes consider challenging. Accordingly, policy makers may find it useful to apply a counterintuitive standard to their own performance in bottom-up reform implementation: The work will be difficult even if and perhaps especially when it is going well.

NOTES

1. According to predominant uses of the term in this literature, "bottom-up reform" is distinct from other nontraditional forms of policy making including so-called community-driven reform, which primarily aims to involve community residents in school-level decision-making processes. Bottom-up reform focuses mainly on shifting or sharing decision-making authority between levels of hierarchical school systems—usually schools and school district central offices.

2. For one example of a classic guide for policy analysis based on these assumptions, see Stokey and Zeckhauser's (1978) *A Primer for Policy Analysis*. Several recent texts provide alternative conceptions of policy making as the management of conflicting social values and inconclusive information (Majone, 1989; Stone, 1997). Significantly, these authors explicitly frame their texts as departures from traditional conceptions of policy analysis as rational calculations by policy specialists.

3. For an elaboration on organizational learning as a framework for understanding policy implementation, please see Honig (2003).

4. For an elaboration on these policy designs, please see Honig (2001, 2003).

5. I report on these conditions as findings in another publication (Honig, 2003).

6. I report on these meetings and the role of the nonprofit conveners in a separate publication (Honig, 2004).

7. For an elaboration on this subset of findings, please see Honig (2003).

8. An extended version of this example appears in Honig (2003). I used the same extended example in this article as a deliberate strategy to help readers understand the findings reported here as an extension of that previously published work.

9. All proper names reported in these findings are pseudonyms.

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