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Ready for What? School and District Responses to State College and Career Readiness Accountability in Tennessee

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Tennessee's K-12 accountability system incorporates three distinct measures of college and career readiness (CCR) for state and federal accountability. Each of these indicators applies its own set of metrics and performance benchmarks, but they all consistently draw upon similar components including participation in Early Postsecondary Opportunities (EPSOs), standardized tests like the ACT and SAT, completion of industry certifications, and performance on military entrance exams. This qualitative analysis draws on interviews with 40 district and school leaders, staff, and administrators. While school and district personnel acknowledged the importance of preparing students for life beyond high school, many expressed skepticism about the accessibility and legitimacy of current state accountability metrics, especially for unique populations served by the district such as English Learners and immigrant students. Respondents noted a lack of clear policy consequences, limited alignment between CCR goals and available resources, and frustration with ever-changing and confusing indicators. These findings suggest the need for

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Ready for What?

School and District Responses to State College and Career Readiness Accountability in Tennessee

Introduction

Tennessee uses three different measures of high school students' college and career readiness (CCR) for state and federal accountability. While Tennessee's state and federal accountability systems emphasize the importance of promoting CCR, it is unclear whether the state's various indicators of CCR align with those used in school districts to promote and track college and career readiness. It is also unclear whether and how each CCR accountability measure shapes policies and practices on the ground in schools and districts. Using the case of a large urban district in the state of Tennessee, this qualitative study aimed to establish a comprehensive view of how state-imposed CCR accountability indicators operate in a unique school district to inform administrators and leaders about students' preparedness for college and career. A related paper explores the association between attainment of state indicators and college outcomes using administrative data from the district finding that college outcomes including enrollment, persistence, vertical transfer, and degree completion have a generally positive association with meeting Tennessee's CCR accountability indicators. This paper draws on these quantitative findings to understand how stakeholder perspectives on the state CCR accountability system shape local policy and practice through interviews with district and school personnel. The analysis specifically addresses the following:

1) How do school and district personnel operationalize college and career readiness, and how does this operationalization differ (if at all) from state definitions?
2) How do state college and career readiness accountability indicators shape policies and practices in the school district?
3) How does the measured relationship between each college and career readiness indicator align with the beliefs held by school and district personnel?

a. What actions do school and district personnel take based on their understanding of the relationship between state accountability measures and college outcomes?

To answer these questions, I conducted interviews with 40 school and district leaders and staff that explored how individuals operationalize and assess CCR and how state CCR accountability indicators shape local policies and practices. To address the third research question and sub-questions, this paper integrates findings from interviews with results from quantitative analyses presented in a related paper to understand whether district administrators and leaders are aware of the associations between indicators and student outcomes and how presumed relationships between indicators and student outcomes shape district policies and practices.

Study Context and Background

In recent years, Tennessee has used three measures of college- and career-readiness for accountability purposes: the Ready Graduate measure[1] for federal accountability under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the State CCR measure to calculate state-reported school letter grades, and the Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA) CCR measure to allocate bonuses to districts through the state education funding system. Each measure incorporates multiple pathways by which a student can be considered "college- and career-ready." These pathways are based on similar core elements: performance on college entrance exams, participation in early postsecondary opportunities (EPSOs) like Advanced Placement (AP) and dual enrollment courses, attainment of industry-recognized credentials, and performance on

[1] In the 2025-26 school year, Tennessee is replacing the Ready Graduate indicator with the state CCR indicator for both state and federal accountability: https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/accountability/2025-26_Federal_Accountability_Protocol.pdf. This study was completed before this change was announced in September 2025.

military entrance exams. However, the details of each pathway vary considerably across indicators (see Table 1).

Despite having one of the most comprehensive approaches to CCR accountability in the United States (Hackmann et al., 2019), to date there is little information on how schools and districts in Tennessee understand and respond to state-level accountability pressures around CCR. A robust body of work produced by the Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning (C-SAIL), though, has identified key aspects of CCR accountability policy that motivate and shape school and district behavior in other states (Desimone et al., 2019; Edgerton & Desimone, 2018, 2019; Pak et al., 2020; Pak & Desimone, 2019; Polikoff et al., 2022). This work—much of which is rooted in "policy attributes theory" (Desimone, 2002; Porter, 1994; Porter & Brophy, 1988)—has been used to examine the implementation of CCR standards for mathematics and English language arts (ELA) in six states (California, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas) and to evaluate the effects of CCR standards on student outcomes across the nation.

The CCR accountability implementation work produced by C-SAIL has identified key similarities and differences across state contexts in how schools and districts respond to state-level CCR standards post-ESSA (Edgerton & Desimone, 2018, 2019; Polikoff et al., 2022). Importantly, while states vary in their approaches to defining and implementing CCR standards for accountability purposes, this research finds through surveys and interviews that district administrators and principals have consistently higher "buy-in" than teachers in terms of how CCR standards are defined by the state (Edgerton & Desimone, 2019). The degree of buy-in varies according to whether individuals perceive state CCR standards to be based on criteria or goals that are viewed as legitimate and tied to useful measures of CCR among students.

Teachers—especially those who work closely with students with disabilities or English Learners—are more likely to view state standards as under-nuanced and inappropriate for all students. When a lack of perceived legitimacy is coupled with the perception of significant personal consequences for failing to meet standards, this results in reduced efforts to implement standards into teaching practice (Edgerton & Desimone, 2018). This finding is especially important given that the perceived legitimacy of CCR standards is one of the most critical attributes of state accountability policy in predicting successful implementation of new state standards (Desimone et al., 2019; Edgerton & Desimone, 2018; Polikoff et al., 2022).

While the C-SAIL work largely focuses on CCR-based curricular standards in math and ELA, the findings from C-SAIL have implications for how schools and districts might respond to other types of CCR accountability pressures. In Tennessee, the existence of CCR accountability measures that are tied to student outcomes beyond performance on standardized math and ELA tests complicates how local actors may respond to state-level pressures. Allowing multiple pathways for students to meet CCR indicator criteria and incorporating measures that go beyond test scores may grant the policies greater legitimacy than test-based accountability measures. Such multifaceted measures could be perceived as more nuanced and therefore appropriate for evaluating diverse forms of student progress than test-based measures that can be viewed as inadequate measures of student ability. Yet it is unclear whether local leaders and practitioners indeed perceive Tennessee's CCR indicators as legitimate or if they conflict with individual beliefs on how to best measure and evaluate CCR. The current study aims to shed light on this question by evaluating how school and district staff in a unique urban district understand and respond to these relatively recent state CCR accountability pressures.

Study Context

This study is situated within a large urban district in Tennessee. The school district presents an interesting setting for exploring the focal research questions for three primary reasons. First, Tennessee is noteworthy across states for the high emphasis it places on CCR and district accountability in both its federal system and state accountability systems. Under ESSA, states were required to create a non-academic School Quality and Student Success (SQSS) indicator for accountability which could include various components such as measures of student engagement, educator engagement, access to and participation in advanced coursework, postsecondary readiness, and school climate (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). Thirty-nine states and D.C. do include some measure of access to, completion of, or performance in a "college- and career-ready curriculum" in their SQSS indicator (Erwin & Bloomquist, 2024; Kostyo et al., 2018). Although the majority of states incorporate CCR in their federal accountability plans, in most cases, CCR measures that go beyond high school graduation rates make up only a small percentage of a state's overall accountability rating given to schools or districts. Among the states, Tennessee places the lowest weight on high school graduation alone for accountability at only 5% of the overall rating for high schools (Portz & Beauchamp, 2022), yet it places some of the highest weight (20% of the overall accountability grade) on measures of CCR that go beyond graduation via the Ready Graduate—only six other states place higher weight in their high school ratings on CCR measures that go beyond graduation rates (Erwin & Bloomquist, 2024). Furthermore, as noted in a content evaluation of all states' ESSA plans, "Tennessee provides the most comprehensive CCR treatment [in its ESSA state plan], noting how the state's CCR standards guided the state goals and ESSA plan development." (Hackmann et al., 2019). The deep and intentional incorporation of CCR in Tennessee's accountability system extends beyond

explicit measures like the Ready Graduate and serves as the basis for defining other aspects of accountability. It is unclear though if this intentionality at the state level translates at the local level and is both recognized and reflected in school and district practices.

Tennessee is also exceptional for its treatment of district accountability generally. Unlike other states which only provide cursory references to district accountability in their ESSA state plans (American Institutes for Research, 2017), Tennessee's state plan devotes an entire section to its approach to district accountability explaining that, "the primary role of the state is to monitor district outcomes (rather than school outcomes), both by evaluating current performance and by providing supports that promote equity, excellence, and continuous improvement." (Tennessee Department of Education, 2019, p. 81). This approach demonstrates the state's philosophy regarding who is responsible for ensuring student success. Rather than holding schools directly accountable, the state believes in delegating this responsibility to districts who are in turn held accountable for their management of schools' outcomes. The high degree of intentionality around incorporating CCR and the clear delineation of state, district, and school roles in accountability systems makes Tennessee a useful case for studying local approaches to state CCR accountability. In comparison to other states with a less clearly defined and direct approach, one would expect to learn a great deal from districts in Tennessee on how local actors understand and react to state-level CCR policy.

Second, although most school districts in Tennessee are situated in rural communities, a large urban district like the one in this study can serve as an "critical case" (Patton, 1990) for understanding the impacts of accountability policy throughout the state and in other similar urban contexts. The school district examined in this study is one of largest in the state in terms of number of schools and students served (Tennessee Department of Education, 2024). The district

is also one of the most demographically diverse districts in terms of student race/ethnicity, and the district serves large shares of English Language Learners (ELLs), students with disabilities, and economically-disadvantaged students who are not distributed evenly across district schools (Tennessee Department of Education, 2024). The diversity and size of the student population implies that school and district leaders must consider a range of responses to state accountability pressures in order to serve students with differing needs. Also, unlike some of the smaller rural districts in Tennessee, the district office is large enough to warrant organization into multiple departments each with several suboffices. In particular, the creation of the relatively new Office of College and Career Readiness within the Academics Department signals that the district has delegated key CCR tasks to specific district-level staff and has developed an intentional strategy around promoting CCR outcomes. As a result, the case of this particular school district should yield a great deal of nuanced information about responses to state CCR priorities and can contribute to the development of theory about how responses to changing state accountability systems differ according to local factors.

Finally, the district is currently engaged in a research-practice partnership with a local university focused on increasing equity in education. This partnership has provided me with the opportunity to consult district practitioners and leaders directly throughout the duration of the study, thus ensuring that findings and research questions were tied to relevant topics and issues faced by the district. I was able to readily access answers to questions about state and local policies throughout the research process, which has deepened my understanding of the implications of key findings and ensured that my conclusions were informed by important aspects of the local context. The results of this work will also be shared with district partners to improve upon existing strategies, policies, and practices regarding CCR.

Theoretical Framework

To guide the qualitative exploration of Tennessee's CCR accountability systems, I draw on policy attributes theory (Desimone, 2002; Porter, 1994; Porter & Brophy, 1988). As found by studies of accountability reform in the post-No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and ESSA eras, state initiatives come with practices that can be assessed according to their specificity, consistency, authoritativeness, power, and stability (Desimone, 2002; Desimone et al., 2005, 2019). Policies that are highly *specific* reduce uncertainty in how the policy ought to be implemented and make the intended outcomes of the policy change clear. When there is *consistency* across policies, actors, such as district and school leaders, are better able to understand the vision and goals of the state. Yet even if policies are specific and clear, *authority* is needed to give legitimacy to initiatives and *power* is needed to enforce or reward actors for following the policy. However, without *stability* and a reasonable belief in the longevity of an initiative or policy, actors will not be incentivized to implement the reform.

In this context, the individual components of the CCR accountability system adopted by Tennessee vary according to their associated levels of specificity, consistency, authoritativeness, power, and stability. Each CCR indicator comes with a set of measures for evaluating progress and outcomes associated with certain levels of performance. Yet the efficacy of these accountability systems in bringing about desired outcomes will depend on how school and district actors perceive attributes of these policies. While each CCR indicator provides a detailed outline of how students are classified as college- and career-ready, if schools and districts do not view the consequences associated with each measure as holding power or if they are not convinced in the stability of the policy, for example, they may be less likely to adopt changes to promote those policy outcomes. Similarly, if these indicators are not believed to be associated

with the outcomes they aim to promote, these systems will lose legitimacy and buy-in from school and district leaders. Furthermore, given the indicator-by-indicator differences, the collective set of CCR indicators in the accountability system may amplify or complicate individuals' perceptions of the state's overall approach to accountability policy. For example, even if individual CCR indicators are perceived as specific and internally consistent, the introduction of each new and slightly different CCR indicator might create the perception of overall instability or inconsistency in the state accountability system.

Findings from the public administration performance management literature provide further insight into how school and district staff may respond to these CCR accountability pressures using a principal-agent framework (Benaine & Kroll, 2020; Courty & Marschke, 2003, 2008; Heinrich & Choi, 2007; Heinrich & Marschke, 2010). In the public sector, there is well-documented evidence that performance-based accountability mechanisms imposed by the state (i.e., the principal) shape public employees' (i.e., the agents) responses according to multiple dimensions (see Heinrich & Marschke (2010) for a review). Most relevant to this work is the degree to which performance measures are linked to outcomes that are within an agent's ability to control and are tied to goals that are meaningful to the agent. When performance measures are linked to outcomes that are noisy and/or are difficult for the agent to directly impact, it can lead to dysfunction and conflict especially if failure to reach performance benchmarks is associated with serious consequences (Heinrich & Marschke, 2010; Sloof & Van Praag, 2010). Yet, even if changing behavior to improve outcomes is extremely difficult, agents may still increase effort to meet performance goals if there is alignment between the policy goals and the agent's own prosocial, public service motivation (Perry et al., 2010; Rainey & Steinbauer, 1999; Ritz et al., 2016). This is especially important in the context of public education given the myriad factors

outside of the school's control that impact a student's academic performance, interests, and goals. While value-added accountability systems attempt to ensure that teachers and other school/district personnel are only held accountable for academic outcomes that they can reasonably impact (Chetty et al., 2014; Rubin et al., 2004; Sanders, 1998), it is not necessarily clear how to measure each public education actor's individual value-add for outcomes that cannot be measured through standardized tests alone. For example, in comparison to a concept like performance in mathematics, "college- and career-readiness" is a relatively vague concept without a clear, universal definition or obvious set of associated performance measures. By nature, the concept of CCR also acknowledges that what constitutes "readiness" can vary depending on the pathway a student hopes to take after K-12 schooling. It is perhaps unreasonable to think that one could use the same measure to gauge a high school student's readiness for a career that requires graduate education to one that requires a trade school education. While Tennessee attempts to address this through incorporating multiple pathways for meeting CCR accountability indicators, there are tradeoffs between increasing the relevance of each measure and introducing complexity. As CCR is not the only accountability pressure faced by schools and districts, the complicated nature of a multi-pathway system can create confusion and uncertainty about the desired response.

Another important insight from the public sector performance management literature is the dynamic nature of agents' responses to performance-based accountability systems (Courty & Marschke, 2003, 2008; Heinrich & Marschke, 2010). Research on local responses to the high stakes testing requirements introduced under NCLB has found that it was not uncommon for school and district staff to respond by "teaching-to-the-test" to meet achievement benchmarks rather than through focusing on other learning goals (Au, 2007; Jennings & Bearak, 2014).

Schools and districts also felt pressured to focus attention on "bubble kids"—i.e., those who were on the cusp of reaching minimum performance thresholds—rather than on supporting learning gains among students at the lowest levels of academic performance (Booher-Jennings, 2005, 2006; Reback, 2008). These types of gaming responses ultimately resulted in a "distortion" of the relationship between test scores and student outcomes (Courty & Marschke, 2008; Holmstrom & Milgrom, 1991). While there may have been a strong and positive association between test performance and student outcomes prior to the introduction of these performance measures, the gaming behaviors that resulted from the introduction of high-stakes tests weakened the predictive power of standardized tests.

This phenomenon supports the notion that performance-based measures must be designed in ways that prevent distortions and account for actors' responses to accountability pressures. In the context of Tennessee's performance-based CCR measures, the shift from the EPSO *participation* based Ready Graduate measure (which could be easily "gamed" for example by simply placing students into EPSOs regardless of academic ability or interest) to the academic *performance* based State CCR and TISA CCR measures represents a possible strategy for mitigating the changing nature of the relationship between EPSO engagement and student outcomes. Indeed, as the quantitative analysis from the larger study finds, there is a positive association between meeting Ready Graduate criteria and college-going across the full period of study. However, as time passes, the nature of this relationship might change as schools and districts change behavior in order to meet Ready Graduate accountability pressures. Shifting to the performance-based State CCR and TISA CCR measures could restore the positive association between meeting indicators and student outcomes. Through this qualitative analysis, I explore individuals' perceptions of the alignment between state and local definitions and goals for CCR. I

also examine how and why individuals change behaviors and practices in ways that either improve intended student outcomes or contribute to distortions in the relationship between CCR indicators and student outcomes. Approaching this study using policy attributes theory in combination with findings from the public sector performance management literature hones the focus on specific elements of Tennessee's CCR indicators that would be expected to shape local behaviors and outcomes.

Research Design

The qualitative analysis presented in this paper originated from a larger mixed methods study. The larger study used a convergent mixed methods research design (Creswell & Clark, 2017) where quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed separately during roughly the same timeframe. Following analysis, results were brought together for interpretation and discussion. This approach deepens the understanding of how CCR is conceptualized and measured by district and school leaders in comparison to how the state defines and assesses CCR, as well as in comparison to the relationship between state CCR indicators and college-going outcomes among students in the district. Although I did not formally outline an iterative process of collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data, preliminary findings from the quantitative analysis were incorporated into the data collection and analysis of the qualitative study component and vice versa. In particular, as the third research question explores, I use findings from the quantitative analysis presented in a related paper to inform the interpretation of information gathered during the qualitative interviews.

Methods

I conducted semi-structured interviews with school and district staff from April 2024 to January 2025. This data collection expands on interview data collected as part of a separate

project in the 2022-23 school year with 5 principals, 7 school staff members, and 9 district staff members. This initial series of interviews focused on the issue of access to and participation in EPSOs broadly. Two emergent findings from these earlier interviews were a) the high perceived importance of the Ready Graduate indicator and b) the wide range of interpretations individuals held about the indicator. While the initial interview protocol did not explicitly address the Ready Graduate indicator itself, it became increasingly clear during data analysis that participants considered the Ready Graduate indicator to be synonymous with college and career readiness; a student who was a Ready Graduate was by their definition also college- and career-ready. In addition, the importance of student participation in EPSOs was also defined in relation to the Ready Graduate indicator. EPSOs mattered because the Ready Graduate indicator mattered, and if a student completed EPSOs according to the Ready Graduate standards, that was viewed as sufficient for preparing students for college and career. In contrast to students' ACT scores, which were perceived as difficult for administrators to directly improve, school leaders had more opportunities to promote EPSO participation through course enrollment and advising practices. Given these emergent findings, interviews collected during the course of this study explicitly investigated how school and district personnel view and make use of the Ready Graduate indicator along with new state-level CCR accountability indicators, which had not yet been released during the initial round of interviews.

Between April 2024 and January of 2025, I interviewed 8 district leaders (those with a title of Director or higher), 7 district staff, 9 high school leaders (principals and assistant principals), and 16 high school staff. Interviews lasted 53 minutes on average (34 minutes minimum and 74 minutes maximum), and with one exception, were conducted virtually via video conferencing software based on participants' preference for a virtual over an in-person

format. I combined purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit study participants. Using lists of personnel obtained from research partners at the district, all high school principals and all district staff with positions related to college and career readiness (e.g., executive directors of high schools, those working within the district's Office of College and Career Readiness) were contacted for an interview. District office research partners also provided lists of high school staff with positions related to college and career readiness activities (e.g., counselors, assistant principals, college and career readiness coaches) to contact for interviews. At the end of each interview session, participants were asked to recommend other staff members who would be especially helpful to talk to about college and career readiness accountability and its implementation in the district or at their school.

The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol divided into three sections: participant's current role; school, district, and state goals for college and career readiness; and college and career readiness accountability. In line with the first two research questions, interviews explored individuals' perspectives on CCR generally and on specific accountability indicators (i.e., the Ready Graduate, the state CCR indicator, and the TISA High School Outcomes indicator) including their understanding of how indicators are used for accountability purposes. Interviews explored how individual and institutional operationalizations of CCR align with state-provided definitions. Interviews also inquired about programs and practices schools and the district have adopted to improve CCR, such as student recruitment strategies for specific eligibility pathways or EPSOs, staffing decisions, and data collection and reporting procedures. As interviews and the quantitative analysis progressed, the interview protocol was revised in order to deepen my exploration of emergent themes and findings. See Appendix A for the interview protocol.

Analysis strategy

Interview data analysis consisted of writing analytic memos and coding interview transcripts following a first and second cycle coding process as outlined by Saldaña (2021) and Miles et al. (2018). After cleaning each interview transcript with the assistance of the Otter.ai software, I annotated each interview transcript to summarize key topics and interviewee responses. This annotating process was akin to a "Theming the Data" process (Saldaña, 2021) in that annotations served to organize large blocks of interview data according to different topics and used longer phrases or sentences rather than concise codes. I also generated analytic memos during the annotating process to note emerging themes, connections, and impressions from interviews. Throughout the annotating and memo-ing process, I incorporated tenets of policy attributes theory and the public sector performance management literature to explore how emergent themes were related to different attributes of state CCR accountability indicators (e.g., how participants described and perceived the specificity of Ready Graduate eligibility pathways, the perceived power of the state to enforce its accountability goals, and the use of gaming behaviors to meet performance goals).

After cleaning and annotating each transcript, I completed a "First Cycle" coding procedure that drew on exploratory holistic coding methods (Miles et al., 2018; Saldaña, 2021). This approach allowed me to organize the transcript data into key categories for further analysis of the content. These exploratory codes combined a variety of coding types (e.g., In Vivo codes, process codes), depending on the content of each interview. While I generated First Cycle codes inductively as I read through transcripts, I focused on emphasizing topics that were closely related to my research questions. First Cycle codes were informed by the interview protocol,

prior literature, analytic memos and transcript annotations, and the policy attributes and performance management frameworks I employ in this study.

Following the exploratory First Cycle coding process, I completed a Second Cycle pattern coding process where I developed summative codes for groupings of conceptually similar First Cycle codes (Miles et al., 2018; Saldaña, 2021). The pattern coding process allowed me to condense and identify emergent themes linking each of the First Cycle codes. For the purposes of this study, I focused solely on refining and developing pattern codes for groupings of First Cycle codes that were most directly related to the research questions. More specifically, I used four pairs of pattern codes to organize coded data on perceptions of CCR accountability:

- Relevance of policy goals and indicators
    - Policy goals and performance measures capture important context and outcomes
    - Policy goals and performance measures miss important context and outcomes
- CCR indicators predict important student outcomes
    - Does not predict important outcomes
    - Predicts important outcomes
- Policy consequences
    - Unclear or no consequences
    - Real consequences
- Ability to support students in meeting CCR indicators
    - Challenging to meet
    - Possible to meet

I also used a series of codes to organize participants' CCR practices and strategies for responding to state accountability systems conceptually similar groups (e.g., increasing EPSO opportunities, checking boxes, changing school culture). I then use my coded data in combination with participant and site attribute data (e.g., participant role, school characteristics) to generate matrices and other displays in order to identify and explain connections between concepts, themes, and settings. The following section details the key themes I identified with regard to these focal pattern codes.

Findings

The overarching finding from this study is that the actions taken by school and district staff in response to state CCR accountability pressures were largely a function of individual beliefs about the state CCR accountability system on four dimensions:

- *Importance:* whether the state accountability system was centered on goals that promoted important and relevant student outcomes
- *Predictive power:* whether state accountability indicators could be used to meaningfully predict students' likelihood of being successful after high school
- *Associated consequences:* the severity of penalties to oneself and/or the school/district for failing to meet state accountability goals
- *Ability to change:* whether the individual and/or the school/district were capable of enacting changes to practice or policy in order to meaningfully improve performance on state CCR measures

In combination, how a given participant felt about each of these dimensions shaped the actions they took in response to the state's CCR policies and their perceptions of the link between state and local definitions of CCR. These dimensions closely align with the elements proposed under

the policy attributes framework of specificity, consistency, authoritativeness, power, and stability. These dimensions are also conceptually linked to elements of performance management systems (e.g., alignment between employee motivations and performance measures, perceived task difficulty) that predict different responses (e.g., gaming behaviors). In what follows, I address the study research questions by exploring how school and district staff responded to state policy according to their own beliefs regarding each of these four dimensions. I also explain similarities and differences in the practices, strategies, and delegation of roles that are associated with particular beliefs on each dimension. Throughout, I draw on terminology from the policy attributes and performance management literature to describe findings. The discussion provides a more detailed explanation of the link between theory and findings from this study.

Importance of State CCR Accountability Goals

> *I think the state's vision for Ready Graduate is aligned with our vision for what it would take for students to be successful.*
>
> — District leader

> *The Ready Graduate initiative is, in theory, a great idea in my view, but unfortunately, it isn't the most realistic or prioritized goal for a lot of our students.*
>
> — High school counselor

In many cases, "official" definitions of college and career readiness were directly tied to the Ready Graduate indicator. For example, when asked to describe school or district goals around college and career readiness without any specific prompting about state accountability measures, half of all participants' immediate responses still centered around "increasing the number of Ready Graduates." The push for increasing Ready Graduates was a relatively recent development which some participants speculated was the direct result of changing state accountability pressures. As one district staff member explained, "all of a sudden the state [Ready Graduate] grades come out, and they're not all positive. And so that really shifted our

emphasis to helping schools be able to achieve the Ready Graduate status." When publicized state measures including the Ready Graduate seem to reflect poorly on the district, this shifts the district's priorities and actions to improve performance on state-defined measures.

Yet, as the quotes presented at the start of this section show, participants' personal beliefs varied widely on whether the Ready Graduate indicator captured important student outcomes. The perceived relevance of the state's definitions of CCR to important student outcomes existed on a spectrum from highly aligned to personal beliefs (the quoted district leader) to misaligned (the quoted high school counselor). When participants believed in the importance of state definition of CCR via the Ready Graduate, their reasoning was based on the Ready Graduate's incorporation of measures that went beyond test scores and its recognition of multiple pathways by which a student could be successful. As one high school principal even stated, "I think that the college and career Ready Graduate work is probably the most significant work that we do." In the view of this principal and others, the Ready Graduate indicator accurately captures the ultimate goal and mission of public education. As she went on to explain,

> If I look at standardized tests and where they fit on the ranking or on a scale [of school priorities], it's probably the least important work that we do. The most important work that we do is to get kids to find their passion and purpose in where they want to go as it relates to college and career.

For this principal, working towards outcomes that aligned with the state Ready Graduate measure, no matter how difficult, was meaningful and worthwhile work. The existence of accountability pressures tied to performance on the Ready Graduate indicator were in line with many of the goals schools and the district already had for their students. For example, as one district leader explained, the recently-adopted district motto of *Every Student Known* means that

“it doesn't matter if it’s the valedictorian of the class, or the last ranking person in the class, it’s [the district’s] goal to know every student and to provide them with the skills they need to be successful no matter where they are.” As a result, multifaceted state definitions of CCR were a natural extension and useful operationalization of the goals school and district staff were already working towards even before the introduction of CCR accountability measures.

When conflict came up between state CCR definitions and school and district efforts, it typically centered around the perceived lack of appreciation for the challenges faced by the students served by the district. As the high school counselor quoted at the beginning of this section explained, although meeting Ready Graduate status may signify progress towards worthwhile goals for students, in reality, these state definitions of CCR were not aligned with many of her students’ personal goals or needs. In particular, the large population of undocumented students in the district created challenges both for meeting elements of the Ready Graduate and in supporting students’ postsecondary success. Undocumented students are not eligible to receive state grants for participating in dual enrollment opportunities offered by public postsecondary institutions (College for TN, 2025) nor are they eligible for most financial aid programs (e.g., federal student loans, TN Promise) or for joining the military. As a high school staff member explained, this creates challenges for her school in offering opportunities for students to meet state Ready Graduate criteria:

> There are so many ways that you can become a Ready Grad, which I am grateful for, but not all those options work for all students. As an example, the military does not want to come and proctor the ASVAB for a school that has a large share of undocumented students that they can’t use those test results for. So, for us, [offering the ASVAB pathway] is not an option.

In theory the state has created multiple opportunities for schools to meet CCR performance goals thus increasing the perceived relevance between state measures and important student outcomes. In practice, much of this nuance and connection to relevant student outcomes is lost when pathways are inaccessible to large portions of the student body. This school staff member further explained that the large population of undocumented students at her school made it financially untenable to offer dual enrollment opportunities to many students and that issues with language barriers made it challenging for many of the ELLs served by the school to meet ACT benchmarks. Notably, many interviewees at this school and others explained that the only accommodation for ELLs on the ACT is a word-to-word English translation dictionary, which is often inadequate given that students do not receive any extra time for the assessment. As a high school assistant principal at another school put it:

> Looking at a kid who's been in the country for two months and saying, 'Why can't you get a 21 on the ACT, even though you don't speak English as a first language?' when I know I could put the ACT in Spanish in front of any of these lawmakers and they can't pass it, that's where I hold issue with [the Ready Graduate].

While the dual credit, AP, and industry certification options were potentially viable pathways for schools that served large populations of ELLs and non-citizen students, the constant change in state priorities and rules as well as the difficulty of staffing and offering these opportunities created challenge and frustration. For example, the high school counselor further explained how these other options for Ready Graduate were great in theory but unrealistic for her school in practice by saying,

> Dual credit is limited to the career technical education offerings. Not many schools or community colleges offer dual credit for English, math, science, or social studies. But

> also, [community colleges] don't make any money off dual credit. So, in the next coming years, community colleges are wanting to shift from dual credit to dual enrollment, because they can make money off that [via the state's dual enrollment grants]. Well, that will shoot my high school in the foot! Because if we can't offer dual credit, most of our kids are not going to be considered Ready Grad.

District staff and leaders shared this frustration felt at the school level by explaining how the realities of the population served by the district made it challenging to offer guidance and support to schools. Given the needs of the student population, the district has attempted to shift definitions of what constitutes college and career readiness and to be creative in how they support students in meeting Ready Graduate benchmarks. As one district staff member explained, "many schools have high populations of students that are ELLs. And if they're undocumented, they don't have access to federal aid. So, we've struggled with students really having interest in Ready Graduate." To combat the lack of perceived alignment between students' individual goals and the state's CCR goals, schools and the district have adopted strategies for marketing Ready Graduate pathways as relevant and useful for all students. For example, this district staff person explained that the district has worked closely with local universities to offer scholarships to district students regardless of a family's documentation status:

> Schools have had to be a little bit more creative and more intentional about how they message [why the Ready Graduate] is important. For students that are undocumented, it's making sure they know different [college access] options. We are blessed in our district, in that we've had lots of partnerships with universities … so, like making parents be

aware, 'Hey, you might be undocumented, but if you get, you know, these particular scholarships, you have access to college.'

The prevalence of these strategies reflected a pattern of school and district staff perceiving alignment between state CCR goals and personally held goals for improving students' preparedness for college and career, but it underscores the perceived misalignment between measures like the Ready Graduate and individual student interests and needs. District and school personnel acknowledged that even if they personally believed that state goals focused on important student outcomes, many of the students they served faced significant barriers to accessing opportunities both in high school and after. These barriers shape students' expectations and aspirations regarding college and career in ways that are not always reflected in the CCR goals set by the state.

Predictive Power of CCR Accountability Indicators

> *So, why do we [the district] believe that [meeting the Ready Graduate] matters? It's really critical to emphasize that it's not just because of accountability. Yes, it's part of our accountability measures, but we also think it's a meaningful way of understanding whether or not our kids are ready for postsecondary success.*
>
> — District leader

> *Meeting [the Ready Graduate indicator] predicts absolutely nothing. I don't think that you have to have a 21 [on the ACT] to be considered college ready. I don't think you have to have a 3.0 GPA to be college ready. I don't think you need to obtain an industry certificate to feel that your lifelong goal is now achieved. I don't think it has any indication of the success of a student beyond high school graduation.*
>
> — District staff member

Of the participants interviewed, two-thirds agreed to some extent that meeting the Ready Graduate and/or State CCR and TISA CCR indicators was associated with positive outcomes for students, but there was wide variation in the perceived strength and causal nature of this association. Some participants, like the quoted district leader, deeply believed that meeting

criteria for the Ready Graduate was an evidence-based indicator of student success. As this leader explained, "a 21 on the ACT is a nationally normed indicator of college readiness on the ACT" and "in general, it's a good rule of thumb that taking EPSOs is going to prepare you for college, and there is research to back that up." For this leader, there is sufficient evidence that individual components of the Ready Graduate are linked to experiences for students that foster important postsecondary skills. Similarly, one principal recounted the result of the district adopting a new requirement that valedictorians and salutatorians must have a 21 on their ACT—one of the Ready Graduate and State CCR pathways. As this principal said,

> Gone are the days where your valedictorian has a 4.3 GPA but a 15 on the ACT. This year our true number one student based on GPA did not have the 21. We ended up going to the number seven student…But what's beautiful is, I had [the seventh and eighth ranked students] each write their speech for graduation. And when I tell you, I did not have to edit either speech. Now, last year's valedictorian speech [before the new ACT score requirement] was full of grammatical errors. It looked like something a third grader had written. And I am convinced, and I don't think anyone could convince me otherwise, that elevating the expectation of the 21 on ACT allows us to have more academically ready students going into college.

Participants who held these strong beliefs in the power of state CCR measures to predict student outcomes adopted practices to support student attainment of state indicators. For example, this principal described the ACT "boot camps" her school had implemented to prepare students for the exam. Other schools where leaders held strong beliefs in the benefits of meeting Ready Graduate status had adopted strategies like "EPSO nights" where students and families could learn about opportunities for advanced academics at their school or boosting student enrollments

in their existing AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination) programs which aimed at preparing students for participation in advanced academics.

However, participants were cognizant of the potential for gaming behaviors that would weaken the relationship between performance and student outcomes in the long-run. For example, the district leader acknowledged that "there's a lot of cynicism around people trying to game these [CCR accountability] systems by packing as many kids into a so-called AP class as possible." While she explains that district leadership "certainly does not give the direction to schools that you should put every kid in an AP class and just call it that," she acknowledged that "you just don't know what happens when you leave the room." As described earlier, Tennessee's approach to accountability makes it the district's responsibility for monitoring school performance. Yet even if district leaders are aware of the potential for gaming behaviors, participation-based state measures like the Ready Graduate do not necessarily empower districts to prevent unintended consequences and distortions between performance measures and student outcomes. In contrast, standardized performance-based CCR measures like the State CCR and TISA CCR indicators may provide a truer indicator of student performance. As the prior principal explained, "the ACT, AP exams, and the dual enrollment classes, things that are not within our control at the school level, give us better data." In her view, the misalignment she has observed between GPA—a school-controlled measure—and ACT scores—a measure controlled by a third party—is evidence that schools are unfortunately motivated to "do funny things with the number" when their performance is tied to accountability. To combat this potential for distortion, school leaders like her have placed greater emphasis on these "standardized" pathways that are outside of the school's control.

At the very least, most participants agreed that meeting Ready Graduate criteria would not be harmful for students' long-term success. For example, one high school teacher explained her stance on the predictive power of meeting Ready Graduate pathways by saying, "I don't think that this list of things is going to hinder a student. It might not make much of a difference, or it could make a lot of difference, but I don't think it's going to have a negative impact." However, many participants were quick to emphasize that the students they serve are individuals, not averages. While meeting these criteria were generally associated with positive outcomes for most students, measures like the Ready Graduate still failed to capture important aspects of CCR or were not applicable to all students. Even if indicators like the Ready Graduate were predictive of postsecondary outcomes on average, there were always memorable exceptions thus calling the utility of the measure into question. On the one hand, some Ready Graduates were not necessarily "college- and career-ready." In order to meet the Ready Graduate, one high school counselor had to place a student into an industry-recognized CPR certification course she had little interest in. She explained how this decision changed her beliefs about the predictive power of the Ready Graduate measure by saying,

> [The student] had taken two AP classes and exams, but she failed both of them. The jury is still out on whether she's going to do her work in order to graduate… And I was like, 'Hmm, so if, she attempted these AP classes but failed them and may not graduate. She's not really college and career ready.' So, it made me look at the Ready Graduate criteria and go, 'How legit is this?'

This counselor's perception of the positive association between state CCR measures and student outcomes was challenged when she realized the potential for discrepancies between what the Ready Graduate claims to measure and what it actually measures regarding CCR. While she and

other school staff felt strongly about their school's mission of preparing students for success after high school, witnessing the disconnect between student skills in other areas and performance on state measures called the legitimacy of state performance measures into question. Similarly, some participants pointed out that the indicators lacked any measure of fidelity or course rigor. One high school teacher passionately described this frustration with the lack of course rigor in her building due to accountability pressures:

> [EPSOs] are not ran with fidelity. The kid can sit in the class, but that doesn't mean that they're learning what they should be learning or being held to the high standard of what an EPSO class should be like. An example being last year I had students taking an IB math course, and they were doing coloring sheets! So, do I think that is preparing them? Absolutely not. But does it check a box that they took an EPSO class? Yes, it does. And that's the issue.

For this teacher, her school has placed emphasis on boosting EPSO participation and enrollment in order to improve school performance on the Ready Graduate. However, this has resulted in diminished course quality and rigor as the school expands EPSO participation. Although the Ready Graduate indicator might be helpful in theory for predicting student success, in practice, as schools respond to accountability pressures by lowering academic standards and course quality, the utility of the Ready Graduate for gauging students' CCR degrades.

While these participants described how the Ready Graduate criteria might overestimate students' propensity for postsecondary success, interviewees were also concerned about college- and career-ready students that state measures failed to capture. Although one district staff member believed that the Ready Graduate is generally a good predictor of positive student outcomes, she didn't think it was enough: "there are a lot of soft skills you can't measure that

really indicate more success for people than just a test score or if they took advanced courses." Several school staff repeated similar stances on state CCR measures by explaining "there's no way to measure 'want to' and dedication and tenacity" and that "self-efficacy and advocacy" were not adequately captured by current indicators. Like the district staff member quoted at the beginning of this section, these participants felt that state measures were inadequate for measuring a student's potential for success. Oftentimes, this view was informed by individual's personal experience working with students. As one district staff member explained, "I've been in this work for over 20 years now, and I've seen kids graduate with 14 and 15 ACT scores who now have their doctorates." Even if a participant saw a connection between meeting Ready Graduate and finding success in postsecondary, it was impossible to ignore cases where a student found success without meeting state criteria.

Similarly, several participants reflected on their own high school experiences in comparison to their current success in adult life. As one district leader said, "I may not have had the best score on my SAT back when I took it in high school, but I have a PhD from [state flagship university], right?" For participants like her who have gone on to be successful in college and career, it was difficult to put much faith in indicators of CCR that they themselves would have struggled to reach while in school. She went on to explain,

> For a lot of people, [the Ready Graduate] indicator doesn't show motivation, it doesn't show drive, it doesn't show what people's dreams are, right? It shows what they *may* potentially be able to accomplish or where their aptitude is, but it doesn't mean that they're not going to be successful ... I see the point behind it, of wanting to use these couple things as indicators. But I think if you went into the community and talked to businesses, there's other pieces that are going to make folks successful, not necessarily

> just in college, but in life—like those interpersonal skills. Can they collaborate? Can they speak? Do they have good time management? What are their organizational skills?

While participants see the value in tracking and measuring progress towards preparing students for college and career, there are certain unmeasurable student qualities that cannot be captured by state accountability systems. Not only is it challenging to accurately measure students' interpersonal skills, motivation, and self-sufficiency, but it is also questionable as to whether the school can and should be held accountable for these student qualities.

In addition to the elements of student success that go unmeasured by state indicators, participants reiterated concerns about how the accountability system is only predictive of success for certain students. Again, the large population of immigrant and English Learner students served by the district made it challenging to view state CCR measures as adequate for evaluating student success. Despite having a motto of *Every Student Known* in the district, some school staff felt that the state's CCR pressures were "one-size-fits-all" and defined a student's potential for success in narrow terms that systematically excluded certain groups. A teacher in a high-ELL school explained his stance by saying, "you can't take a ninth-grade kid [who just emigrated] from Mexico and think they have had the same educational program as a ninth-grade kid in America. I'm not saying ours is better. I'm not saying theirs is better. They're just apples and oranges." When the state's expectation is to have all students regardless of prior experience and background achieve the same standards for being considered "college- and career-ready," school staff lost buy-in with the policy. As this teacher went on to explain,

> How do you take kids from, you know, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and say, 'Now you have to take a U.S. History class,' when they have zero idea who George Washington is, they don't know anything about a cherry tree…there's so much that has to

> be done to get them on an even playing field with other students that I don't feel any of those predictors, any of those guidelines, truly are designed or built with our kids' experiences and levels in mind.

This teacher's perspective reflected a shared feeling that this school district existed as an outlier across the state given the diverse population of students it served. The difficulty of achieving state CCR goals due to the unique student population led to some participants to feel true anger and disillusionment in the state system. As one teacher put it, state accountability policies serve as "another way to make rich White schools, more rich and more White." For her school, it is irrelevant how well state measures predict student outcomes on average because her school is not like the average school in the state: "Who is going to perform well on those EPSOs? Whose school is going to have the highest ACT scores? The ones that have two ELL students, or my school, which is a school of over 2,000 and half are English Language Learners?" This lack of perceived recognition and support from the state for individual school contexts resulted in participants simply not caring about whether state-defined measures were predictive of student success. CCR measures that only predicted success for certain students were useless (at best) and harmful (at worst) for schools that served large populations of students with greater needs.

Associated Consequences of State CCR Accountability Systems

> *The reality is that other than in Ready Graduate, and in our grade for the district and the individual schools, we really aren't [held accountable]. I mean, you'll get percentages of how many kids applied for TN Promise, how many went on to college, how many did FAFSA, but there's no accountability piece for it. You have the data, but we're not being held accountable…And not all of that's even 'CCR,' you know? There's nothing about advising or whether kids actually go on to college and stuff. So, I don't think we're necessarily held accountable.*
>
> — District leader

> *[Interviewer: So, how is your school held accountable for college and career readiness outcomes?]*

> *I really don't know. I mean, I know that there's like percentages of kids that are considered college and career ready, and I know it kind of goes on our state report card, but I don't know where any of that data goes or how we're held accountable.*
>
> — High school staff member

Although many participants identified alignment between the state's Ready Graduate measure and local goals and definitions of CCR, most participants, like the high school staff member quoted here, had only a vague understanding of the state's CCR performance targets or how state CCR measures were used for accountability. Of those who were interviewed, all but 6 participants spoke about lacking clarity on the state's goals for CCR to varying degrees, particularly around the recent introduction of the State CCR and TISA CCR measures. As might be expected given the relative newness of those indicators, only one school staff person and a third of the district-level participants had even heard about the State CCR and TISA CCR indicators prior to the interview. Although there was greater familiarity with the components of the Ready Graduate indicator, participants generally did not understand what consequences, if any, were associated with failing to increase performance on the Ready Graduate measure. As one high school counselor who was particularly knowledgeable about district and school initiatives around CCR explained, "I don't know all of the Ready Graduate accountability in and outs. That just has to show you it can't be that important to the school, because I feel like I'm on top of everything, and I don't know how it's used." Even though student attainment of the Ready Graduate measure was tracked closely by this counselor and reported back to her principal, it was not clear how that information was used by the state or even the district for accountability.

Most of this uncertainty was due to a lack of clear communication from the state on CCR performance targets as well as instability in CCR policy priorities. As one high school principal explained, "So much is done at the state that is not communicated down to the schools." This

lack of direct communication from the state on not only CCR but also other priorities created frustration and lowered this principal's trust in the state. As he went on to say,

> I don't understand why there's not a one-stop-shop or newsletter [from the state] where school administrators can go and get key things that we need to know and understand about CCR. Sometimes I feel like they don't want us to know … It just feels like we're not a part of the conversation and we're not communicated with, and we don't even know who to go to to get answers, or what we even need to ask or get answers for.

A district staff member in the Office of College and Career Readiness similarly explained, "I'm sure that [the Ready Graduate] plays a role in whatever score that we're receiving from the state. I know it measures internally what we're doing and I'm sure it filters up, but I'm not exactly sure how all of this is reported to the state level." This lack of clarity on how exactly state measures translated into specific rewards or consequences had negative implications for setting cohesive district and school strategy around CCR. Regarding the district's response to the introduction of the new State CCR indicator, one district administrator explained, "There's just a lot of confusion. I don't know that our district has really been able to put a lot of solid concrete actions in place because there are still more questions than answers at this point." District leaders and administrators often perceived a lack of guidance on state-determined performance targets making it difficult to understand how specific components of CCR should be prioritized. As this administrator went on to say, it's not the responsibility of the district to set these performance targets, instead "there needs to be some definite guidance from the state on how different CCR elements are going to play into the rating of schools and the rating of districts." Although the state intentionally delegates most of the responsibility for school oversight to districts, districts are still expected to hold schools accountable using state-defined performance measures. When

communication is unclear about how performance measures are generated, this creates challenges for districts in supporting their schools in achieving measured outcomes.

In contrast, some participants, like the district leader quoted at the beginning of this section, did feel real consequences for failing to meet high performance on state CCR measures. In many cases though, these consequences were "soft" in that they were only tied to publicly released data on performance rather than any direct punitive actions by the state. Interestingly, although the Ready Graduate was utilized by school and district staff to measure students' progress towards CCR, the most visible metrics for these forms of public accountability for CCR were tied to other measures such as FAFSA completion rates, Tennessee Promise application rates, college enrollment rates, and average ACT scores. One high school counselor summarized this dynamic saying,

> I'm not necessarily responsible for Ready Graduate, but it is something my principal wants me to help keep track of and, like, push where I can. But I *am* responsible for Tennessee Promise applications, and myself and my team are responsible for FAFSA. So, if our FAFSA numbers are low, we are the ones that are getting those emails [from the district] saying, 'Hey, y'all need to figure out how to fix this.'

This counselor went on to explain that there are no clear negative consequences to her or her team for having low Ready Graduate rates beyond a hit to publicly reported school grades. A counselor at another high school similarly explained that the state focused more on reporting and emphasizing graduation rates and performance on college entrance exams than on comparatively complex metrics like the Ready Graduate. For this counselor, ACT scores were the only student outcome included her annual performance review. However, this metric was chosen not because of its connection to CCR goals like increasing Ready Graduate rates, but rather because of its ties

to graduation rates. In Tennessee, all students must take the ACT by their senior year in order to graduate.

While some school and district staff felt soft pressure to make progress on CCR goals, only school principals expressed any real worries about more severe consequences such as losing their job due to poor performance. It is possible district leaders felt similar pressures, but no district-level participants expressed such fears. For example, when explaining his reasoning behind focusing on improving Ready Graduate rates at his school, one principal explained that schools have "no choice" in whether they implement district-led strategies for improving CCR outcomes. He went on to emphatically say, "There is no option for a sanction, because you cannot have it another way. The real question comes down to how well you're doing on CCR. And then if you don't do well enough, then you just get fired." As another principal explained, responsibility for performance on the Ready Graduate falls on her, not her teachers. Her school's performance on the Ready Graduate and other CCR metrics "impacts my standing in the district, the school's standing in the district, and the security of my position, perhaps, if we're not meeting our goals." For this principal, there is a very real threat of losing her job if she is unable to bring her school up to the district's standards for CCR performance.

However, principals were responsible for all forms of school performance that go into school accountability grades, not just CCR. This meant that even though CCR and Ready Graduate performance was viewed as important, it was only one small piece of the overall accountability system. As one principal said, "the principal is responsible for everything; we can delegate everything but responsibility." She went on to explain that although CCR was important, especially because of its ties to school and district grades, "there are so many things that do matter that are on my evaluation. But if one of those big rocks that's not on my evaluation

drops, I could still lose my job." While principals know and believe that CCR is important for student success, other more pressing issues like getting too many "crazy parent complaints" or having a school safety issue can result in immediate and serious consequences. As a result, principals tried to delegate ownership over individual elements of schooling and hold their own staff accountable for outcomes like CCR performance.

Ability to Change Student Performance on CCR Accountability Measures

> *We're an outlier in a district that's an outlier. And so, when you have special populations that aren't the focus of 90% of the state, a lot of the mandates, processes, procedures, and policies that come down from the state impact us at a higher level, but with no additional support to make it work.*
>
> — High school principal

> *I have 10 seniors who are graduating this year, who've been in the country less than four months. There's only so much I can do in this school year to get them ready to do that. So, when a kid's been with me for a couple of months, I can't necessarily get them all the things that I wish that I could get them.*
>
> — High school assistant principal

> *A lot of our graduation rate, a lot of the pieces of that school report card are out of the locus of our control, but that really small piece of Ready Grad is something that we <u>can</u> do. And so, we tried to kind of shift the narrative and the ignorance around what it meant to be a Ready Grad and how we actually have a role in it.*
>
> — High school staff member

Virtually all participants spoke at length about the difficulty of moving the needle on state-defined CCR measures. Perceptions about the degree of difficulty and its root cause differed though depending on the context in which the participant worked and their understanding of how students could meet indicator components. For example, as the high school principal and assistant principal quoted here explained, the unique populations served by their schools made it impossible to realistically get all students to reach Ready Graduate status. For many participants, factors outside of their control, like a student's status as an ELL, were some of the primary determinants of whether a student could reach Ready Graduate status. The

same high school principal explained that his school "struggles for every point on that report card" and not just the elements tied to CCR due to the high needs of the large ELL, immigrant, and economically-disadvantaged population he serves. Even in academic magnet schools that served high-achieving students, school staff still found it impossible to reach the district's ultimate goal of having all students meet Ready Graduate criteria. A magnet school counselor said, "even though we're on board with Ready Graduate goals," her school struggles "when the goal is 100% and you're working with humans." Although only a handful of students at her school were not on-track to meet Ready Graduate criteria, the pressure to reach performance goals led to her school's counselors nevertheless "getting in a position where they gotta decide, 'Okay, do I throw you in this AP class or do I put you in a more manageable class so you can graduate.'"

At the district level, administrators and leaders shared similar apprehensions about the inaccessibility of CCR opportunities for large shares of the district's student body. In particular, district-level participants were concerned about the state's shift away from growth-based accountability measures to achievement-based measures. A district leader summarized this sentiment by saying,

> Personally, I think overall, our state accountability system is enormously flawed and doesn't emphasize growth sufficiently, because I think growth at the end of the day is about what's within the locus of control of the school and achievement in a lot of cases is what's within the locus of control of a neighborhood or individual family.

According to her, it is the district's responsibility "to respond to the incentives" and it is the state's job "to determine what those incentives are." But when the state emphasizes incentives

that are based on hard to control measures, it puts districts like this one at a disadvantage. She went on to explain the consequences of this dynamic by saying,

> If you give schools an out to say that they can't move the [accountability] measure, then they take their eye off the ball. Even though I think the [district's] vision for Ready Graduate is ultimately right, the broader concern I have is how are we thinking about Ready Graduate indicators in the state of Tennessee in terms of what the school district is responsible for?

Again, the disconnect between state and district perspectives on whether accountability measures were truly tied to elements of performance that schools could control made it difficult for the district leadership to develop clear messaging and goals on CCR. This disconnect coupled with the broader district leadership stance on serving as a supporter rather than a monitor of school success created tension that filtered down to the school level. For example, the district's recent re-branding of the central office as a the "Support Hub" was reflected in practices like frequent meetings between school leaders and district staff to discuss school progress on key topics including CCR. The purpose of these engagements between school and district leaders is to discuss current challenges in meeting goals and finding strategies for improving performance. By acting as a source of support rather than just supervision, the district strives to reduce negative pressures that can result in gaming behaviors and a breakdown of trust between schools and the district. However, when the state sets performance indicators that are largely based on factors outside of the school's control, this relationship breaks down. A principal described a recent meeting with the district on his school's Ready Graduate performance as "actually really good, [the district leader] even made the comment that they struggled finding us areas to improve on." Although the principal felt that the meeting was a success, another school staff member shared a

different perspective. She recalled that when the district leader pointed out her school's low number of students meeting Ready Graduate criteria,

> I literally said to [the district leader], 'We have exhausted all options to help our students be Ready Grad, what do you recommend we offer to fill the rest of this gap?' And they looked at me and had no response. So, you cannot come down on our school and say, 'Well, you guys aren't helping kids be Ready Grad.' We have exhausted all of our options! We are literally offering everything that we can offer.

Both this counselor and the district leader could acknowledge that her school was doing all they could to improve performance on the state's measures, yet they were still struggling to meet performance targets. Instead of feeling supported by the district when struggling with boosting CCR performance, this counselor felt frustrated by how state measures did not account for her school's high effort and that the district could not provide any solutions. As one district leader put it, most of the time state education policy "is just not written for [the district] and [other urban district in the state]." From her perspective,

> Some state policies are written so that it serves smaller communities, smaller districts, and they know that it's never gonna work in [the district] and [other urban district in the state]. There's no way we can get it done, and we're still accountable for it. You don't know whether to ignore it. So, we just work either alongside it or around it.

When state accountability pressures appeared unreasonable and impossible to meet for their schools, district leaders and staff lost buy-in and were not motivated to hold schools accountable for performance on state measures.

Notably though, at least half of participants conceded that there were at least some elements of state CCR metrics that were within their control. Yet participants were aware that not

all of their colleagues or staff shared that understanding. Like the high school staff member quoted at the beginning of this section, creating a shared belief that state measures like the Ready Graduate were within a school's locus of control required a major shift in school culture. Several school staff and principals noted making efforts to change school culture in ways helped staff feel empowered to improve CCR performance. For example, one school counselor explained that according to her principal, the Ready Graduate represents "something that we can make measurable progress towards" unlike other elements of accountability like levels of achievement on standardized tests. After seeing their school's low performance on the Ready Graduate measure, her principal has made a concerted effort in the last school year to shift responsibility for CCR from a few siloed staff members to the entire school building. Strategies like "hanging career posters throughout the building, having college banners surrounding our cafeteria, make sure that teachers are sharing with students where they went to college" are some of the ways she and her principal have worked on changing mindsets and building a CCR-focused school culture. When coupled with other strategies within a school's control such as increasing offerings of EPSO courses, requiring all students to complete certain industry certifications, and targeting students for additional ACT test preparation this translated into improved performance on state CCR measures.

Discussion

This study shows how different actors in one urban district responded to recently adopted and multifaceted state-level CCR accountability pressures. The key finding from this study is that school and district practice is shaped by individuals' perceptions of state CCR policy along four primary dimensions: the relevance of state CCR accountability goals to important student outcomes, the power of CCR accountability indicators to predict student outcomes, the

consequences associated with levels of performance on state CCR measures, and the ability to change practice in order to improve performance on state CCR measures. How individuals perceived state policy along these dimensions was determined by their personal experiences and beliefs about CCR, especially for those who worked directly with diverse and/or high-need student groups. Adoption of different practices and the setting of school/district CCR goals were informed by the stances individuals took on these dimensions.

These findings align closely with other work on the dynamics that influence individual responses to performance-based accountability systems. Work on policy attributes theory within the context of local responses to changing state CCR standards finds that the perceived authority of the policy (i.e., the legitimacy of the policy) is one of the most critical policy attributes for predicting the implementation of policy-aligned instructional practices (Edgerton & Desimone, 2018). This attribute of authority is closely linked to the key dimensions identified here of indicator importance and predictive power. In this study, participants adopted practices aimed at boosting performance on state CCR metrics when they perceived state measures to be legitimate. State indicators gained this authority when participants' definitions of CCR closely mirrored state definitions and when participants believed that state indicators were useful predictors of student success. Buy-in for state CCR indicators broke down though when participants felt that indicators were illegitimate and not applicable to their students. In particular, many participants pointed out that pathways for meeting state measures lacked sufficient accommodations for the large population of English Learners and immigrant students served by the district. This led to participants feeling that the state measures lacked importance and predictive power, which reduced participants' trust in the state to implement helpful and relevant policy solutions. Ultimately, this lack of perceived policy relevance resulted in participants deprioritizing efforts

to improve performance on state measures and focusing instead on areas with greater relevance for their students' needs and goals.

While prior work on attributes of state accountability policy has found that teachers rather than school leaders perceive greater rewards/sanctions for performance on state CCR standards (Edgerton & Desimone, 2019), I find the opposite phenomenon in this study. In Tennessee, participants largely felt that state CCR accountability indicators did not come with any clear and direct consequences for most school and district staff, but principals understood that severe consequences were possible if their school did not sufficiently improve performance and/or meet certain standards. This difference in findings is likely due to the policy context of each study. While Edgerton and Desimone's work (2018, 2019) is focused on policies tied to classroom practices that result in performance on state tests, the CCR measures in this study are not clearly the responsibility of any individual teacher or staff member. Instead, the ability to move the needle on these indicators requires effort from multiple actors at different levels. This dynamic was understood by the principals I interviewed, who all expressed their role as one of a delegator of tasks who was ultimately responsible for the collective performance of their staff. Principals all spoke about using "distributed leadership" approaches and a structure of "managed autonomy" where the principal served as the leader who really "relies on the team to do the implementation." This understanding of the structure of responsibility for CCR performance was reflected in how participants at both the district and school levels recognized the need for changing institutional culture around CCR. To improve CCR performance for the entire school, principals strived to ensure that responsibility for CCR performance was shared among their staff rather than siloed with a few individuals.

The four dimensions identified in this study are also linked to findings from the public sector performance management literature. In particular, the dimension of ability to change performance is linked to research on effort substitution and gaming behaviors that occur when performance-based measures are tied to difficult outcomes (Benaine & Kroll, 2020; Heinrich & Marschke, 2010). In this study, participants who felt that they were limited in their ability to change performance on state CCR measures might turn to superficial strategies for meeting performance benchmarks leading to distortions in the relationship between indicators and student outcomes. For example, counselors who felt the pressure of boosting Ready Graduate numbers might place students in courses they are ill-equipped to perform well in given that students simply need to participate in the course and take any aligned exams rather than achieve a certain level of performance. Similarly, schools might adopt strategies like requiring all students to complete "easy" industry certifications (like CPR and OSHA-10 certifications) rather than incorporating student voice and interest in selecting relevant pathways. In contrast, when participants both believed that measures were linked to important outcomes that aligned with their public service motivation and felt as though performance measures were within their locus of control, they adopted strategies to improve performance.

Whether participants felt that measures were within their control was again a function of the context in which they worked as well as their personal understanding of how state CCR indicators were measured. Some participants saw a contrast between these measures of CCR and other accountability measures, like levels of achievement on state tests, that were more difficult for staff to change. Adopting practices like ACT "boot camps" and increasing awareness of EPSO opportunities were strategies that some school and district personnel believed were in their control that could result in increased student performance on state indicators. Even still, other

participants felt that the barriers to access and performance faced by much of the student population made these strategies irrelevant. For example, even if the school implemented ACT boot camps for all students, this could not account for the fact that English Learners were given virtually no accommodations on the assessment or that undocumented students would not be able to access funding for college and were therefore less motivated to do well on the ACT. When individuals working together in the same school or district office hold different levels of buy-in to state policy and have a different understanding of whether they can create change, it can cause dysfunction in setting goals and implementing changes to policy and practice.

Limitations

As with any qualitative study, the conclusions of this study are drawn from a relatively small sampling of individuals situated in a particular context. While important insights can be learned in the unique context of a diverse district like the one in this study, the perspectives shared by this sample of study participants should not be interpreted as universally held or official district stances on state policy. However, this study can still shed light on the range of responses to state accountability policy that can exist within a single setting. Although the sample is undoubtedly not representative of all individuals in this setting, the perspectives shared by these participants represent a diverse array of potential responses. Interview participants did reflect a diverse grouping of individuals both in terms of participant roles, demographics, and experience but also in terms of school characteristics. The 25 school-level participants came from 11 different district high schools including both traditional public schools and magnet high schools. In the 2022-23 school year, six of these schools had fewer than 15% of students and two had over 90% of students reaching Ready Graduate status (Tennessee Department of Education, 2024). In the 2023-24 school year, five of these schools had fewer than 30% of students and two

had over 90% of students reaching State CCR status (Tennessee Department of Education, 2024). The result of this diversity within my sample allowed me to identify multiple dimensions of participant perspectives and actions.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

I conclude with a note on the implications of this work for policy, practice, and future research. First, this study highlights the potential for conflict when state policy does not align with local needs. As participants pointed out, many times Tennessee state policies served as "unfunded mandates" where schools and districts were expected to reach state-defined performance metrics without receiving any additional support. For the district, which serves a diverse population of students with high levels of need, the implementation of performance-based accountability from the state without adequate support is unhelpful at best and harmful at worst. No matter how well-intended and closely aligned state goals are with important student outcomes, if districts and schools feel under-supported, little progress will be made on state measures.

Second, participants expressed confusion around both the content of state accountability measures and the consequences of failing to meet state goals. Although all interviewed individuals did feel responsible for CCR to some extent, very few had a clear understanding of the state's goals for CCR or how state indicators were used to determine rewards or sanctions. This lack of understanding was partially due to constant change in state policy; some participants simply felt it was not worth their time to learn the ins and outs of every state policy given the constant change. As a result, there was a little unified strategy for improving performance on state measures. To combat this, participants expressed the need for better guidance from the state in terms of how priorities should be set and for clearer communication with all stakeholders.

Although the ability to improve performance on state CCR measures required that all school and district staff felt shared responsibility for CCR, communication about state goals and policy were not distributed to everyone.

Finally, more work is needed to understand how these findings might apply in other situations. As states like Tennessee continue to refine their strategies for CCR accountability, it is important to understand if these dimensions of state policy are found to shape responses to other CCR policy changes and/or in other settings. This school district is an outlier district for the state in terms of its size and the populations it serves. It would be compelling to explore these research questions in other districts across the state to see how responses might be similar or different depending on characteristics of the district. Future work can also explore whether perspectives on the new State CCR and TISA CCR indicators change over time as performance on these indicators becomes shared more widely. At the time of the study, these indicators were relatively new. As more time passes, it is likely that district and school perceptions of these measures will change.

Table 1. Eligibility Criteria for College and Career Readiness Metrics in Tennessee

Ready Graduate indicator	State College and Career Readiness indicator (CCR)	TISA College and Career Readiness indicator (CCR)
Any high school graduate who meets one of the following: 1. Earns 21+ on ACT or 1060+ on SAT 2. Completes 4+ EPSOs 3. Completes 2+ EPSOs and 1+ IC 4. Completes 2+ EPSOs and a score of 31 or higher on the ASVAB AFQT	Any high school graduate who meets one of the following: 1. Earns 21+ on ACT or 1060+ on SAT 2. Earns a score of 31 or higher on the ASVAB AFQT 3. Earns a Tier 3 IC OR earns a Tier 2 IC and at least one other IC 4. Earns postsecondary credit for 1+ EPSOs	Any high school graduate who meets one of the following: 1. Earns 2+ EPSOs AND either: • Earns a 21+ on the ACT OR • Increases ACT score by 4 points 2. Earns postsecondary credit for 3+ EPSOs 3. Earns postsecondary credit for 2+ EPSOs and a score of 31 or higher on the ASVAB AFQT

Note: EPSO = early postsecondary opportunities. IC = industry-recognized credential. EPSOs include 7 course types: Advanced Placement (AP), Cambridge International Examinations, College Level Examination Program (CLEP), Dual Enrollment, International Baccalaureate (IB), Local Dual Credit, and Statewide Dual Credit. EPSO completion is defined differently according to indicator type. For the Ready Graduate indicator, "completed" means the student enrolled in an EPSO course while in high school, earned a final grade, and sat for any aligned exams if applicable. Under the state CCR and TISA CCR indicators, "earns postsecondary credit" means that a student has also obtained a college-credit-bearing score on the aligned exam. (For AP exams, a student must earn a 3 out of 5 or higher. For IB exams, a student must earn a 4 out of 7 or higher. For Cambridge Advanced exams, a student must earn a score other than "ungraded." For dual credit exams, a student must earn a course-specific score on the end-of-course challenge exam; passing scores typically range from 70 to 80 out of 100 total points depending on the subject.)

Source: Tennessee Department of Education. (2023). *2022-23 College and Career Readiness (CCR) Data Verification Guide*.
https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/accountability/2022-23_CCR_Guide.pdf

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Appendix A

Underline = Question formally added to protocol after interviews began

Semi-Structured District Staff Interview Protocol

Hello and thank you for contributing your time today. As I mentioned in our earlier communication, I am interested in learning more about your role and experience with regard to college and career readiness policies in Tennessee and [the district]. Specifically, I am interested to hear your perspective on how state-level college and career readiness accountability policies play a role in district-level policies and practices.

While this project is aimed at understanding CCR in [the district], I want to be clear that this conversation is about you and your experiences and perspective on the topic. The responses you give today will not be interpreted or represented as an official statement on CCR in [the district].

This conversation should take about 45 minutes to an hour. You can refuse to answer any questions if you do not wish to answer them or if you do not feel as if you can accurately answer them. You can also choose to end the interview at any time if you do not wish to continue.

With your permission, our conversation will be recorded and transcribed. The recording and transcript will be kept confidential, and I will exclude information from transcripts that could possibly identify you or your specific role.

Do you have any questions before we begin? Do I have your permission to start recording?

First I'll start with some background questions about you and your role.

1. Tell me about your role in the district as it relates to college and career readiness.

   Probe: How many years have you been in your role? What other roles have you held and for how long did you work in them? What experiences have you had in other schools? In other districts? How would you compare those districts with *[district]*?

2. How are you involved with district-level decisions around college and career readiness initiatives?

   Probe: Who else is involved in district-level conversations around college and career readiness?

Now we will shift to talking about district and state goals surrounding CCR.

3. Can you describe the district's priorities and goals with respect to college and career readiness?

Probe: How does *[the district]* consider college and career readiness among its other priorities and goals? Who determines these goals? How does *[the district]* measure and evaluate success when it comes to meeting its college and career readiness goals? What is an example of a "success" or a "win" in your college and career readiness programs?

4. Give me an example of a college and career readiness program, practice, or initiative that the district has recently adopted.

    a. What was your role in the development or implementation of this policy/practice/initiative?
    Probe: Why did the district adopt this policy/practice/initiative? How did the district come up with this policy/practice/initiative? What is the goal of this policy/practice/initiative? What issue was this policy/practice/initiative aimed at addressing? How had the district tried to address this issue in the past?

5. How has this policy/practice/initiative succeeded?

    Probe: How has the district tracked or measured success? What challenges has the district faced with implementing this policy/practice/initiative?

6. How do district priorities and goals connect to the state's goals for college and career readiness?

    Probe: What are the state's goals for college and career readiness? How do you know what the state's goals are? How do state goals shape district goals? Where are areas of misalignment between state and district goals?

7. How do district priorities and goals connect to individual *[district]* schools' goals for college and career readiness?

    Probe: What is an example of a school's goal for college and career readiness? How do you know what different schools' goals are? How do district goals shape school goals, if at all? How do school goals shape district goals, if at all? Where are areas of misalignment between school and district goals?

Now we will shift to talking about district and school accountability surrounding CCR.

8. How are school districts in Tennessee held accountable for college and career readiness outcomes?

    Probe: Who holds the district accountable? How strong are accountability mechanisms in driving decision-making in the district? How does state accountability policy shape district policy?

9. What role, if any, does Tennessee's Ready Graduate indicator play in district accountability?

10. How do you use the Ready Graduate indicator to understand college and career readiness in *[the district]*?

    If you do not use the indicator, why do you not use it? Who does use the indicator? Where do you get information about how *[the district]* is faring with regard to college and career readiness?

    Probe: How do you access information about the number of Ready Graduates in *[the district]*? What does the Ready Graduate indicator tell you about college and career readiness in *[the district]*?

11. *Over the past year, the state has introduced two new measures of CCR for accountability and funding purposes: the new state CCR measures used for calculating school letter grades and a CCR measure used to allocate high school outcomes bonuses through the TISA funding system.*

    a. What is your understanding of how these new measures of CCR differ from the Ready Graduate measure?
    b. How do the intended outcomes of each of these accountability systems differ?
    c. What do each of these measures predict or tell you about students' readiness for college and career?
    d. <u>In your view, are there important elements of CCR that are missing from these indicators? *(question added after 13 out of 15 district interviews completed)*</u>
    e. How do these recent changes shape college and career readiness policies/practices/initiatives in *[the district]*?

12. In this interview, I was interested in learning more about college and career readiness in *[the district]* and how *[the district]* interprets and responds to state-level college and career readiness priorities. Is there anything related to this topic you didn't already talk about that is important for me to understand?

    a. Is there anything else I should have asked about this topic that I didn't?

Thank you for your insight and participation. I have a few final questions to wrap up.

13. Is there anyone else in the district that you recommend I speak to regarding college and career readiness policies and practices?
14. If I have any follow-up questions concerning what we discussed today, may I contact you via email?
15. Lastly, do you have any relevant documents you would be willing to share that might help us better understand college and career readiness at the district level or practices at the school level (e.g., these could include advising materials, written policies, support documents etc.)?

Semi-Structured School Leader and Staff Interview Protocol

Hello and thank you for contributing your time today. As I mentioned in our earlier communication, I am interested in learning more about your role and experience with regard to college and career readiness policies in Tennessee, [the district], and your school. Specifically, I am interested to hear your perspective on how state- and district-level college and career readiness accountability policies play a role in school-level policies and practices.

While this project is aimed at understanding CCR in your school, I want to be clear that this conversation is about you and your experiences and perspective. The responses you give today will not be interpreted or represented as an official statement on CCR at your school.

This conversation should take about 45 minutes to an hour. You can refuse to answer any questions if you do not wish to answer them or if you do not feel as if you can accurately answer them. You can also choose to end the interview at any time if you do not wish to continue.

With your permission, our conversation will be recorded and transcribed. The recording and transcript will be kept confidential, and I will exclude information from transcripts that could possibly identify you or your specific role.

Do you have any questions before we begin? Do I have your permission to start recording?

First, I'll start with some background questions about you and your role.

1. *Non-principals only:* Tell me about your role in your school.

   Probe: How many years have you been in your role? What other roles have you held and for how long did you work in them? What experiences have you had in other schools? In other districts? How would you compare those schools/districts with *[the district]*/your school? Give me an example of a task you completed this week related to this role.

2. How are you involved with school-level decisions around college and career readiness initiatives?

   Probe: Who else is involved in school-level conversations around college and career readiness?

   Give me an example of a college and career readiness program, practice, or initiative that your school has adopted this term and your role in the development or implementation of this policy/practice/initiative.

   Probe: Why did your school adopt this policy/practice/initiative? How did your school come up with this policy/practice/initiative? What is the goal of this policy/practice/initiative? What issue was this policy/practice/initiative aimed at addressing? How had your school tried to address this issue in the past?

How has this policy/practice/initiative succeeded?

Probe: How has your school tracked or measured success? What challenges has your school faced with implementing this policy/practice/initiative?

Now we will shift to talking about school and district goals surrounding CCR.

3. In your own words, describe your school's priorities and goals with respect to college and career readiness.

   Probe: How does your school consider college and career readiness among its other priorities and goals? Who determines these goals? How does your school measure and evaluate success when it comes to meeting its college and career readiness goals? What is an example of a "success" or a "win" in your school's college and career readiness programs?

4. What are some major challenges for supporting students in meeting these CCR goals? *(question added after 8 out of 25 principal/school staff interviews completed)*

5. How do these priorities and goals connect to the district's goals for college and career readiness? How do they connect to the state's goals?

   Probe: What are the district's/state's goals for college and career readiness? How do you know what these goals are? How do district/state goals shape your school's goals? Where are areas of misalignment between state, district, and your school's goals?

6. What are the strengths/weaknesses in how these goals are communicated to you? *(question added after 8 out of 25 principal/school staff interviews completed)*

Now we will shift to talking about district and school accountability surrounding CCR.

7. How are schools in *[the district]* held accountable for college and career readiness outcomes?

   Probe: Who holds schools accountable? How strong are accountability mechanisms in driving decision-making in your school? How does state and district accountability policy shape school policies? How do school letter grades shape practices at the school if at all? Are there specific rewards or penalties associated with college and career readiness outcomes? *(probes added after 8 out of 25 principal/school staff interviews completed)*

8. How are you held accountable for college and career readiness outcomes? *(question added after 17 out of 25 principal/school staff interviews completed)*
9. What role, if any, does the Ready Graduate indicator play in school accountability?

10. How does the Ready Graduate complement or come into conflict with your school's goals for college and career readiness? *(question added after 4 out of 25 principal/school staff interviews completed)*

11. How do you use the Ready Graduate indicator to understand college and career readiness in your school?

    Probe: How do you access information about the number of Ready Graduates in your school? What does the Ready Graduate indicator tell you about college and career readiness in your school?

    If you do not use the indicator, why not? Who does use the indicator? Where do you get information about how *[the district]* is faring with regard to college and career readiness?

12. Which Ready Graduate pathways does your school target?

    Probe: What strategies does your school use to target this pathway? Can you give me an example of a strategy you adopted this year? Who decides which pathway to target? Why does your school target those pathways?

13. *Over the past year, the state has introduced two new measures of CCR for accountability and funding purposes: the new state CCR measures used for calculating school letter grades and a CCR measure used to allocate high school outcomes bonuses through the TISA funding system.*

    a. What is your understanding of how these new measures of CCR differ from the Ready Graduate measure?
    b. How do the intended outcomes of each of these accountability systems differ?
    c. What do each of these measures predict or tell you about students' college and career outcomes?
    d. In your view, are there important elements of college and career readiness that are missing from these indicators? *(question added after 1 out of 25 principal/school staff interviews completed)*
    e. How do these recent changes shape college and career readiness policies/practices/initiatives at your school and in *[the district]*?

14. In this interview, I was interested in learning more about college and career readiness in your school and how your school interprets and responds to state- and district-level college and career readiness priorities. Is there anything related to this topic you didn't already talk about that is important for me to understand?

    a. Is there anything else I should have asked about this topic that I didn't?

Thank you for your insight and participation. I have a few final questions for you before we wrap up.

15. *For principals:* Is it okay for me to contact staff at your school for similar interviews? Their decision to participate would be kept confidential.
16. Is there anyone else in your school that you recommend I speak to regarding college and career readiness policies and practices?
17. If I have any follow-up questions concerning what we discussed today, may I contact you via email?
18. Lastly, do you have any relevant documents you would be willing to share that might help us better understand college and career readiness at the district level or practices at the school level (e.g., these could include advising materials, written policies, support documents etc.)?