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Sensemaking in the Program Stream: How Local Leaders Re-purposed the "ALL In Virginia" Policy

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Given the exploratory nature of our study, we used a multiple case study design to understand how school level actors interpreted and implemented the ALL In policy across three school districts. We conducted 21 in-depth interviews with district and school leaders responsible for ALL In implementation and cross-referenced qualitative data with policy documents.

Our findings show how local judgments about instructional fit and organizational feasibility shape the redefinition of policy problems as they move downstream. Across these cases, leaders interpret new policy demands through a lens of program relevance, prioritizing existing initiatives and locally perceived needs. We further distinguish between absorptive and adaptive sensemaking as two patterned responses within the program stream.

To bridge policy design at the state level and local implementation, policymakers must attend to feasibility constraints and priorities of local actors and create opportunities for lateral sensemaking that strengthens leaders' perceptions of what is possible.

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Sensemaking in the Program Stream: How Local Leaders Re-purposed the "ALL In Virginia" Policy

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Abstract:
School and district leaders are challenged to comprehend and translate policy into practice, a process shaped by cognitive, social, and political dynamics. This study offers a conceptual analysis of Virginia's post-COVID-19 “ALL In” policy, which directed nearly half a billion dollars to school districts, primarily for high-dosage tutoring. We examine ALL In VA implementation through the intersection of two frameworks: the multiple streams framework and sensemaking theory. This dual approach allows us to theorize how school-level actors, as street-level bureaucrats, navigate ambiguity, institutional signals, and organizational constraints as they interpret and enact policy.

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Keywords: policy implementation, sensemaking, policy drift, school leaders, high-dosage tutoring, multiple streams theory

School and district leaders are necessarily susceptible to external policy demands and the confusion and chaos these forces sometimes entail (Coburn, 2001; Wang et al., 2023). As mediating agents, these leaders reconcile goals, values, and the interests of personnel alongside a steady stream of broader policy directives or priorities (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017; Honig, 2006). In the daily rough and tumble, school and district leaders are challenged to comprehend and translate policy into practice (Spillane et al., 2002). These policy solutions to public school challenges present, more often and at best, as sedimentary layers, or at worst, contradictory mandates derived from an inherently political and detached process (Cohen & Ball, 1990; Malen, 2006; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). With implementation, we know that "outcomes depend on the interactions between that policy, people who matter to its implementation, and conditions in the places in which people operate" (Honig, 2009, p. 333).

School and district leaders are called upon to manage, maximize, and when necessary, mitigate demands that the implementation of new policies invariably demands. They do so through strategies such as bridging, buffering, and symbolic adoption (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Torres et al., 2024). And yet, while scholars have generated rich insight about how school and district leaders negotiate ambiguity and tension through policy implementation (Coburn et al., 2016; Fowler, 2013), we have limited knowledge about the way these leaders reshape policy intent as they adopt newly imposed programs.

As such, this study's intent is to continue exploration of district- and school-level policy implementation beyond concerns with fidelity and impact, but also as a process influenced and understood by cognitive, social, and political influences. This conceptual exercise focuses on Virginia's post-COVID-19 "ALL In VA" [2023] policy. In Virginia as in other states, the governor and education leaders made high dosage tutoring an urgent and central strategy to

counteract “learning loss,” as studies indicate that learning through small group tutoring often accelerates student achievement (Kraft & Falken, 2021; Robinson et al., 2021). Research indicates that under favorable conditions (e.g., intense dosage, small groups, consistent personnel), high frequency tutoring programs boost student performance outcomes by providing customized support and additional learning time (Fryer & Howard-Noveck, 2020; Kortecamp & Peters, 2023; Kraft & Falken, 2021; Schueler, 2022). According to research by Fahle et al. (2024), students in Virginia experienced the most significant learning loss among students nationwide from the extended pandemic school closures.

ALL In VA has directed nearly a half a billion dollars to school districts since December 2023 primarily for high dosage tutoring but also to improve student attendance and literacy (Bryson, 2023). Consequently, district and school leaders have enacted and monitored the provisions of this policy, ensuring that remediation plans reinforce, replace, or overlay ongoing school priorities. Specifically, this study illuminates the intersection of leadership and policy change by critically examining implementation processes, school leaders’ perceptions of their roles and responsibilities, and gaps between policy intent and execution. Our analysis is animated by the following two research questions. First, how are school leaders interpreting and implementing the ALL In policy and in what ways, if at all, does implementation differ across schools and districts? Second, we ask, what role does sensemaking about policy priorities play in the way school leaders implement this policy?

Theoretical Framework: Sensemaking and Multiple Streams

Policy implementation is often under-theorized, particularly in education, because not uncommonly it is narrowly framed in terms of fidelity and compliance and measured in terms of

outputs over outcomes. This persistent perspective has neglected how institutional, organizational, and cognitive processes introduce ambiguity, chaos and complexity, and shape local actors' interpretations of the policies they implement.

We explore ALL In implementation through the intersection of two conceptual pathways: the multiple streams framework (MSF) **and** sensemaking theory**.** This dual approach allows us to theorize how school-level actors, as street-level bureaucrats (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977), navigate ambiguity, institutional signals, and organizational conditions as they interpret and enact policy. Rather than treating implementation as a mechanical extension of design, we position it as a complex, contingent phase shaped by upstream factors (Heath, 2020) and local interpretation. This framing enables us to contribute to policy implementation theory—an often overlooked and under-theorized domain of the policy process (Howlett, 2019).

Implementation: Process, Programs, and Critical Junctures

To move beyond this narrow framing, we draw on the multiple streams framework and sensemaking theory to conceptualize policy implementation in the context of ALL In. Specifically, we draw from Howlett's (2019) extension of Kingdon's (1984) multiple streams framework (MSF), which expands the framework beyond agenda-setting to capture the complexity of the policy cycle's implementation phase. Kingdon's original framework explained how policies reach the decision agenda through three streams: the problem stream (what needs attention), the policy stream (what solutions are considered), and the politics stream (what is feasible). These streams define the avenue and conditions through which policy decisions are made.

Building on Kingdon (1984), Howlett (2019) introduced two additional streams – process and program – to help theorize the institutional and organizational dimension of implementation.

Together, these streams help to operationalize policy implementation as complex and multi-faceted. Importantly, the reframing characterizes implementation as dynamic, as opposed to passive – as the critical juncture in which structures, contexts, and actors' interpretations and motivations interact to shape how policy is received, made sense of, and ultimately implemented. Put differently, the process stream focuses on the institutional structures and rules that shape how implementation unfolds. In the case of ALL In, these structures and rules might include variations in school board decision-making or district leadership priorities. In short, the process stream reflects the evolving "rules of the game" that shape implementation across different local environments.

The program stream captures the tangible and intangible resources available for implementation, including human capital, time, and fiscal assets. It also encompasses an organization's ability to identify, internalize, and apply new knowledge in practice (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990) – as reflected in, for example, staffing models, information systems, and curricular infrastructure. Finally, Howlett's program stream attends to the cultural dimensions of organizations, highlighting how norms, routines, and values shape the ways policies are interpreted and enacted.

Sensemaking theory further guides this inquiry and set of analyses. In contexts of ambiguity and conflicting expectations, policy actors make meaning of their responsibilities toward programs by drawing on internal cues and external pressures (Coburn, 2001; Spillane et al., 2002). This sensemaking process is informed by schemas, prior experiences, and environmental signals (Spillane & Anderson, 2014). Derived from cognitive psychology, sensemaking theory highlights the variance between school leaders' understanding of policies; program implementers' role as "learners;" and the importance of ongoing professional support

especially when new programs deviate from leaders' prior practice (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019).

Educational leaders are tasked with interpreting and implementing policies across district, state, and national levels, often under tight timelines and with limited guidance (Coburn, 2001). This quick turnaround in implementing change creates disjuncture, where educational leaders step outside their norms and use their sensemaking to determine how this policy would best be implemented in their school (Weick, 1976). By engaging in sensemaking, school and central office leaders serve as mediating agents that operationalize their own understanding of the policy, drawing on their knowledge, values, and experience alongside broader directives or priorities in their buildings (Almeida, 2016; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017; Helms et al., 2010).

To delineate factors that contribute to sensemaking, Spillane et al. (2002) created a framework that breaks sensemaking into three stages: individual cognition, situated cognition, and the role of representations. The first stage of individual cognition correlates specifically to the educational leader and how their beliefs, experiences, emotions, and knowledge shape their understanding (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017; Spillane et al., 2002). In situated cognition, the context of the situation is a key factor in how educational leaders implement change (Spillane et al., 2002). While using situated cognition, leaders often focus on the policy and pull the key elements that make the most sense for their given situation (Helms et al., 2010). The last stage of the role of representations is when educational leaders use concrete evidence, such as data, to determine how the policy will work best within their given scenario (Bertrand & Marsh, 2015; Spillane et al., 2002).

Scholars recognize that sensemaking at the local level is an ongoing, evolving process

shaped by knowledge, priorities, pressures, and other factors (Coburn, 2004; Duncheon, 2021). In this study, we investigate how district officials and school administrators used their sensemaking to best implement the ALL In initiative considering upstream directives and resource realities. Lastly, we draw insight from a set of conceptual tools that explain how building and district leaders reconcile multiple policy pressures. In response to external policy demands, local leaders craft coherence through dynamics like bridging, buffering, and symbolic adoption (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Torres et al., 2024).

Background Literature

Policy implementation is complex and rarely looks the same across contexts. Educational policy adds further complexity given the numerous stakeholders involved. Because there is no "one size fits all" approach, policy coherence, or the way a policy fits a given situation, must be continuously negotiated throughout implementation (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Chu, 2022). Superintendents, district staff, principals, and teachers all play a role, and when exposed to a new policy, implementers typically bridge, buffer, or partially adopt it (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Russell & Bray, 2013; Torres et al., 2024). Bridging involves fitting the new policy into existing practice, often drawing on prior experience (Torres et al., 2024; Shaked & Schechter, 2019). Buffering is outright resistance, while symbolic (partial) adoption means implementing parts of the policy without meaningful change to daily operations (Russell & Bray, 2013; Torres et al., 2024).

Research consistently confirms these challenges. Russell and Bray (2013) found that implementation involves understanding the policy, making sense of its demands, determining contextual fit, and crafting a response, which ranges from full resistance to full adoption. They also found that policies with aligned goals were implemented with greater fidelity, while

ambiguous policies were interpreted individually. Similarly, Donaldson et al. (2021) illustrated how bridging and partial adoption can each succeed depending on school circumstances, reinforcing that sensemaking is situationally driven. Torres et al. (2024) found that district leaders most commonly responded to policy with a combination of bridging and buffering. Critically, when sensemaking is undermined, implementation weakens and stakeholders lose clarity on how to proceed (Shaked & Schechter, 2019). Explicit communication of expectations to all stakeholders is therefore essential; without it, disconnects derail the process, and the likelihood of successful implementation diminishes (Shaked & Schechter, 2019; Ellis, 2016).

Ultimately, empirical research on school leaders' sensemaking and policy enactment consistently identifies several trends. At the beginning of sensemaking, policy implementers initially use their own background and personal views to understand the policy (Jennings, 2010; Rigby, 2015). Sutherland (2022) examined how school board members use their sensemaking to understand and implement policy and find that their non-educator backgrounds as well as a lack of information from administrators shape differing ideas on how to implement policy, ideas that clash with superintendent and principals' plans. Even where foundational interpretations may be similar, implementers use resources around them to help them understand what is possible in executing the policy (Ellis, 2016; Jennings, 2010). In a study of school choice and unlawful student screening among principals in New York City, Jennings (2010) found that social networking significantly supported sensemaking by enabling access to key information from salient stakeholders. It also found meaningful variation among school leaders' efforts to curate a student population based on individual views of accountability pressures. One implication of this variation in sensemaking of policy demands is that implementation requires a full team approach to ensure its enactment can be as effective as possible (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019). Across

these studies, sensemaking reflects differences in background knowledge and access to resources that, in turn, lead to uneven interpretation and consequent variation in the way educational leaders enact policies.

Methodology

Design

Given the exploratory nature of our study, we used a multiple case study design to understand how school level actors interpreted and implemented the "ALL In VA" policy across three school districts. This design choice set the stage to contribute to furthering understanding of policy implementation theory, particularly in public education contexts. An exploratory, multiple-case design is fitting for the investigation of complex phenomena with under-researched behavioral dynamics and outcomes (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013). As Stake (1995) and Merriam (1998) argued, multiple case designs offer opportunity for variation from which novel insights, theory generation, and theory replication may follow. Specifically, on one hand, multiple case designs set up natural comparisons between cases to test and develop concepts common across various contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). But equally important, the design can surface unique manifestations of concepts across contexts lead to speculation that in turn generates propositions and theory augmentation and replication.

As such, this study explores the "ALL In VA" policy implementation experiences of three school districts within the same region of Virginia. While each district held similarities in terms of demographic and socio-economic diversity, each also exhibited unique differences in factors such as enrollment size, geographic expanse, and human and capital resource capacity. The design's intent, then, was to illuminate and explore potential relationships among myriad

concepts and themes (e.g., contextual and demographic characteristics, leader experience, etc.) and implementation decisions. Finally, considering intra- and inter-district comparative possibilities, the design allows us to engage in theoretical replication as we reflect upon and deepen understanding of policy streams and sensemaking theory, specifically, and policy implementation theory, more broadly.

Research Methods

Participants selected across the three case districts consisted of central office and school level personnel. Case participants included central office staff with responsibilities for ALL In oversight and principals responsible for school level implementation. Through the information gathered from those interviews and descriptive school data available through the state department of education, we purposively selected elementary and middle schools that represented demographic and socio-economic diversity within the district. In total, we conducted 21 in-depth interviews with 19 personnel responsible for ALL In implementation.

In our largest district by geography and enrollment (40,000 students) we interviewed 3 central office staff and 3 elementary and 2 middle school principals. In the second largest district by enrollment (16,000) we interviewed 3 central office staff and 3 middle school principals. And in our smallest district (11,000) we interviewed 3 central office staff and 2 elementary principals. In two instances, we conducted a second interview with a district-level administrator to further discuss policy changes and their perceptions of school leaders' reactions. Documentary evidence served as our secondary source of evidence and included state- and district-level policy documents and school board minutes to gain insights into how district and school personnel interpreted the ALL In policy.

We analyzed data using standard methods of qualitative analysis. The team, consisting of three researchers during this phase, began analysis by coding interviews independently of one another, then exchanging transcripts and documents to code again independently. At this point, we compiled and discussed codes and associated data looking for overlap, contradictions, and connections to and outliers from our conceptual frameworks. These early sessions led to shared codebooks that guided further analysis leading to memoing as we built themes and subthemes supported by our codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Our theoretical framework guided coding and theme-building by paying special attention to how sensemaking may have influenced implementation and been negotiated among stakeholders (Fowler, 2013; Van Dijk, 2008). As we built our story through memoing we further established trustworthiness by engaging one school level participant from each district to challenge our interpretations of our data and to ensure resonance with key participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2016).

Findings

Our study underscores the socially constructed nature of the policy-making process – from problem definition to policy implementation. In this section, we consider the vertical dimension of policy implementation, where problems are defined, solutions developed, and resources appropriated at the state level and enacted at the grassroots level. Then, we explore how these conditions produce horizontal variation in implementation across local contexts, with particular attention to how organizational capacity shaped what was possible. Ultimately, we conceptualized sensemaking as a central feature of implementation, showing how local actors interpret and adapt policy.

Vertical Orientation of the Policy Process

Despite our regional focus, the contexts influencing implementation were multi-faceted and varied. Our data suggested two dimensions of context: vertical (state- to local-level) and horizontal (across case school districts in one region). Participants viewed the ALL In policy uniformly as one developed at the state level to address the perceived problem of learning loss caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Responses underscored how state policymaking operated on a different plane. On the one hand, perceptions of problems at the state level were driven by political influences and a deliberate, even plodding, approach to resolving the challenges of learning loss. Yet, even when out of sync with local needs, the ALL In policy still required administrators and local actors to respond and implement allocated funding.

Participants noted that the vertical disconnect between state and local contexts was exacerbated by a policy reportedly borne out of political and fiscal expediency and diminished by delays in policy directives and funding. This approach to combatting learning loss did not align with the policy challenges as perceived at the local level. By the time mandates and resources had reached the local level, needs and priorities had evolved. One principal described how, while state policy makers focused on COVID-related learning loss, they saw that public problem as "in the rearview mirror." He continued that learning loss and achievement gaps never were a COVID-only issue. Rather, these issues were persistent and vexing challenges that local educators had been dealing with for decades and for which they were already managing programs, interventions and dedicated resources.

Other participants described how the state's policy solution to local challenges around learning loss was perceived as politically expedient. But at the local level, resources and limited guidance on their use arrived well past the height of the problem. One principal captured the widely shared sentiment, "that bus had left the station," while a district administrator helped

explain why this was the case: “we encouraged our principals to rethink a little bit of their school scheduling, not a lot because their school schedules were already in place and everything was already underway when ALL In came to us.” Local leaders critiqued the messiness of problem identification and solution justification. For example, to them, "learning loss" had little distinction from existing programs targeting achievement gaps they were already grappling to implement. As one district official stated, “we found redundancy with the students we had already identified for intervention and had created schedules and caseloads for.” In other words, to at least some of our participants the ALL In policy was a semantic play on words as part of a state level performance to demonstrate relevance and responsiveness.

Perceived Problems and Reality Gaps

Data supported the existence of implementation tensions we refer to as “reality gaps.” One gap relates to a tension arising from the temporal mismatch between the problem definition stage (the problem stream) and the program stream where policy implementation occurs. They also noted the performative nature of state-level policy making related to the perceived problem of learning loss. Participants were aware that states received and reallocated federal funds to address educational challenges. From their perspective, the state presented its ALL In high dosage tutoring as a solution to the presumptive problem of learning loss.

Learning loss is "presumptive" not because it did not exist, but because participants identified several issues undermining the efficacy and utility of ALL In as a program to counter learning loss. On one hand, the state's policy solution to the public problem moved slowly. Long, drawn-out policy responses reached local implementation levels after the crisis had passed. One district administrator stated that by the time the ALL In resources reached schools and districts, two years had passed since the peak of the COVID-induced problems. Yet, participants

acknowledged that, despite the mismatch between the perceived and actual challenges on the ground, local and state policymakers and implementers continued with the performative dance of policy implementation. As a district-level Director of Curriculum noted, ALL In funding was at best redundant and at worst duplicative to extant policies, programs, and practices meant to address learning loss and achievement gaps.

Viewed over a longer historical perspective, the temporal disconnect between policy solutions and execution and programmatic redundancy became more visible. Specifically, some argued that ALL In stood as an example of policy overlap because there was nothing new about the challenges ALL In was supposed to address. One principal asserted, **"**those ALL In funds are really how do we meet the needs of students who are just behind… whether that is because of attendance, COVID, not having the support at home." As street-level bureaucrats, these participants saw learning loss not as a COVID-19 issue, but as an ongoing challenge. COVID, they agreed, negatively affected student learning, but its effects were hardly unique when considered against the backdrop of decades of learning reforms and interventions.

Where Policy Streams Meet Organizational Reality

School-level data show that policy implementation also varied horizontally, that is, across school contexts. Organizational capacity (or lack thereof) in areas such as instructional infrastructure (e.g., virtual learning management systems), human resources, and transportation determined how well these organizations absorbed ALL In resources. In some cases, ALL In stressed organizations already struggling to make use of existing resources to enhance learning and close achievement gaps. In other cases, ALL In had a multiplier effect.

Implementation Under Stress.

While the infusion of ALL In funding created distinct constellations of opportunity, it posed new organizational demands that many schools could not absorb. School leaders emphasized their human resource capacity and instructional infrastructures were already operating at or near their limits. However, institutional norms suggested that "free money" should not be declined regardless. As a result, leaders were expected to determine how to deploy new funds within systems already stretched thin. In practice, this often meant layering additional tutoring programs, staffing expectations, and accountability requirements onto existing workloads without a corresponding expansion of stable personnel. Some leaders described ALL In as a distraction given more urgent operational demands in high-need schools, despite the scale of the investment.

These pressures manifested through a common set of stressors, transportation, staffing, and barriers to participation among students and tutors. Schools without activity buses, drivers, or family transportation were pigeonholed into providing tutoring during the instructional day, which negatively competed with core instruction. Leaders repeatedly cited the inability to staff after-school transportation as a limiting factor, even when funds were available. For example, one principal noted, "Transportation was also an issue because we didn't have an activity bus." Similarly, another principal stated, "some students can't find transportation and so they end up with different students than originally intended…" An elementary school principal emphasized, "The kids that need it most….are the ones that can't get home," while a district administrator described transportation as "a roadblock and a barrier for students of need."

One principal shared the common notion that "We still have difficulty getting our kids here to get that support." Transportation, or rather its absence in Title I schools, undermined student attendance and the practical nature of high dosage tutoring; that is, unless tutoring was

held during the daytime, as it was in a few schools. Despite educators' efforts, daytime tutoring may appear structurally infeasible, as illustrated in one case in which a 30-minute period required removing 15 to 18 students from core instruction so a trained tutor and teaching assistant could work with them in the cafeteria. While daytime scheduling increased attendance, the margins were slim and impact may have suffered because of the tight fit alongside other time commitments and academic classes, all of which were fixed by a rigid master schedule.

Staffing presented an equally persistent challenge. Some schools struggled to recruit qualified tutors, particularly in high-need contexts. Leaders reported a limited pool of applicants, difficulty securing certified staff, and reluctance among existing teachers to extend their workday due to burnout or safety concerns. A principal stated that "more affluent schools have a lot of retired teachers," while another school leader stated "My entire school – like half of my school – needs tutoring…There's only a limited number of people available. So, although I have that ALL In funding, there's nothing I can do with it." A middle school principal echoed that same sentiment: "Let me give you the names of schools where we can't even find anyone, where even with the carrot of that amount of money, we don't have tutors." When surrounding counties offered the same initiative with more money to tutor, it created competing compensation. As a central office leader observed, "I think really the biggest one [barrier] is getting people," and that "a considerable amount of time goes into interviewing, hiring, training."

These staffing constraints required leaders to support newly hired or temporary instructional personnel. Participants described bringing in tutors or aides who lacked familiarity with the curriculum, student population, or instructional expectations. While these hires expanded capacity on paper, they often required additional coordination, supervision, and informal training. At the same time, experienced instructional staff – those best positioned to

support implementation – were already fully committed, limiting their ability to mentor new personnel. Thus, efforts to expand capacity paradoxically introduced additional organizational workload.

Another common theme was staff disposition, including teacher, parent, and student buy-in. With packed schedules, teachers reportedly viewed these additional small groups one more layer of responsibility. A principal shared the common sentiment that "They [teachers] wholeheartedly felt like it was one more thing." With parent and student buy-in, a participant noted, "many students do extracurriculars after school," with those competing activities making it hard for tutors to "track down students and with only 40 minutes, time was lost." Alarmingly, a middle school principal shared, "I started out with eight kids in my group, and now I only have two that come consistently," and further noted that "at some point, parents have to make the students available too." Along with a widespread perception of policy impermanence, these logistical shortfalls contributed to a lack of buy-in from multiple participants, including one principal who never used ALL In funds because she replaced an outgoing administrator in the fall and, apart from her late arrival, believed that Title I funding already accomplished the same purposes related to tutoring and small group instruction.

Logistics became another common barrier. While propagating ALL In, the state department of education was launching a new accountability system, new math curriculum, and new language arts standards. ALL In came at a time where master schedules were already in full effect. One principal affirmed, "no way can we change our master schedule in December." A fellow school leader stated that an effective rollout requires "the opportunity to plan effectively and roll out something with…a better communication plan." Protected instructional blocks like English and math provided even more limited opportunities for students to receive remediation.

Another principal stated that "we had already identified for intervention and had created schedules and caseloads," while an elementary principal described competing demands: "trying to prioritize…their speech services, they need direct instruction with their special ed teacher. They are an ELL student, so they also need that." These challenges were further compounded by physical space constraints within school buildings.

Participants described a gap between the minimum staffing and organizational conditions required to implement ALL In as intended and the actual resources available on the ground. While all districts faced this tension, the degree to which it constrained implementation varied based on local context, including existing staffing levels, access to community resources, and student needs. These issues were not isolated, and they created a reciprocal effect. Notably, staffing limitations dictated who provided the tutoring and how the program was delivered. When schools lacked transportation for after-school sessions, leaders were forced to tutor during the day with limited time or staff – choices were after-school programs with poor attendance or daytime programs with policy constraints that reinforced implementation barriers. Given these organizational constraints, principals' discretion became a matter of mere feasibility.

Bounded Discretion Under Constraint.

Much of the $418 million to "accelerate learning loss recovery" was soaked up at the central office level or allocated to school leaders with little capacity to enact broad new tutoring initiatives. Data reveal considerable variation in the degrees of freedom or opportunities that school and central office leaders perceived as viable. At the district level, administrators interpreted the policy with wide latitude. "We got creative" explained a range of expansive, or sometimes pragmatic, responses to extra funding. Although principals also exercised autonomy over service implementation, they worked assiduously within confines created by available

personnel, transportation, rigid schedules, and upstream guidance. Despite their more bounded discretion, school leaders shaped implementation by controlling timing (e.g., before, after, during, or Saturday school), finding transportation opportunities, identifying students, and recruiting staff and community members to participate. Responding to district-level direction, school leaders enacted street-level bureaucrat roles by adapting the enumerated policy to mirror their resource realities, especially in Title I schools.

As the policy solution moved downstream, degrees of freedom narrowed. Initially, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) provided guidance: a "High-Intensity Tutoring Playbook" with implementation suggestions and a recommended allocation breakdown: 70% spent on tutoring, 20% on literacy, and 10% on attendance. However, consistent with capacity building as a policy instrument (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987), ALL In provided a high degree of openness concerning investments that would be allowed by the policy. The State approved reading curricula – as part of the Virginia Literacy Act – and district spending plans, but it did not delineate tutoring dosage or formats (i.e., in-person or online) or help secure tutoring personnel. With more sway over funding decisions and their own district priorities, central office leaders were able to repurpose the policy and expand its reach, as noted. At the school leadership level, the spectrum of viable actions became limited. Bounded choices led to frustration among some principals. As one principal put it, "They come up with it, drop it on schools, and we have to figure out how to implement it. Each school has different resources, but all are expected to do the same thing. It's a struggle."

In each district, this narrowing was intentional. Where innovative thinking among central planners led to defined implementation structures, principals had limited space for school level variation. A district leader explained that ALL In tutoring would be expected to involve

"small-group reading and Zoom-based delivery," which, "were our two non-negotiables." School leaders concurred: "the method was provided for us." A principal observed, "We were told it was during the ELA block. That was the option that was." In this rigid implementation plan – the most among the three districts – the framework was finalized above, and school leaders were merely free to determine days of the week and names and number of students. Yet, the school administrators either endorsed or understood well the district's reasons for this approach, which was to focus remote instruction on Tier 1 students who are typically the recipients of fewer additional services and whose academic success would be more influential in a new state accreditation system. Similarly, in another case district, one district administrator put it this way: "We certainly involved them in the planning and responding to 'this is what we're thinking.'" However, feedback is where this discretion stopped. She went on: "Help us understand how to make it actionable in your buildings. But we did not leave that responsibility to our individual schools." Less so in the largest district, key decisions about how money might be spent in these two districts were a priori, settled before principals could determine tutoring strategies, curriculum, or overall service plans.

Degrees of freedom were determined not only by higher-powered organizational actors, but also by timing, capacity, and other logistics. After the first year, school and district leaders' views of the policy shifted, going from strict to more permissive. Reflecting the perceived rigidity in year one, when the policy was rolled out in the late fall and winter of 2023-2024, one school leader observed, "It was very, very strict last year." She went on, "this year, after learning more, the district allowed us to have a little more flexibility." The perceived strictness motivated careful reporting and onerous spreadsheets. Over time though, the program (and its reputation)

became more relaxed. A fellow school principal noted, "we did feel like they started to back off a little bit and allow us to do the work."

The evolving policy expectations, particularly as they relate to reporting expenditures, unnerved some school and central office leaders. Data suggest limited communication across professional roles or districts about ALL In implementation, though some principals shared stories or hearsay from other contexts. They perceived that in some places others were "crossing lines." One principal explained:

> I feel like there's not enough lines, and I feel like people are probably crossing those and taking too much. It always makes me nervous with money, because with equity funds there's a limit, but with this, we've not been given a limit.

These sources of anxiety materialized as excessive documentation, perhaps as a defense mechanism. We saw a clear pattern of leaders expressing caution around monitoring, such that if they were to be judged on their ALL In expenditures, they would be viewed as careful stewards. As one district leader shared, "If the media or anyone would ever want to say, what in the world did you do with X million dollars? I can pull it up on the screen and say here's what we did." Yet, despite their worries and procedural caution, some district leaders thought plans were merely "rubber stamped." This administrator claimed, "We were extremely, extremely careful with it. But the reality is the mechanism that the state used to even track this was so light." Later, this individual elaborated, "it was approved so quickly that there's no way that anybody, even with speed reading, could have read one word of it. That told me something." Overall, despite the potential opportunity of lax oversight, murkiness about state spending and allowances seemed to create indecision for many of our participants.

Absorptive and Adaptive-Sensemaking as Implementation

Despite structural challenges, some schools found ways to absorb the new resources and operationalize ALL In. Among these strategies, participants aligned ALL In resources with existing initiatives or expanded into new ones. One district had a robust online instructional program to address student achievement in reading and math. A central office staff member stated, “The existing instructional and technological infrastructure helped with ALL In implementation and shaped what we saw as possible.” In this case, school and district leaders were able to add value to existing programs aligned with ALL In’s policy intent, hiring additional staff to include more children in small group sessions during instructional time as well as after school hours – absorbing the resources with minimal disruption or added organizational stress.

Some school leaders did not treat ALL In as a standalone program, but instead absorbed ALL In resources into existing instructional routines, particularly small group intervention structures during and after the school day. In several cases, leaders mapped ALL In onto already established intervention blocks or enrichment periods, using those spaces to deliver additional targeted instruction rather than creating entirely new structures. Similarly, district leaders emphasized aligning tutoring with existing curriculum and pacing so that resources “flow into what was already happening.”

A second absorption pattern involved the expansion of small group instruction through flexible delivery models, including both “pull-out” and “push-in” approaches. In some schools, this took the form of structured after-school tutoring programs, with students grouped by grade level and served multiple days per week. In other contexts, leaders shifted tutoring into the school day to mitigate participation barriers, embedding support within classroom schedules and avoiding barriers such as transportation and attendance.

Leaders also demonstrated adaptive staffing strategies to extend instructional capacity, often blending certified teachers, teaching assistants, and external tutors. In Title I settings, teacher aides were paired with licensed teachers to meet policy requirements while expanding the number of students who could be served. Other schools supplemented internal capacity with retired teachers, college students, or community members, increasing flexibility in how small groups were staffed. In some cases, auxiliary personnel familiar with school routines were tapped to maximize instructional quality.

Finally, some districts pursued more innovative or hybrid delivery models, particularly in response to staffing constraints. In one district, ALL In funds were used to repurpose virtual school teachers as remote tutors, allowing students to engage in small group instruction via Zoom during the school day. This approach extended remedial instruction with less staffing stress and illustrated how leaders leveraged existing virtual learning infrastructure to support ALL In implementation.

The reality gaps between state-level problem framing and the actual conditions facing schools created space for strategic choice and action. While the ALL In policy was designed to address pandemic-related learning loss, principals consistently described encountering a different set of persistent and immediate challenges, including staffing limitations, uneven instructional capacity, chronic absenteeism, and evolving accountability demands. In this context, participants described implementation as making sense of how ALL In resources could be absorbed and adapted within existing systems.

Given available resources, organizational role, and policy expectations, all leaders' discretion in their decision making was bounded. Consequently, sensemaking related to ALL In

meant "playing the hand you're dealt," interpreting possibilities for ALL In funding in relation to their immediate contexts, school or district goals, and local constraints.

Building leaders interpreted the VA ALL In policy in a manner that was more flexible than prescriptive. Absorptive sensemaking represents one dominant pattern in our findings on implementation. Across interviews, principals described utilizing ALL In resources in ways that harnessed and even strengthened existing instructional systems rather than creating new ones. This included using the resources to address staffing gaps, extend the reach of existing interventions, and maintain continuity of services for targeted students. These leaders coped with the pressure to use new resources by building on what was already there, often embedding tutoring within existing instructional structures such as flexible learning strategies and small group structures. As a result, leaders utilized the new resources with minimal disruption to students, often with little change to their instructional day, while minimizing additional burdens on teachers. These absorptive strategies represented deliberate efforts to fit new resources into the existing instructional fabric in ways that preserved coherence and minimized disruption in capacity-constrained environments. These practices suggest that implementation, at least in part, was about leaders' ability to integrate external resources in ways that strengthen rather than fragment existing work.

Absorption alone was not sufficient. A second pattern – adaptive sensemaking – captured how principals stretched the use of ALL In resources to address problems that extended beyond the policy's original framing. While VDOE intended for the funds to support learning loss due to COVID-related shutdowns, many leaders across districts repurposed the funds to address their organizational needs and to meet new state accountability requirements. With increased emphasis on rewarding growth across performance tiers, principals were attentive to where additional

instructional time could have the greatest impact on school performance, including students near key cut points regardless of tier. The funding, treated as a flexible resource, led many schools to shift from remediation to enrichment, targeting Tier 1 students instead of Tier 3 students. With new accountability standards offering more points for students who could pass advanced on their SOL, districts strategically shifted their focus. One principal stated, "It's using it strategically towards the accreditation regime… if we can get a .75 to a 1 or a 1 to a 1.25, that helps me because it's an average across all students," and later explained, "I have to get that kid who is going to pass to pass advanced… it causes you to not just focus on the middle… you also have to raise the floor while raising the ceiling at the same time." These moves reflect policy drift, where the intent of the policy shifts during implementation. In this way, the policy's purpose, while not abandoned, was reinterpreted and stretched to fit the problems that mattered most locally. The policy was not completely diverted from its purpose, but it was stretched to address school-level performance expectations.

Another clear example of this adaptive sensemaking is the use of ALL In to address chronic absenteeism. Leaders described providing additional instructional opportunities outside the regular school day to help students recover missed learning due to inconsistent attendance. A district leader explained:

> Quite a few of the schools are doing Saturdays. They might have three hours on a Saturday because they're trying to leverage that flexible instruction piece… They're inviting all the students because as long as you have some students that are identified, you can still use ALL In funds to pay a teacher. So, they are kind of getting creative in having these like Saturday days of learning activities or STEM days… and they're double dipping. They're hitting those SOLs [Standards of Learning] or trying to fill some

learning gaps. But at the same time, they're also getting some of that chronic absenteeism time back.

These efforts remained connected to the policy's focus on academic support, while also recognizing chronic absenteeism as a barrier to learning and a contributing factor to learning loss.

Across these examples, adaptive sensemaking reflected a broader process of local-level problem reframing and its role in shaping implementation. Administrators leveraged the policy's lack of strict guidance to implement it beyond its original intent, adapting it to conditions such as chronic absenteeism, staffing limitations, and shifting accountability expectations. Absorptive and adaptive sensemaking show how ALL In was enacted across contexts. Leaders worked to absorb the policy into existing systems while adapting it to local conditions. Implementation was an ongoing process of interpretation and sensemaking in capacity-constrained school environments.

Discussion

With a focus on ALL In VA, this study explores how upstream policy definitions translate down through the system as local educational leaders make sense of and enact state-level policy under conditions of resource pressure, ambiguity, and competing priorities. Our analysis draws on data in three separate districts to reveal the way district and school level leaders reconstruct policy aims as they make sense of the policy within the program stream, an extension of Kingdon’s (1984) Multiple Streams Framework that Howlett (2019) conceptualized. In doing so, our study examines how the timing of policy enactment, as a deferred effort to address learning loss on the part of state officials, influenced local leaders' sensemaking and encouraged policy

drift. As we seek to better understand change processes in which "policies are mediated through the contexts in which they are implemented" (Fowler, 2013, p. 11; Honig, 2009), this study carefully examines the relationship between local factors and implementation dynamics (Howlett, 2019; Reinhorn et al., 2017; Torres et al., 2024).

Our findings reveal how local judgments about instructional fit and organizational feasibility shaped the way policy problems were redefined as they moved downstream. We witnessed policy drift in various forms as we explored how ALL In moved from the state capital to the district office and then to school principals. We found that these actors tended to embed ALL In strategies into existing routines, such as small-groups, intervention blocks, and prior instructional routines rather than devising new procedures. This kind of absorption aided coherence, while at the same time it suggested compliance. We further found that participants recoupled policy provisions to local imperative, like a new accreditation system, as means to make pragmatic adaptations consistent with street level bureaucrat responses (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977).

Across districts, administrators' reactions to ALL In were shaped by state-local disconnect concerning the feasibility of abrupt high-dosage tutoring programs. Limitations related to staffing, bus and bus driver shortages, and student absences, then, shaped implementation, not leaders' visions for academic remediation or school improvement priorities. Consequently, execution and locus of control varied. In the mid-sized district, central office leaders set non-negotiables while principals operated within narrow bands and in the larger district, school leaders exercised more discretion. In both, parameters were predetermined, with approaches more closely tied to district culture and specific personnel instead of policy design. We found that programming decisions rarely aligned with a strict definition of "learning loss"

and that students most in need were sometimes not even the target. Rather, leaders viewed these new policy demands through a prism of program relevance, where current priorities and perceived problems took precedence. In two districts, student selection targeted those who were "Tier 1", as performance gains among these students would trigger additional points on the state's new accreditation framework, rather than the Tier 3 students for which the policy was drafted. The pandemic framing largely evaporated. Instead, what took hold was shaped by routinization and a realization that long running achievement gaps threatened learning more than COVID-era "loss".

For district and school leaders, sensemaking of policy enactment was characterized by bounded discretion, a narrowing force operating through positional power and local resource availability, timing, and capacity. Sensemaking took place along two axes, one involving upstream hierarchical authority related to funding allocation and mandates allocation and another that was crosswise, involving local priorities and resource limitations. These factors intersected at the school level where vertical and horizontal guardrails left principals with the fewest degrees of freedom, and, ironically, the biggest burden in proving compliance. We found that sensemaking was informed by limited communication across districts or roles and excessive demands upon time, resulting in school leaders' ad hoc assessments of what the policy allowed.

Our findings corroborate earlier studies on educational leaders' sensemaking and policy implementation. According to that research, local actors "co-construct" policies as they interpret and fit them to priorities, prior experiences, and resource realities (Datnow, 2006; Honig & Hatch, 2004; Lenhoff et al., 2026; Malen, 2006). These dynamics allow policies to work within their temporal and organizational constraints, "sometimes resulting in better fit to practice and sometimes resulting in unintended consequences" (Jimerson & Childs, 2017, p. 585). Like earlier

studies, this analysis identifies pragmatic recoupling of policy problems and solutions, as local adaptations contributes to policy drift (Diamond, 2012). Findings also show that context, or what we call reciprocal barriers of transportation, staffing, buy-in, and feasibility, contribute to the emergence of alternatives to high frequency tutoring.

This study further illustrates an instance of symbolic adoption when school leaders simultaneously bridge and buffer elements of a disruptive policy (Kohansal, 2015; Torres et al., 2024). Along a continuum of responses to ALL In, districts crafted coherence through bridging strategies like creating new daytime, after-school tutoring programs. In some cases where they struggled to locate the personnel to meet these demands, school leaders may have suffered for their strict adherence to the original policy. In the mid-sized district, leaders buffered by reframing an old program involving virtual teachers to be their ALL In plan. In the largest district, administrators greenlit tutoring but also invested millions of dollars in professional learning to address what one administrator called "adult learning gaps" brought on by COVID. For some district leaders, the timing of enactment and other logistical challenges made it nearly impossible to spend the money as it was intended by state policymakers. Moreover, the lightness of state monitoring contributed to situations where symbolic adoption might have been attractive. Lax oversight meant that compliance was a relatively low bar, though participants sought to use funds defensibly and in ways that would boost instructional capacity. As in other studies, symbolic adoption here may have been structurally essential rather than merely strategic (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019).

This study builds upon the literature base in several important ways. First, our analysis offers visibility to the "program stream" (Howlett, 2019), a downstream juncture in the policy process where new stakeholders, strategies, and resources join the initial politics, problem, and

policy streams, according to Kingdon (1984). Using the case of ALL In VA, our study links policy design and enactment by showing how school leaders understand state-level priorities in light of what is possible from a resource and discretion standpoints. Mindful of their positional power and local capacity, school leaders interpret and translate in ways that reflect their conditional agency. Second, our findings make a valuable distinction between absorptive and adaptive sensemaking as two characteristic patterns in problem definition and policy enactment. Absorptive sensemaking reinforces existing systems while adaptive strategies stretch or reframe the policy to fit eminent local problems. Considering that the policy stream cannot keep up with the problem stream, local actors will make sense of and respond to policy demands differently and in ways that explain eventual enactment.

Our study raises significant questions about factors influencing or even encouraging the recoupling of policy problems and solutions. As policy translation is reasonable, perhaps inevitable at times, researchers should seek to determine how to nudge these systems toward desirable outcomes. Relatedly, scholars should investigate the enabling conditions and motivations under which leaders are likely to reframe policy solutions to fit their local needs. Considering the demands of scaling high frequency tutoring programs specifically, these policies should be more closely aligned to the resource capacities and priorities of local leaders. To bridge policy design at the state level and local implementation, policymakers need to be highly attentive to feasibility constraints, preferences, and priorities of local actors. Another implication involves the enablement of cross-district learning. As implementation was largely siloed, there were few opportunities for lateral sensemaking that might have strengthened leaders' perceptions of what was possible.

Several limitations related to this research are worth noting. First, our study illustrates the reactions of leaders across three district cases and, in so doing, relies on their personal recollections of their decisions and sensemaking related to ALL In. We corroborated some statements with other officials, but we cannot independently confirm their experiences, perceptions, or activities. Next, although the study provides an in-depth illustration of leaders' perspectives and sensemaking, it does not permit generalizability beyond these districts. In addition, we identify influences such as local capacity, leaders' beliefs, and organizational culture, but we cannot fully account for the factors that drive variation across contexts, nor can we disentangle the causes of drift in any given case. Still, despite these caveats, findings from this study offer insight on the way local-level constraints and capacity influence sensemaking and mediate policy implementation.

Hardly a matter of mere fidelity, enactment in this study reflects the "ongoing negotiation within an implementation subsystem" (Howlett, 2019, p. 420) subject to different actors' influence, goals, and organizational tendencies. Upstream policy guidance set the formal boundaries of implementation, but local actors navigated those boundaries through situated interpretation and resource realities. In this way, adaptive and absorptive sensemaking reflect a rational process of reinterpretation when upstream vision and program stream capacity diverge.

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