



“Can we fight this fight?": How Racial Politics Shape the Implementation of Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education Teaching Standards

Maya Kaul
University of
Pennsylvania

Meghan Comstock
University of Maryland,
College Park

Joy Esboldt
University of Delaware

Maya Kaul
University of
Pennsylvania

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Maya Kaul, University of Pennsylvania

Meghan Comstock, University of Maryland, College Park

Joy Esboldt, University of Delaware

Dayna Muñoz, University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

In this study, we investigate the role of teacher education (TE) programs in filtering the implementation of Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education teaching guidelines in Pennsylvania. Drawing on a comparative case study of three TE programs across diverse institutional and political contexts, we find that implementation varied from surface-level adoption of the guidelines to deeper implementation, depending on actors’ perceptions of the specificity, authority, consistency, power, and stability of the policy and programs’ pre-existing organizational conditions. As racial politics eroded the policy’s initial race-conscious language, the labor of preserving the policy’s equity aims fell disproportionately on women of color. These findings point to the uneven costs of equity-based reforms and the need for structures that recognize and redistribute this labor.

Keywords: Organizational Theory/Change; Politics; Race; Teacher Education/Development; Qualitative Research; Case Studies

Decades of scholarship has documented the importance of culturally responsive and sustaining education (CRSE) teaching¹—i.e., teaching practices which promote academic success for all students, affirm all students’ backgrounds and cultures, and prepare students’ critically engage with social issues (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012)—for all students, and especially students of color (e.g., Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Dee & Penner, 2017). Some states have sought to align their state teaching standards with CRSE principles to ensure that students receive instruction that is responsive to their backgrounds, experiences, and identities (Carrier, 2024; Comstock et al., 2026; Muniz, 2019). However, in recent years, these policies have faced growing resistance. Although racialized attacks on public education have a long history (Dumas et al., 2016; Horsford, 2019; Welton et al., 2023), resistance to race- and equity-focused standards and instructional policies has intensified sharply in recent years (Bertrand et al., 2023; Pollock et al., 2022; Woo et al., 2022), reaching new heights with the Trump administration’s executive orders targeting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Within this environment, the political durability of race- and equity- focused education policies is uncertain.

Pennsylvania's CRSE teaching guidelines have been caught at the crosshairs of these racial politics. First introduced by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) in 2022, the standards called on both K-12 districts and teacher education (TE) programs to prepare teachers to develop CRSE competencies in their teaching practice and were explicit about the need for teachers to reflect on and strengthen understanding of race and racism. While the standards prescribed particular competencies for K-12 teachers, they left open the question of how TE programs and districts should prepare future teachers around those competencies. This ambiguity

¹ We use the term “culturally responsive and sustaining education” to refer to a broader range of asset-based theories of teaching and learning, including culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012).

has become more consequential as the policy itself shifted due to political pressure within the state: within the first year TE programs were tasked with implementing the CRSE guidelines, the state rescinded the initial CRSE guidelines and replaced the standards with the more race-evasive Common Ground framework. This instability shifted the external language of the policy, and introduced confusion to school districts TE programs tasked with making sense of and implementing such policy directives. Although scholarship has widely documented the ways in which K-12 teachers adapt policy guidance as they put it into place (e.g., Coburn, 2001, 2004; Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Diamond, 2007; Hodge & Stosich, 2022; Reinhorn et al., 2017), less is known about how *teacher educators*, i.e., the teacher education faculty who prepare teachers, shape the implementation of instructional policy. Yet, the ways in which such practitioners make sense of policies may significantly shape the ways teachers are ultimately trained. Therefore, the implementation of Pennsylvania’s CRSE guidelines may depend significantly on how teacher educators make sense of and translate the policy into practice.

In this paper, we investigate how three TE programs in Pennsylvania, situated across diverse political and institutional contexts, implement the CRSE standards. We draw on critical sensemaking theory (Helms Mills et al., 2010; Schildt et al., 2020) and policy attributes theory (Porter et al., 1988; Porter, 1994) to examine how program leaders’ and teacher educators’ perceptions of the policy, as well as the pre-existing organizational structures and conditions of their programs, shape their ability to meaningfully implement the policy guidance. To study these dynamics, we adopt a critical policy analysis (CPA) approach. CPA centers “the roots, foundations, and assumptions of policies” (Diem & Brooks, 2022, p. 3) to understand *whose knowledge* guides policy, *for whom* policies are designed, how *power* shapes the development and implementation of policy, and *whose interests* are ultimately served by policy. In this view,

education policy is racialized (Gillborn, 2005; Vue et al., 2024), and policy acts as a tool or a “practice of power” (Levinson & Sutton, 2001, p. 1), which can create and sustain racial inequalities in the education system. Aligned with a CPA approach, our analysis draws attention to the gaps between the *rhetoric and practiced reality* and the *historical roots and development* of the CRSE guidelines (Diem et al. 2024). In the face of racial backlash, TE programs may employ different discursive strategies to publicly conceal or amplify work related to equity, making it challenging to understand what is happening in practice (Comstock, 2024). To that end, we trace how the evolution of the policy guidance itself being race-conscious to race-evasive shaped how programs took up the policy in practice.

More specifically, in this paper, we ask: (1) How do TE leaders and teacher educators make sense of the CRSE guidelines?, and (2) How do the institutional and political contexts of programs shape their implementation of the CRSE guidelines? We find that implementation of the policy varied across programs based on programs’ pre-existing organizational conditions and structures, practitioners’ perceptions of the policy, and the evolving racial politics surrounding the policy. As the policy became more politically sensitive given federal attacks on race- and equity-focused policies, women of color came to disproportionately shoulder the labor and political risk of implementation. Taken together, our findings advance understanding of how a state-level CRSE guidelines is taken up amidst divisive racial politics, offering a case of how TE programs, as organizations, mediate the implementation of instructional policy. In what follows, we provide context on the CRSE guidelines in Pennsylvania, documenting how racial politics led the policy to evolve and become more race-evasive over time. Next, we present our conceptual framework and an overview of relevant prior scholarship. Then, we present our findings and discuss our contributions to research, policy, and practice.

Study Context: Pennsylvania’s CRSE Program Framework Guidelines

In this study, we examine how TE programs in Pennsylvania responded to the establishment and eventual rescission of the Pennsylvania’s Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education Program Framework Guidelines (henceforth, the “CRSE guidelines”).² Grounded in a CPA approach, we document the history of the policy’s roots and formation to contextualize the ways in which the policy was ultimately interpreted and implemented at the local level (Diem & Brooks, 2022). The CRSE guidelines emerged from years of grassroots organizing by TE leaders and practitioners across the state. Their initial origins can be traced to PDE’s *ASPIRE to Educate* program in November of 2019, which aimed to increase the number of “diverse teacher candidates” in partnership with higher education institutions across the state (Mezzacappa, 2019). Though short-lived, the initiative set the stage for more structured collaboration among educational organizations across the state and eventually led to the creation of a state-level policy intermediary organization (IO)³ in 2021. The IO was composed of a network of educators, teacher educators, researchers, policy analysts, and others interested in promoting CRSE and teacher diversity in schools. The IO worked with other advocates to lobby PDE for the inclusion of CRSE guidelines during PDE’s Chapter 49 mandated review in 2018 (PSEA, 2022; *22 PA Code Chapter 49: Certification of Professional Personnel*, 2019).

Since its creation, the IO has played a central role in the design and implementation of the CRSE guidelines. To start, the IO worked alongside organizations such as the New America Foundation to craft the CRSE guidelines. Notably, the initial framework was drafted in late 2020 and early 2021, during a national racial reckoning that opened a brief window of opportunity for racially-conscious language in policy (e.g. Grace et al., 2024; Green et al., 2025; Irby &

² We use “CRSE” to refer to Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education to be consistent with how it is referred to in scholarship. However, Pennsylvania refers to “CRSE” as “CR-SE.”

³ We do not name this group intentionally, as we have de-identified them in the findings of the study.

Ishimaru, 2025; Pollock et al., 2022). The CRSE framework reflects this race-conscious approach to the education policy, using terms like “microaggressions,” “racial trauma,” and “BIPOC” to frame teacher practice. For example, Competency 9.A urged educators to “believe and acknowledge that microaggressions are real and take steps to educate themselves” (p. 6), while other competencies asked educators to hold high expectations for BIPOC students, and to help students examine economic, political, and social power structures in the school, community, nation, and world (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2022).

After multiple years of development, the CRSE Program Framework Guidelines were passed in April 2022 as an amendment to Chapter 49 of the Pennsylvania Public School Code—the first state guidelines focused on CRSE (Muñiz, 2021; Pennsylvania State Board of Education, 2021; Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2022). State guidelines required the CRSE guidelines to be integrated in TE programs by 2024-2025 and in professional learning and induction programs in K-12 school districts by 2023-2024. To support implementation, the IO continued to play a central role, offering a shared space for professional learning, resource sharing (e.g., TE course syllabi), and professional collaboration for practitioners across the state to make sense of the new policy.

However, there was swift backlash from the right to the CRSE guidelines, which ultimately led to an adaptation to the policy in November 2024. In Pennsylvania, opponents used both legislative and legal strategies to attack the CRSE guidelines (District Administration, 2023). For example, Republican Senator Michele Brooks introduced Senate Bill 853 to repeal the policy, and the Thomas More Society supported three western Pennsylvania school districts to file a lawsuit that sought to stop implementation of the CRSE guidelines (Borrasso, 2023; Delano, 2023; Forstadt & Riese, 2024). The lawsuit challenged the CRSE guidelines on the

grounds that they violated teachers' First Amendment rights by compelling ideological speech. Although PDE preserved the CRSE guidelines through these initial attacks, they ultimately rescinded the CRSE guidelines amidst the shifting federal policy environment following the re-election of Donald Trump in November 2024—instead replacing it with the *Common Ground* framework. The new framework toned down the racial equity aspects of the guidelines and instead incorporated competencies in trauma-aware mental health and wellness, as well as technological and virtual engagement (Hanna, 2024). Importantly, the Common Ground framework included much of the CRSE competencies, but preserved them in a more race-evasive way and presented alongside less politically-charged topics, like technology. For example, Competency 9.A shifted from “Believe and acknowledge that *microaggressions* are real” to “Recognize comments or actions that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally express a prejudiced attitude.” Competency 8.A shifted from “Understand the importance of having high expectations for all learners, including *BIPOC students*” to “Understand the importance of having high expectations for *all* learners” (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2022).

In the wake of these shifts, PDE was largely silent, leaving school districts and TE programs to navigate implementing the new guidance on their own. Notably, TE programs were still expected to follow the guidelines (unlike their K-12 counterparts), but there was increased latitude in how programs can comply with the requirements. TE programs were midstream in their first year of implementing the initial CRSE guidelines when the shift to Common Ground happened, leaving an open question about how they were supposed to navigate the shifting policy. Within this vacuum of guidance, CRSE supporters across the state continued to turn to the IO when trying to make sense of the settlement agreement rescinding the CRSE guidelines (Forstadt & Riese, 2024). The IO organized forums for PDE staff to explain the changes, created

crosswalks (i.e., documents mapping shifts in language from one framework to the other), generated toolkits to guide and support practitioners, and continued facilitating convenings to support educators. The case of Pennsylvania’s CRSE guidelines, therefore, offers a unique context to explore how TE programs make sense of instructional policies such as the CRSE amidst an unstable policy environment and divisive racial politics.

Conceptual Framework

We ground our study in a framework that bridges critical sensemaking theory (Helms Mills et al., 2010; Schildt et al., 2020) with the policy attributes theory (Desimone, 2002; Porter et al., 1988; Porter, 1994). This framework allows us to examine how TE actors make sense of the CRSE guidelines in their contexts, with attention to how these actors perceive the policy itself and the racial politics shaping implementation.

Critical Sensemaking Theory

Policy implementation literature has long recognized that the actors closest to implementation play a meaningful role in how policy translates to practice (McLaughlin, 1987). Sensemaking theory has been widely applied to studies of policy implementation (e.g., Coburn, 2001, 2005a; Comstock & Margolis, 2021; Comstock, 2026; Hodge & Stosich, 2022; Reinhorn et al., 2017; Rigby, 2015) because it helps explain the factors that might shape how individuals in organizations respond to policy change (Spillane et al., 2002). Hailing from organizational sociology, sensemaking theory suggests that when actors confront an organizational disturbance, they draw on “cues” in their environments to inform their responses (Weick, 1995). In the context of policy, sensemaking theory suggests that, when confronted with a policy change, actors make sense of the ambiguity that change brings by drawing on their personal beliefs and experiences, aspects of their organizational environment, and information and messages about

the policy itself (Spillane et al., 2002). These cues inform actors' future decisions. In this way, sensemaking is simultaneously retrospective and future-oriented, as individuals apply their preexisting cognitive schemas to inform action (Weick, 1995).

Critical sensemaking theory elaborates on sensemaking theory by attending to political and power dynamics within the sensemaking process (Helms Mills et al., 2010; Schildt et al., 2020). This perspective recognizes that sensemaking in organizations can be shaped by powerful actors and powerful ideas (Comstock, 2026; Schildt et al., 2020). Individuals in organizations may have differing levels of authority and influence to shape sensemaking processes (Datnow & Park, 2012; Helms Mills et al., 2010), and organizations operate from taken-for-granted, long-held ideas and norms (Bridwell-Mitchell & Lee, 2025; Diamond & Gomez, 2023). Attending to power differentials in the sensemaking process broadens sensemaking to encompass not just how individuals in organizations come to a shared understanding and collective action, but how individuals in organizations navigate conflict and contestation (Datnow et al., 2012).

Given that CRSE requires educators' attention to structural inequalities and social injustice, our conceptual grounding assumes that CRSE implementation demands critical reflection over the ways that racism and other forms of oppression have been institutionalized in organizational routines and systems (Diamond & Gomez, 2023). Thus, we draw on Schildt and colleagues' (2020) articulation of power in sensemaking—specifically, *systemic power*—to inform our analysis. Systemic power is “how taken-for-granted knowledge structures and individual and collective identities shape the way actors see the world and act” (Schildt et al., 2020, p. 242). Systemic power indicates that particular *ideas* hold power in organizations, resonating with scholars who articulate how institutionalized norms and routines perpetuate systems of power, like racism, in organizations (Diamond & Gomez, 2023; Welton et al., 2018).

Building on these scholars in the context of equity-based instructional reforms, we take up Comstock's (2026) operationalization of systemic power in sensemaking as a spectrum from *limited interrogation* of ideas about equity in organizations—e.g., adopting CRSE without reflecting on the practices it calls for—to *critical reflection* (see Diamond & Gomez, 2023)—e.g., intentional efforts in the organization to reflect on and deepen understanding of CRSE and associated concepts, such as racialized dynamics in the institution. These constructs for delineating aspects of systemic power in organizations provide tools to tease apart the power dynamics inherent in the racial politics of CRSE implementation, a key focus of our study.

Policy Attributes Theory

As noted, sensemaking theory assumes that perceptions of and messages about policy serve as important cues as actors make sense of policy. To further delineate cues of policy itself, we draw on the policy attributes theory (Porter et al., 1988; Porter, 1994). This theory articulates five attributes of policy that are important for successful translation of policy to practice: (1) *specificity* is how prescriptive the policy and its associated resources are, (2) *consistency* is how well aligned the policy is with other policies and practices, (3) *power* concerns the nature of accountability mechanisms for promoting uptake of the policy, (4) *stability* is the likelihood that the policy will endure, and (5) *authority* is the institutional backing and buy-in for the policy (Desimone, 2002; Porter et al., 1988; Porter, 1994). Scholarship has pointed to the importance of studying how actors *perceive* the attributes of particular policies (Desimone, 2002). This work documents how teachers' perceptions of the policy attributes of instructional content standards are related to their uptake of those standards in practice (Comstock et al., 2022; Edgerton & Desimone, 2019) and how policy attributes help explain why and how organizations respond to disruptive policy changes (Hill et al., 2025). However, policy attributes theory has not been

integrated with critical theories, which attend to the role of power, to disentangle the racial politics of policy implementation.

In this study, we posit that TE actors' perceptions of the attributes of CRSE guidelines are important sensemaking cues for understanding how these actors put the policy into practice. Teacher educators across institutions have different perceptions about the specificity of CRSE policy guidance, the extent to which the CRSE guidelines are aligned with other policies and practices in their institution, the strength of the accountability systems tied to the reforms, and the stability of the policy. These policy features can shape practitioners' buy-in for and understanding of the shifts called for in policy. Thus, together, critical sensemaking theory and policy attributes theory allow us to disentangle the racial politics of CRSE implementation.

Literature Review

This study contributes to two bodies of empirical scholarship: (1) research on the implementation of K-12 instructional policy, and (2) research on the implementation of race- and equity-related policies in K-12 education. Together, this scholarship documents the ways in which both individuals and organizations can filter the implementation of instructional policies, particularly equity-oriented instructional policies, such as CRSE. This review highlights the need to better understand the role of TE programs in the implementation of K-12 instructional policies, especially race- and equity-related policies such as the CRSE guidelines.

Implementation of K-12 Instructional Policy

Prior scholarship has widely documented that K-12 instructional policy is rarely implemented in a linear process, but rather there are gaps between how policy is initially written and intended and how it is enacted in practice (e.g., Cohen & Hill, 2001; Kennedy, 2005; Rigby et al., 2016). Policy is adapted at the local level (McLaughlin, 1976), and teachers, leaders, and

other practitioners act as key policy actors in making sense of policy (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). Such actors can exert agency to “interpret, adapt, and even transform policies as they put them into place” (Coburn, 2001, p. 145). Prior scholarship has examined these dynamics across major instructional reforms, including the implementation of college-and-career-readiness standards (Coburn et al., 2016; Comstock et al., 2022), Next Generation Science Standards (Allen & Penuel, 2015), and literacy reforms (Coburn, 2005a; Woulfin, 2015; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022). Instructional reform can prompt a range of responses from teachers: they might take up external policy demands wholesale, accommodate demands to fit into their pre-existing approaches, or adopt surface-level changes without shifting deeper practices (Coburn, 2004; Coburn & Woulfin, 2012). Teachers may struggle to reconcile the external demands of policies with their own beliefs and practices (Datnow et al., 2012), resulting in varied implementation. Organizational and political conditions also significantly shape the implementation of K-12 policy. Leaders play a central role in framing and leading reform efforts (Coburn, 2005a; Honig & Hatch, 2004; Kaul et al., 2022; Rigby, 2015; Spillane et al., 2022; Steilen et al., 2024), and organizational routines in schools can shape how policies are interpreted and taken-up on the ground (Diamond & Gomez, 2023; Spillane et al., 2011). Together, this scholarship documents that instructional policy implementation is a complex process, shaped by individuals’ prior beliefs and experience, the organizational contexts of their work, and the external policy context.

Despite the substantial attention to the role of K-12 *teachers* as mediators of policy implementation, far less is known about the role that TE programs play in the K-12 instructional policy implementation. TE programs are deeply shaped by the broader reform environment (Kaul, 2026), and represent a critical site where teachers learn the skills and dispositions to implement CRSE competencies in particular (Gist et al., 2019). However, we do not understand

as a field how TE programs filter instructional policies, such as CRSE. Shifting teachers' practice related to CRSE, in particular, may be more challenging than aligning teachers' practice with content standards because CRSE requires attention to teachers' dispositions, mindsets, and beliefs (Comstock et al., 2023; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2018). Teacher educators' racial and ethnic identities are similarly foundational to how they approach their work (Boveda & Weinberg, 2022). Implementing CRSE competencies demands not just instructional shifts, but also deeper shifts in the cultural competence, racial literacy, and sociopolitical consciousness of both teacher educators and teachers themselves (Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff, 2017; Seriki & Brown, 2017). Particularly given that many teacher educators may not have themselves received training in CRSE, their prior experience may shape how they both understand and translate CRSE competencies in practice. Further, prior work documents the challenges for TE programs meaningfully preparing teacher candidates around CRSE (Allen et al., 2017).

Implementation of Race- and Equity- related Policies

In addition to general challenges of implementation, policies designed to advance racial equity, what we term “race- and equity-related policies,” face distinct challenges. Education policy serves as a site of political contestation over the meaning of race (Dumas et al., 2016), making race- and equity-focused policies particularly vulnerable to political contestation, institutional resistance, and dilution during implementation (Noguera, 2001; Welton et al., 2023). When a policy's purpose is to disrupt social hierarchies, it may conflict with dominant values, ways of being, and distribution of resources, often triggering backlash or resistance from those whose interests are threatened. This resistance can range from overt backlash, as seen in anti-CRT legislation targeting the perceived implementation of equity-oriented policies, to more subtle efforts to reframe language or narrow objectives during implementation (Felix & Trinidad,

2020; Welton et al., 2023).

While it is sometimes easiest to see hurdles to implementation in specific individuals or groups resisting, the broader political and institutional ecology constrains race-focused policy implementation. Anti-racist policy change cannot be achieved in isolation and organizations are not neutral containers for implementation.. Internal organizational dynamics intersect with broader political tensions, shaping and constraining what becomes possible (Daramola et al., 2023). Organizations carry institutional histories, identities, and logics that can prefigure how policies are taken up (Byrd, 2022; Chase, 2016; Bridwell-Mitchell & Sherer, 2017). Additionally, IOs and partnerships can reinforce these dynamics—absorbing, neutralizing, or even amplifying equity-focused policies through unresponsive bureaucratic structures, efficiency- minded implementation strategies, and social influence (Comstock, 2026; Esboldt, 2025; Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014). Furthermore, within a context of overregulation, the absence of accountability mechanisms for equity-oriented policies can deter meaningful implementation as leaders adopt an efficiency- mindset to navigate multiple, and sometimes, competing demands (Pizarro Milian & Wijesingha, 2023). While particular political and institutional factors may be more influential in particular settings or times, they operate and interact as an ecology (Aby, 2020), shaped further by processes of individual and collective sensemaking.

Racial equity aims can be diluted as actors make sense of policies. Policy actors can undermine a policy's intent when they hold racialized views of who it is meant to benefit (Chase, 2016; Mavrogordato & White, 2020), and race-conscious policy can be implemented in race-evasive ways (Felix & Trinidad, 2020). For example, policies can be taken up in ways to protect and “pacify” privileged community members (e.g., White parents; Trujillo, 2013). Comfort with “race talk” itself can be a barrier; educators may more readily discuss economic

disadvantage than race, sidestepping the equity aims of race-explicit policy (Obeso, 2025; Uzzell et al., 2024). Individuals' existing conceptions of equity shape policy implementation (e.g., Allbright et al., 2019; Comstock, 2026; Hodge, 2021), particularly when policies do not define these terms (Green et al., 2025). Individuals often hold competing or situational beliefs rather than stable stances, so these patterns can be reinforced by organizational norms (Daramola et al., 2023), discursive mechanisms that replace race with neoliberal framings (Rogers, 2021), and self-interest that shapes whose interpretations prevail (Chase, 2016).

In contrast to these barriers, research highlights conditions that can support stronger implementation. Leaders and practitioners who bring ideological clarity and critical consciousness can meaningfully advance equity-focused policy (Felix, 2021; Mavrogordato & White, 2020), as can collective sensemaking among practitioners—though such occasions often remain rare and isolated (Ching, 2023). Attending to the silences in implementation, i.e., what goes unsaid about race, also offers an important analytical lever (Diem et al., 2024; Uzzell et al., 2024). Ultimately, strong implementation requires broad levers of action such as capacity-building tools, mandates, and incentives that help organizations mitigate the normative and political pressures that otherwise blunt equity reforms (Oakes et al., 2005; Trujillo, 2013).

Together, this literature suggests that the implementation of K–12 instructional policy is profoundly shaped by actors' beliefs, experiences, and professional knowledge, as well as by the organizational structures and routines and the broader political ecology within which they work. These implementation dynamics are further complicated in the case of policies designed to be race-conscious, such as Pennsylvania's CRSE guidelines. Despite this rich body of scholarship, several gaps remain. First, while there is substantial scholarship documenting teachers and school leaders as key policy actors in the implementation of K-12 instructional policy, much less

is known about the role of TE programs, and the teacher educators and leaders within them, in filtering policy. Second, as the field grapples with increased political attacks on race-conscious policies, there is a pressing need to understand how the current shifts towards more race-evasive policies are (re)shaping the conditions for policy implementation. Third, despite the growing body of scholarship on state-level CRSE policies (e.g., Carrier, 2024; Comstock et al., 2026; Muñiz, 2019), less is known about the *implementation* of these policies in the current political environment. This study examines how TE programs implement CRSE guidelines and how their sensemaking shifts amid intensifying racial politics and moves toward race-evasive policy.

Methods

In the following section, we describe our study sample, methods, and positionality. We employ a qualitative comparative case study design to study how program leaders and teacher educators in three TE programs across the state of Pennsylvania make sense of CRSE guidelines (Bush-Mecenas & Marsh, 2018; Yin, 2014).

Study Sample

This study draws upon qualitative data collected from three TE programs across Pennsylvania. Because we were interested how political and institutional context shapes implementation, we employed a purposive, criterion-based sampling strategy (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2021) to identify three TE programs which are nested in: (1) varying *institution types* (e.g., private versus public institutions), and (2) counties with varying *political contexts* (i.e., based on presidential voting records) *and racial demographics*. We were interested in variation in institutional context, because we hypothesized that this context may mediate TE programs' implementation of instructional policies, given that public and private higher education institutions may be under slightly different sets of external state-level policy pressures (Bok,

2013). While not comprehensive measures of the local racial politics shaping each program, these measures provided us proxies for the local demographic and sociopolitical environments that may be shaping and/or constraining programs' work. Our final sample included three programs: (1) *Chestnut*, a program based in a private university in a liberal-majority county, (2) *Sage*, a program based in a public university in a moderate county, and (3) *Clover*, a program based in a public institution in a conservative-majority county (Table 1, all pseudonyms). Across all programs, we focused on pre-service TE pathways. At Chestnut, we studied a Master's program in teaching. Sage and Clover offer undergraduate-level TE programs, but do not confer Master's degrees. In these two programs, we studied the programs as a whole.

[Table 1 here]

Data Collection

This study draws on three data sources: (1) interviews with TE program leaders, teacher educators, and leaders of the state-level IO focused on teacher diversity described in the study context ($n=21$ total interviews with 17 individuals; see Table 2), (2) program artifacts ($n\approx 40$), and (3) policy artifacts ($n=4$). We started data collection within each program with interviews with program leaders to understand where the program is integrating the CRSE guidelines (e.g., within fieldwork, foundations coursework, methods coursework), and which teacher educators are most connected to their programs' implementation of the standards. Based on these interviews, we identified the key teacher educators in the program to interview. We intentionally included teacher educators teaching foundations courses (e.g., courses on the historical, philosophical, and/or political contexts of schooling) as well as methods courses (e.g., courses specifically focused on teaching in particular content areas, such as math or literacy) to understand the extent to which the CRSE competencies were isolated in a standalone course, or

more deeply aligned across the program coursework. Finally, we interviewed two leaders of the statewide IO in the spring to understand the nature of the shift from the original CRSE guidelines to Common Ground. This addition was motivated by our emergent finding that the IO was playing a central role in implementation of both the CRSE guidelines and Common Ground.

[Table 2 here]

Data Analysis

Grounded in a comparative case study approach (Bush-Mecenas & Marsh, 2018; Yin, 2014), we analyzed these data through three stages of analysis: (1) analytic coding, (2) case-level analysis, and (3) cross-case analysis.

Analytic Coding. First, we developed an *a priori* coding framework (Appendix D), grounded in prior theoretical and empirical scholarship on sensemaking and policy attributes (e.g., Comstock et al., 2022; Comstock, 2026; Desimone, 2002; Porter, 1994; Porter et al., 1988; Schildt et al., 2020). For example, aligned with *policy attributes*, we coded each instance an individual described their perception of a particular attribute of the CRSE guidelines (i.e., specificity, authority, consistency, power, and stability). To capture the power dynamics of the sensemaking process, we coded for both key *organizational structures and conditions* (e.g., program mission, culture, structures) and *systemic power*, (i.e. individuals' descriptions indicating the nature of reflection around knowledge related to the CRSE guidelines, including instances of limited interrogation/ reliance on existing schemas or templates, as well as critical reflection around race, culture, and identity). To characterize systematic power, we coded each description of systemic power as either *limited interrogation* or *critical reflection*. Drawing on this *a priori* framework, we conducted an initial round of coding, taking note of any additional codes that emerged throughout the process (Miles et al., 2014). Drawing on the full set of codes,

we then coded the full set of interview transcripts. To ensure reliability in our coding, we had at least two members of the research team independently code each transcript, and then engaged in ongoing deliberation as a full team to reconcile any areas of disagreement (Miles et al., 2014).

Within-Case Analysis. Second, drawing on these coded excerpts, we then constructed program-level matrices to understand within-case patterns in sensemaking and policy attributes. To do so, we first drew on all of the coded excerpts for policy attributes and classified each individual's perception of each attribute. Modeled after other work that leverages Likert-type survey scales to characterize policy attributes (e.g., Stornaiuolo et al., 2023), we coded each individual's perception of each respective policy attribute on a three-point scale (i.e., 1=low, 2=medium, 3=high). This was an inductive process, which allowed us to characterize individuals' perceptions of attributes on a spectrum. For example, if an individual described the policy as carrying no external accountability pressures, we classified their perception of power as *low*. Or, if an individual described a strong level of buy-in for the policy within their program, we classified their perception of authority as *high*. Then, we calculated program-level averages for each policy attribute (i.e., using the 1-3 numeric rankings of each individual's perception of each attribute). We classified each program's perceptions of the attributes of the policy based on fall semester interviews (i.e., prior to the shift from CRSE to Common Ground). Given that the programs' plans for implementing the CRSE guidelines were largely crafted in the fall semester, drawing on the fall data also allows us to focus on how each program's initial perceptions of the policy shaped their implementation.

We engaged in a parallel process to characterize systemic power. First, we drew on all of the coded excerpts for systemic power and looked across the coded excerpts from each

individual interview to characterize their overall response to the policy (i.e., critical reflection and limited interrogation). While individual excerpts were coded as either critical reflection *or* limited interrogation, we understood that programs' critical sensemaking practices exist on a spectrum, rather than a strict binary (Comstock, 2026). At the individual-level, we considered the extent to which each individual drew upon limited interrogation versus critical reflection practices. At the program-level, we characterized each program's dominant sensemaking orientation on a spectrum (i.e., from limited interrogation to critical reflection), and inductively examined how individuals described organizational conditions as enabling and/or limiting their sensemaking. Because we were interested in how programs' sensemaking evolved over time, we separately classified each program's sensemaking response to the original CRSE guidelines and then after the shift to Common Ground.

Cross-Case Analysis. Finally, we conducted a cross-case analysis, examining patterns in the findings across programs. In particular, we examined patterns in how each program shifted their sensemaking practices after the shift to Common Ground, and how their perceptions of the attributes of the initial CRSE guidelines were associated with their responses. For example, we observed that the two programs based in public universities (Sage and Clover) responded more similarly to the policy prior to the shift to Common Ground, though they were driven by different perceptions of the policy. We then observe how these differences become borne out after the shift to Common Ground. Throughout the entire analysis process, we regularly returned to our data, including both the interview transcripts and our program-level artifacts, and adjusted our analyses in order to account for any disconfirming evidence.

Positionality

Our identities and social positions shape every aspect of our engagement with this

research (Boveda & Annamma, 2023). The authors of this paper identify as Indian-American; White; White; and Mexican-American respectively. The authors bring a range of prior experiences as academics, former educators, teacher educators, and directors of equity initiatives. We were each drawn to this study because of our shared commitments to CRSE in K-12 education. Either prior to, or during the course of this study, all four authors became members of a state-wide policy coalition focused on teacher diversity in Pennsylvania. This engagement deepened our understanding of the local policy context, and supported our ability to build trust with research participants. Additionally, two authors had a connection to one of the study sites; however, the other two programs were new to all four authors. Together, these prior connections offered us an insider/outsider status in the study contexts, generating some trust with participants which supported their openness to discussing more political topics, while also giving us the distance to critically study each of the three programs. To help ensure the trustworthiness of our findings, we triangulated interview data with program artifacts and observations of the program. We also shared preliminary findings with this community to member-check our findings.

Findings

In the following section, we present our findings. First, we examine how each of the three programs made sense of the CRSE guidelines prior to the shift to Common Ground, and then consider how program sensemaking shifted after the policy became race-evasive under the shift to Common Ground. Across diverse political and institutional contexts, we find that leaders' and teacher educators' perceptions of the attributes of the initial CRSE guidelines varied across programs. (Figure 1). Alongside the pre-existing organizational conditions of each program, these perceptions of policy attributes shaped their implementation of both the initial CRSE guidelines and the Common Ground. When the policy became race-evasive, all three programs

shifted towards more limited interrogation of the policy (Figure 2). Notably, we observe that each program's perception of the attributes of the CRSE guidelines help explain why and how programs pivoted in the unique ways that they did. As state guidance became both less stable and race-evasive, we find that the state-level IO described in the study context emerged as an essential non-system actor to support the implementation of the CRSE guidelines. As federal attacks on race- and equity-focused policies made implementation of the CRSE guidelines more politically sensitive, women of color came to disproportionately shoulder the labor and political risk of implementation. In what follows, we unpack these findings further.

[Figure 1 here]

[Figure 2 here]

From Symbolic Uptake to Program Overhaul: How Policy Attributes Shape Sensemaking

When the CRSE guidelines were first introduced as a race-conscious policy, we observed variation in programs' sensemaking, shaped largely by programs' perception of the attributes of CRSE guidelines. In particular, Chestnut engaged in more limited interrogation, whereas both Sage and Clover engaged in more critical reflection. Notably, different perceived policy attributes drove Sage's and Clover's responses. In what follows, we describe each program's responses in greater detail and examine the organizational conditions shaping these patterns.

Chestnut: Perceived Isolation and Consistency Inhibited Change. At Chestnut, a program based in a private institution in a liberal county, leaders and teacher educators tended to report the CRSE guidelines as having *low* power, authority, specificity, and stability, but *high* consistency with their current policies and practices (Figure 1), and these perceptions shaped the nature of sensemaking around the CRSE guidelines in this program. Perhaps most significantly, the program saw itself as already consistent with the demands of the policy, and did not see the

policy as introducing any new external demands to further align with the CRSE guidelines. Accordingly, the policy generated little urgency for critical reflection in the program. Gary, a white leader in Chestnut, reflected: “When I look through the standards, they're everywhere. We didn't have to do almost anything to embed them in our programs. They're there already.” When asked about how their program shifted in response to the CRSE guidelines, most practitioners cited the work that the program had already done prior to the policy, such as existing coursework aligned with the policy or the program’s overhaul of its existing observational rubric that teacher educators use to assess teacher candidates. Though this overhaul process was initiated long before the introduction of the CRSE guidelines, leaders and teacher educators pointed to it as evidence that their program was already aligned with the expectations of the policy, reinforcing the perception that they did not need to make additional changes in response to the state policy.

Even when individuals did identify potential gaps in the program’s implementation of the CRSE guidelines, they were unable to cultivate strong buy-in (i.e., authority) across the program for critical reflection at the organizational level. Harold, a white leader at Chestnut, reflected:

This [i.e., the CRSE guidelines] are not a small framework. [...] And I think at the high-level, a lot of people look at this at [education school] or at [the teacher education program] and say, “Cool, we already do this stuff.” And so it's hard to motivate people to really dig in on it, to maybe *push ourselves*.

Harold himself made similar comments: “We were already doing most of this stuff. We're one of the few places that has a course, to my understanding, [...] on culturally responsive pedagogy [...] When you look at what the standards are, we already do a lot of it.” Therefore, leaders' and teacher educators’ perceptions that their program was already aligned with the policy limited the policy’s authority in Chestnut, contributing to relatively limited interrogation.

In addition, faculty in Chestnut reported feeling less beholden to state-level instructional policy in general, which constrained how much program leaders felt the need to engage in

critical reflection around the policy. The program is situated within a private institution which is accredited by the state, but leaders described the state-level accreditation process as largely perfunctory. As one leader who had moved from a public institution to Chestnut reflected, this distance was partially a function of how private universities interact with state policy: “When I was at a public institution, we were really deeply embedded in state policymaking because we had to be because whenever there was a new policy that had touched education, they asked us, ‘How's this going to impact you financially?’” Teacher educators in Chestnut reported feeling even further disconnected from state policy mandates than program leaders, a dynamic which further diminished their perceived power (i.e., external accountability) and authority (i.e., internal buy-in) of the CRSE guidelines. As Judy, a white teacher educator, reflected: “I don't think of the state as a meaningful body in my life. [...] I don't work from a place that assumes they come from a place of knowledge and expertise. [...] I don't think policy documents have ever affected me.” When asked how she had responded to the introduction of the CRSE guidelines, Judy responded, “Well, I haven't changed a single thing I do.” Judy’s perceived insulation from instructional policy reflected the broader culture of Chestnut. Chestnut is based in a research-intensive university setting, and its faculty includes a mix of tenure-line faculty and adjunct instructors. As Harold reflected, these dynamics left teacher educators with significant autonomy over their courses, buffering them from both leadership and external policy:

One of the challenges in having higher ed[ucation] is so individualized and *it's cats*. It's cats all over the place and trying to organize them. Whereas really the fundamental philosophy is: people teach their course, their course is isolated. The program is trying to break a mold and try to make it more coherent and cohesive, but the structures in the university aren't really set up in that way. I don't control exactly what gets taught in places. I can give nudges and ask for things, and certainly the state requirements make it so they have to show up, but *exactly* what happens is really the purview of the instructor.

These conditions insulated faculty from *both* the external demands of the policy and from the

state-level and program leadership. Thus, features of Chestnut’s context—specifically, how Chestnut actors viewed the policy, and state-level accountability more generally—functioned to disincentivize meaningful critical reflection around the policy itself.

Importantly, however, some Chestnut program leaders/teacher educators spoke to deeply entrenched racialized dynamics in the program that called into question how well Chestnut’s program indeed aligned with the CRSE guidelines. Although some Chestnut teacher educators suggested that they may already be engaging critically around CRSE, others described racialized tensions amongst leaders and teacher educators, which limited critical reflection about race and racism in the organization. In this context, some teacher educators described a culture that inhibited faculty from surfacing areas of misalignment, particularly around topics related to race. Importantly, the patterns in which individuals perceived consistency with the policy were themselves racialized. Judy, a white teacher educator, noted that she was unaware that the CRSE guidelines existed; however, white program leaders cited her as exemplary for her adoption of the CRSE guidelines. This disjuncture raises deeper questions about how individuals across Chestnut understood the CRSE guidelines, and what the goals of implementation looked like. For example, some individuals questioned whether the program could be deeply implementing the CRSE guidelines if their own students of color did not feel safe and welcome in the program. Sandy, a white teacher educator, noted: “I’m sure there’s a lot of improvement we can make in this regard because I know that our students of color still feel uncomfortable or not included, or that the conversations we’re having are not particularly the ones they need.” Similarly, Margaret, a Black leader in the program, cited Chestnut’s hierarchy amongst faculty, reflecting: “I think whenever you’re working in a system that’s hierarchical and has not identified their own hierarchy as a problem that you’re going to have a problem with CRSE.” This hierarchy

manifested in faculty's engagement with each other. Sandy reflected:

At staff meetings, there's definite self-segregation happening, and I notice in the hallways. [...] [A program leader] and I are the two white people in [one part of the program], and then [there] are two black women who run [the other part]. [...] I've talked to [the program leader] about it. [...] and that's a strange dynamic to be in and participating in. Even if I can talk with him one-on-one about it, it's not like I bring it up in the whole group.

Although the program's position within a private institution may have insulated it from formal external policy pressures, its racialized climate constrained collective sensemaking, and critical reflection in particular, around the CRSE guidelines. The program's limited capacity for sensemaking around institutional policy was therefore even further amplified by the race-conscious nature of the CRSE guidelines.

Sage and Clover: Meaningful Organizational Efforts Shaped by Local Conditions.

Although we observe notable differences in the perceived policy attributes across Sage and Clover (Figure 1), leaders and teacher educators in both programs reported strong critical reflection around the substance of the CRSE guidelines. However, the conditions that drove that critical reflection were unique to each site. Whereas Sage found support for the policy *internally* through a strong sense of authority (i.e., driven by local leaders who championed the work and supported program-level buy-in for the CRSE guidelines), Clover found the strongest support for the policy *externally* through a strong sense of accountability (i.e., the perception that strong state-level accountability required them to align with the policy). In what follows, we dive deeper into these program-level cases.

Sage. At Sage, a program based in a public institution in a politically moderate county, leaders and teacher educators reported the CRSE guidelines as *low* in consistency, power, and stability, but *high* in specificity and authority (Figure 1). In other words, Sage was driven more by strong internal buy-in and program-level champions to implement the CRSE guidelines

(authority), rather than the pressure of external policy mandates (power). Leaders and teacher educators in Sage leveraged the CRSE guidelines to identify areas for improvement in their program and took action to make the policy more specific to their particular context (as indicated by high specificity), signaling the need for deeper programmatic shifts.

For Sage leaders, critical reflection was a necessary part of implementing the CRSE guidelines. Multiple leaders noted that they wanted to avoid letting the guidelines become a “check box” situation. Given the nature of the guidelines, which ask teachers to adopt particular dispositions, leaders recognized the potential “gray area” this would create in implementation. Elaine, a multiracial leader who spearheaded Sage’s adoption of the guidelines, brought both expertise and personal investment to this work. She reflected: “They’re mandated competencies. Now, of course, there’s a lot of gray area there...a lot of wiggle room.” Leaders at Sage took on greater ownership for transforming their programs in alignment with the guidelines. Elaine noted: “We were very much not into making this be a checkbox situation. I said, ‘I don’t want to be a part of that. I want to actually see real change happen.’” As in Chestnut, Sage had faculty who perceived they were in strong alignment with the CRSE guidelines and did not need to make any shifts to align with the policy. Charlotte, a white leader in the program, shared:

We still have some faculty who just assume they’re already doing it well, who aren’t probably interrogating their practices enough, who just, in my opinion, the best educators never think they’re doing it well and are always trying to improve. [...] We haven’t had a ton of barriers, and I think that speaks to the culture and speaks to just our context in general as people were pretty excited to use this opportunity to kind of push this further.

Unlike in Chestnut, however, Sage leaders spearheaded a substantial effort to adopt the CRSE guidelines, and sought out institutional support for those efforts.

Sage’s critical reflection was reflected in a range of different programmatic efforts they undertook to align with the CRSE guidelines. First, with funding provided by their dean, the

program engaged in a curricular “gap analysis,” designed to audit the entire program to both assess areas of alignment/misalignment with the CRSE guidelines, but also to go “deeper” to understand the quality and depth of the program’s work. Charlotte shared that the program began by creating a task force “of people interested in being leaders in this change process”--building off of the strong buy-in for the policy. Then, that task force was tasked with doing a gap analysis, identifying the extent to which existing program coursework was aligned with the CRSE guidelines. Charlotte reflected that, at the end of this process Sage realized: “we needed to change everything.” This process of forming a task force helped cultivate ownership for making sure the program took meaningful steps to better align with the spirit of the CRSE guidelines. As a result of this process, the program intentionally integrated the CRSE guidelines into TE coursework across field placements, assignments, and assessments to ensure that they were not confined to one or two classes but rather embedded across the entire program.

Sage also recognized the need to support the critical reflection of both teachers and school leaders in the field in order to ensure that the CRSE guidelines were meaningfully adopted in practice. They developed two new summer institutes, one focused on helping K-12 teachers embed anti-racism into their everyday practices and another focused explicitly on designing courses around the CRSE guidelines. Sage had already developed program-level convenings following the murder of George Floyd as a way for their community to come together and critically reflect on social justice and education, and was able to extend these convenings as a way to support their implementation. After the introduction of the CRSE guidelines, Sage got funding from both PDE and their dean to host an additional set of convenings focused on the CRSE guidelines. Sage built upon its existing capacity for critical reflection, while also leveraging strong buy-in from leaders, teacher educators, and community

partners to make substantive shifts in program practices to fully align with the CRSE guidelines.

Clover. At Clover, the program based in a public institution in a conservative county, leaders and teacher educators reported the CRSE guidelines as *high* in power, *low* in stability, and *moderate* in specificity, authority, and consistency (Figure 1). The program perceived strong external accountability pressure to implement the policy (i.e., power), despite the instability of the policy. While the program had strong buy-in from select program leaders (i.e., authority), there was not the same level of program buy-in for the CRSE guidelines as in Sage. Similarly, leaders and teacher educators took significant efforts to make the CRSE competencies specific to their local context (i.e., specificity). Even still, Clover leaders described leading the program through critical reflection of the policy, albeit to a lesser degree than Sage, drawing on both external accountability pressures and leaders' sense of buy-in to support their implementation.

The external accountability of the policy provided an initial impetus for implementing the CRSE guidelines in Clover. Jane, a white leader in the program, noted: "The thing too is, when PDE says, 'You have to do it,' if you want our program to remain intact, we have to do it." This stood in stark contrast to Chestnut, where practitioners perceived the role of PDE as perfunctory. Building on this external accountability, Clover was able to engage in critical reflection around the CRSE guidelines due to leaders' strong buy-in for the policy and its connection to broader program initiatives. More specifically, the shifts to implement the CRSE guidelines were supported by the pre-existing organizational conditions at Clover. Prior to the introduction of the policy, several teacher educators in the program applied to have their course earn a DEI designation offered by their institution. The institution enabled students to earn a DEI certificate by completing a required number of designated courses, and offered faculty training to integrate DEI principles into their instruction—work that primed faculty to see the CRSE guidelines as a

natural extension of existing commitments rather than a new initiative.

Unlike Chestnut, however, Clover leaders and teacher educators did not see the process of further aligning with the CRSE guidelines as purely symbolic, but rather took steps to identify and address gaps in their implementation of the CRSE. Jane reflected: “I don’t want a touristy approach to CRSE.” Rather, Clover leaders and teacher educators wanted their teacher candidates to “internalize” the CRSE framework, in Jane’s words. For example, the program conducted a crosswalk analysis to ensure that the CRSE guidelines were represented across coursework. This initial analysis surfaced areas of the program not aligned with the CRSE guidelines, so the program modified the program-wide assessment for teachers to include CRSE. Clover understood that meaningful implementation of the policy would require them to support teacher candidates’ critical reflection as well. Dora described: “Those topics [i.e., the CRSE competencies] are controversial, but my students are wonderfully receptive and they’re open to [...] rethinking their own values as well.”

Still, there were barriers to deeper critical reflection at Clover that limited their deeper implementation of the CRSE guidelines. Leaders in Clover noted that they lacked designated time to adopt the policy (e.g., course releases), resulting in the technical work of implementation falling on a small number of individuals in the program. Jane noted that implementation depended on “just folks volunteering.” At the same time, leaders and teacher educators in Clover understood that implementing the CRSE well would require critical reflection. Dora noted that time for shared reflection was an important, yet scarce, resource to support critical reflection: “Everybody’s busy. And then curriculum work and [...] creating [a] new assessment tool [takes] a lot of time, and building consensus in the college takes a lot of time. [...] so the lack of time seems to be the major barrier.” Notably, Dora was the only woman of color within the leadership

team at Clover, which prepares teachers to work in a white-majority school community. Dora expanded: “I haven’t gotten paid or given extra release time. It’s just part of the job.” In the absence of more dedicated time to support the implementation of the CRSE guidelines, Clover was creative in filling in the gaps. For example, to conduct the crosswalk analysis of their program’s alignment with the guidelines, Clover relied on the assistance of a graduate student. These efforts supported the program’s ability to engage in some critical reflection, but they were limited in engaging in the same sustained, program-wide critical reflection as Sage.

A Shift to “Common Ground”: How Race-Evasive Policy Language Undermines Implementation

The symbolic and material blow to the CRSE standards in November 2024 with the rescission of the CRSE guidelines and introduction of the more race-evasive Common Ground framework, along with the shifting federal policy landscape in early 2025, had real consequences in programs’ buy-in and ability to implement CRSE guidelines at the program-level. Although individuals across the three programs described the shift to new race-evasive language in the Common Ground as largely symbolic, individuals also reported less critical reflection across programs after the shift (Figure 2). As institutions became more politically cautious in the wake of federal attacks on DEI, the survival of the policy largely depended on women of color in the programs, who were deeply committed to the work and willing to shoulder the political risk of implementation. How this played out in each program depended on their initial perceptions of the attributes of the CRSE guidelines. In what follows, we unpack these findings in more detail.

Chestnut: Continued Surface-level Adoption. Because Chestnut was already more symbolically adopting the CRSE guidelines, the shift to Common Ground did not significantly change their program-level response. When the shift to Common Ground first occurred, the

program first sought to understand the extent to which the policy shifted. Gary recounted: “There was lots of panic, and as I started to read the Common Ground, there was very little there. [...] I did a crosswalk [...] and the changes didn't seem that huge to me.” Chestnut was less sensitive to the shift towards more race-evasive language in the policy, perhaps in part because they initially adopted a less race-conscious approach to implementing the initial policy. However, because practitioners already perceived the policy to have *low power*, their response to the policy was not shaped by a sense of external accountability. Gary reflected:

The new administration may give people that are interested in pulling away from the work more room because it's made everyone afraid, but I don't think that there's any material guidance change. [...] It is also true that PDE has zero capacity to follow through on any of this, and everyone knows it.

Chestnut perceived the shift from CRSE to Common Ground as largely symbolic, not carrying real consequences for the implementation of the policy on the ground. Based in a racially diverse and Liberal-majority city, Chestnut did not report facing any political backlash from their local communities for adopting the CRSE guidelines. When asked what the local response to the CRSE guidelines, both before and after the shift to Common Ground, Chestnut practitioners did not think local community members were even aware of the policy. However, in response to federal anti-DEI pressures, the institution in which Chestnut operates took anticipatory steps to remove much of their own public-facing equity language. Reflecting on how the evolving institutional climate shaped their work, Sandy noted: “There was a sense of *depression* and *suppression* of like, ‘Oh, we can't talk out loud about this stuff anymore.’” Similarly, Gary spoke to how the national policy environment still created some fears of the program around how the federal government might intervene in schools: “We see the Trump administration sending the National Guard into L.A. to suppress protest against immigration policy. [...] How is the government going to use its power to try to enforce what the Trump administration wants to see

happening in schools?” Though leadership said that they would not shift their language in response to the federal policy, we observed that the program website scrubbed mentions of “social justice”—seemingly preemptively to avoid political blowback.

Sage: Strong Champions Keep the Work Alive. Sage, initially driven to adopt the CRSE guidelines internally by a strong sense of buy-in and ownership, still found pathways to preserve their adoption of the CRSE guidelines, but leaders described not being able to preserve the same degree of critical reflection practices as they had prior to the shift. On the one hand, participants characterized the shift to Common Ground as largely symbolic. On the other hand, there were material effects. Participants perceived this shift as reducing the power and the authority of the CRSE guidelines—buy-in for policy decreased overall, with the exception of several champions amongst program leadership. Given the strong buy-in (i.e., authority) prior to the shift to Common Ground, Sage had cultivated deep ownership over the policy and had strong champions who refused to pivot after the Common Ground. Susie, a white teacher educator, reflected:

Not to turn this into a therapy session, but I've been really sad about this for a while, and I was sharing something with my mom and she was like, “Well, you're just going to have to pivot.” I was like, “No, I'm not going to pivot. This is my work. [...] Schools need this, so I'm not going to just pivot because it's politically trendy right now.”

Similarly, Elaine, a multiracial leader of the program, shared that she was steadfast in her commitment to continuing implementing the original policy. She reflected:

Ironically, if anything, it's [i.e., Common Ground] made me go deeper into this in my classes. [...] One of my grad students [...] was kind of worried. He goes, “do you think you'll be able to teach this class in a couple years? Will they even allow you to teach this class?” And I was like, “I could teach in my basement.”

The strong buy-in Sage had cultivated prior to the shift to Common Ground helped the program sustain their critical reflection after the shift to Common Ground.

At the same time, however, the instability of the policy affected some Sage leaders' and

teacher educators' buy-in for the policy itself, which undermined their critical reflection practices. For example, Susie, a teacher educator, described a stark contrast between their CRSE process and their response to Common Ground. She described that, prior to the shift to Common Ground, Sage's strategy involved a systematic program-wide overhaul:

[It was] two days worth of six of us sitting down doing this intense work. [...] The objectives were really clear and we were being compensated, and it was just beautiful. So having those resources available, if we were to sit down and think, "Okay, programmatically, if we need to change everything to make sure we're hitting this at every level, what do we do?"

However, after the shift to Common Ground, the process became much more perfunctory, and involved more of the "check box" types of exercises which the program had initially avoided. Susie described Sage's adoption of the policies after the shift as "basically a filling out of a form as opposed to a deep thought exercise of what needs to change." Program leadership struggled with the fact that, due to the escalating political fears around DEI, many of the programs' school partners shifted towards more limited interrogation of the policy. Elaine reflected:

I've heard from a lot of K-12 teachers and administrators [say], "We sent in our assurance paper, we checked, 'Yep, we're doing it.'" And I was like, that's not what this is about." [...] The big issue right now is all this societal pushback about anything that's related to diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging...

Despite the strong buy-in and ownership from Sage leaders, the shift to Common Ground undermined the program's critical reflection around the policy. As the policy became race-evasive and the broader policy landscape became more inhospitable to DEI, both program-level work around the CRSE competencies became more vulnerable.

Clover: Paused Implementation in Anticipation of External Disputes. Whereas Clover had initially engaged in more critical reflection around the CRSE competencies, the state's shift to Common Ground led them to pause their programmatic work. External accountability of the policy initially drove the push in Clover to critically reflect around this policy. However, once

Clover leaders and teacher educators came to see the policy as unstable, they engaged in more surface-level adoption of the policy. Dora, a teacher educator, reflected: “We put hours and hours into this work that PDE asked us to do, and then...[they change it].” As in the other programs, the shifting federal policy landscape intensified this uncertainty about the stability of Common Ground. Dora expanded: “I did not want to put [in] too much work on it because one thing after another at the federal level...I didn’t want to [do too much] too soon and then change it all over again.” Thus, the instability of the policy environment fostered lower authority for *both* the CRSE guidelines and Common Ground, and engagement in critical reflection waned.

In response to this instability, Clover paused much of its technical work and adopted a “wait and see” approach, choosing to monitor whether the new policy would hold before committing further time and resources to its implementation. Some teacher educators continued to adopt the CRSE competencies; however, they still saw downstream risks for their teachers and tried to protect them by teaching the CRSE competencies in race-evasive ways. Dora shared:

We cannot cave to fear, but we have to be smart. [...] I do not want any future teachers to take that risk, but I could teach what *bias* is, what an implicit bias is, and why teachers need to examine implicit bias. [...] Things like that we could keep on teaching without getting anybody into trouble in the future.

Clover preserved some of its deeper integration of the CRSE competencies, but suspended more surface-level work of making that integration legible publicly. Faculty tasked with technical components were concerned about the possibility of future changes, and paused implementation. Sarah noted that it was clear to her where the CRSE competencies were embedded in the program, but there was no longer a need to articulate that in the master syllabi because, “it was like we’re not even sure if this [Common Ground] is real.” As Dora expanded, the instability of the policy disincentivized Clover from taking the new guidance seriously:

I think we have to be ready for changing every semester. [...] But I think we have to

accept that it's part of our job nowadays in terms of the political arena. Just like our department says, “Well, we don't want to commit to the new Common Ground because PDE might change their Common Ground and they might do something else.” [...] And there was no explanation to the higher ed [programs]. They just changed it. And then they just published a new website, and then higher ed was scrambling around and said, “Well, what does it mean?”

The work of constantly changing programming based on shifting guidance was cumbersome, in part because the program had engaged in more critical reflection practices to implement the initial CRSE guidelines and saw implementation as requiring deep programmatic work.

Non-system Actors: The Role of a State-level Intermediary Organization

In the absence of stable state policy guidance, the state-level IO described in the study context became a critical non-system actor for supporting and sustaining attention to the CRSE competencies, especially after the shift to Common Ground. During implementation, the IO bolstered the capacity of TE programs to implement CRSE in two primary ways. First, it communicated guidance and resources on the CRSE competencies, including a repository of teaching tools aligned with the competencies. Across all programs, TE leaders and faculty reported the IO as their primary source of information and guidance regarding the CRSE guidelines—much more so than PDE. Second, this IO bolstered community-building by establishing communities of practice, workshops, and other shared sensemaking spaces for implementing the CRSE guidelines. Notably, programs varied in how deeply engaged they had been in these sorts of opportunities with the IO. For example, in Clover, a teacher educator noted having just learned about the organization, expressing excitement to engage in future gatherings. Leaders in Sage, on the other hand, had been deeply involved in this organization since its inception and thus continued actively engaging in communities of practice.

After the shift to Common Ground and subsequent loss of institutional support for CRSE

in TE programs, there was some evidence that program-level champions for CRSE shifted the focus of their work from facilitating internal program-level work to encouraging engagement with the IO for colleagues eager to continue the work. The IO became a place for those who were enthusiastic about engaging around CRSE. Higher education institutions were concerned about implementing initiatives that may be deemed as DEI, weighing the political risks of carrying on their work. One teacher educator reflected: “I think we had heard a very long time ago about the term Common Ground, but we hadn't made sense of: are they going to change it? What's going on? [...] Can we fight this fight?” As this work became more tenuous, some programs turned to the policy IO as a site of shared sensemaking. As one Sage leader, Elaine, explained: “I think we lost a little steam [...] but of course now I've pulled in two more of my colleagues into the [IO] community of practice. [...] We are creating our own community that is really serious about it.” Others spoke to this IO as creating important spaces for critical reflection within the race-evasive context. A member of the IO, Cassie, explained:

I think we provide a community, a place where folks can feel as if they're part of a community that they can come and talk about, this is the work I was doing, this is what happened. And strategizing together. [...] [We] have been leaning a little bit into the community to think, how do you continue to do this work without using the terms?

Thus, this IO emerged as a key force, and a third space, in maintaining its commitment to critical reflection amid a race-evasive policy and political environment.

The support that this organization provided filled a notable absence in support from the PDE, and members of this IO were critical of the lack of PDE's institutional support. For example, one IO member, Emmy, commented: “It has become pretty apparent that PDE does not have much intention of really pushing for these competencies to truly be embedded or doing any kind of accountability or checking to see whether they're being meaningfully implemented.” This

same member characterized PDE as a “weak state agency” that did not “take a very hands-on directive approach to a lot of things.” She explained how the IO became the de facto leader:

Our hope had been that they [PDE] were going to be much more of a leader on this issue in terms of really, number one, communicating the importance of this and why it's a priority. And number two, providing technical assistance and supporting districts really being out in the field and helping to develop resources and so forth. And I think it's clear that they're not going to play that role.

Particularly after the shift to Common Ground, participants spoke to a climate of fear for engaging with CRSE. IO members suggested that PDE's lack of support for the CRSE competencies exacerbated these fears by not providing the “moral authority” needed to assuage concerns about political backlash. The IO, led by Black women, chose not to step back from their commitments to CRSE in this environment. As Cassie shared, this work was personal:

I think this work is always going to be relevant. I'm a Black woman. I'm an immigrant. I'm on the chopping block here. They want to send me back to my country. They want to cancel the work that I do, so it feels personal.

Despite this acknowledgement that she would be “on the chopping block,” leaders like Cassie were unrelenting in their commitments to CRSE, putting their own professional livelihoods on the line to preserve the initial intent of the policy.

Despite the challenge of limited state support, participants spoke to several reasons why the IO was particularly well-suited to bolster implementation support for CRSE. The IO was composed of members with substantial expertise in CRSE and had been supporting the state's capacity around CRSE implementation for years prior to the introduction of the policy. Members of this IO acknowledged the political advantages of *not* being a governmental agency. One member explained:

They [PDE employees] officially have to think about the governor. They don't make decisions outside of what's in line with the governor's educational agenda. [...] we don't have those kinds of issues at [our organization]. That freedom is vastly different. We're not tied to someone's agenda. [...] We'll work with whoever wants to work with us in

good moral standing in order to move [our] agenda forward.

This member also named that the organization's position allowed them to push on PDE to "hold them accountable" to commitments to equitable education, and saw benefits to being situated externally to formal governmental spaces and without direct ties to electoral politics.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, our sample of program leaders and teacher educators within each program was limited to those who were most engaged with the CRSEs. This was by design, because we were interested in understanding the key programmatic efforts to implement the policy. However, we may not capture the perspectives of faculty who may have been more resistant to or disengaged from implementation efforts, and their experiences might reveal additional barriers to implementation within programs. Second, while we aimed to trace the shift in programs' sensemaking of the policy over the course of the academic year, we were unable to consistently interview all individuals in our dataset twice (i.e., during both the fall and spring semesters). We made multiple efforts to recruit all individuals for spring interviews; however, we did not get responses from everyone. Given the fears of anti-DEI blowback in higher education in spring 2025, we suspect that this lower response in the spring was influenced by the political sensitivity of the topics we were studying. Although we traced broader shifts at the program-level, we may have missed additional variation in how individuals' understandings of the attributes of the policy evolved over time. Finally, we did not include teacher perspectives in this work; however, there may be gaps between the espoused goals of leaders and teacher educators in the program and teachers' experience of their programs. CRSE guidelines will only transform the system as it intends to if they result in meaningful shifts in K-12 teachers' skills, dispositions, and ultimately practice. Future work might more explicitly track teacher candidates'

experiences in programs adopting state-level CRSE guidelines mandates and examine the extent to which teachers' shifts in practice are supported by their pre-service TE programs.

Discussion

Amid mounting political pressure on race- and equity-centered education policy, it is critical to examine how practitioners interpret and respond to an increasingly volatile policy environment. Although some states have CRSEs into state-level instructional policies and standards (Carrier, 2024; Comstock et al., 2026; Muñiz, 2019), the rise of anti-DEI attacks across the country opens the question of whether, and how, states will preserve such policies in coming years. Our findings suggest that teacher education programs, and the leaders and practitioners within them, can play a central role in preserving the implementation of CRSE guidelines amidst growing racial backlash. Drawing on a critical policy analysis lens, our study interrogates the disjuncture between the public rhetoric surrounding the CRSE and Common Ground policies and their implementation, demonstrating how policy enactment can reinscribe the racial inequities it ostensibly set out to address. Additionally, our work traces how the original race-conscious CRSE guidelines got diluted in practice over time amidst racial backlash. Together, this work advances scholarship on K-12 policy implementation, race- and equity-focused education policy, and teacher education, bringing these three bodies of literature into more intentional dialogue.

First, our work offers important theoretical contributions by bridging policy attributes theory and critical sensemaking theory. Whereas a tradition of scholarship has studied how educators' perceptions of policy shape how policies are implemented (Comstock et al., 2022; Desimone, 2002; Edgerton & Desimone, 2019), our work extends this work by bridging policy attributes theory with *critical sensemaking* (e.g., Helms Mills et al., 2010; Schildt et al., 2020). In doing so, our work adds clarity to the process by which educators' perceptions come to shape

implementation, and centers the role of power in that process. This affords us the lens to examine how attributes shift over time in response to racial politics. Our findings suggest that both the (in)stability of policy, as well as whether it creates *internal* versus *external* pressures on organizations, can meaningfully shape organizations' capacities to sustain critical reflection. Sage, the program with a strong *internal* sense of authority for CRSE, was better positioned to persist through the racial politics and continue to engage in critical reflection, even after the policy became race-evasive. In contrast, Clover, which was *externally* pressured by accountability, was more sensitive to the policy's instability and shifted more substantially towards limited interrogation after the policy became race-evasive. Finally, Chestnut, which lacked both strong internal authority and external accountability, consistently engaged in limited interrogation of the policy and did not attend to racialized organizational dynamics which inhibited a deeper implementation of the CRSE guidelines. Prior scholarship has documented how *organizational defensive routines*—i.e., “actions or policies that prevent individuals or segments of the organization from experiencing embarrassment or threat”—can inhibit organizational learning (Argyris, 1990, p. 25). Because these routines can make risky or uncomfortable topics hard to discuss, they can inhibit organizational change by leaving the core challenges unaddressed. Our work extends this theoretical concept to document how such defensive routines, alongside organizational histories and norms, may be shaped by racialized conditions within organizations. In the case of Chestnut, for example, patterns of individuals feeling uncomfortable raising issues in their program related to race limited the program's ability to engage in critical reflection in their implementation of the CRSE guidelines, even though program leaders espoused alignment of their practices with the policy. However, our findings

suggest that this alignment was only superficial, and more a reflection of the limited interrogation of the policy and the program's discomfort surfacing issues related to race.

Second, our study contributes to studies of race- and equity-related education policies by documenting how the race-consciousness of policy shapes implementation. Prior scholarship has well-documented the dangers of race-evasive education policy and practice (e.g., Annamma et al., 2017; Diem & Welton, 2021; Esboldt, 2025; Hernández, 2022; Turner, 2020). However, in the contemporary political climate, race-evasiveness may be a political lever for organizations to avoid political scrutiny while preserving their core work related to racial change (Comstock, 2024; Comstock et al., 2026; McCambly & Colyvas, 2023; Walker, 2025). Organizations may strategically de-couple their externally facing language from their internal organizational work. However, our findings suggest that the language of policy matters. The symbolic blow to the CRSE standards in November 2024, alongside the shifting federal landscape in early 2025, had material consequences on how programs embraced CRSE. Although Chestnut saw the policy as largely symbolic, the existence of the policy provided pressure within Sage and Clover to more deeply commit to the CRSE guidelines. While state-level policymakers face pressures to shift to race-evasive language, these findings suggest that the external framing matters insofar as it shapes how policies are taken up in practice. For example, despite decades of calls for teacher diversity policies, some are now calling to implement such policies in race-evasive ways (e.g., Thomas B. Fordham Institute, n.d.). Our findings suggest that any such policies are likely to fall short, and raises questions about pathways for organizations to internally preserve their commitments to racial equity, even as external policies become more race-evasive.

Third, building on the prior point, work highlights that CRSE guidelines, and arguably race- and equity-focused education policy more broadly, critically depends on a *coalition of the*

willing. The CRSE competencies survived in practice to the extent they did because these leaders, especially women of color, exposed themselves to heightened political risk. Even the IO, which we find was critical to the CRSE work being preserved after the policy became race-evasive under Common Ground, was primarily led by Black women. Prior work has documented that women of color disproportionately shoulder the work of implementing DEI initiatives in organizations (e.g., Alicea, 2026), and anti-racist policy change can fall short when leaders are expected to take on the risks of this work (Diem et al., 2022). Our work finds that the implementation of race- and equity-focused education policy depends on what Lerma and colleagues (2020) term “racialized equity labor”: “the uncompensated efforts of people of color to address systemic racism and racial marginalization within organizations” (p. 286). Because PDE offered minimal guidance, implementation depended on leaders personally committed to the policy's goals. But as federal executive orders eliminated DEI programs and institutions abandoned equity language, those leaders have become politically vulnerable, reproducing some of the inequities the initial policy sought to redress.

Finally, our work offers an understanding of teacher educators and TE program leaders as *policy actors* in shaping the implementation of instructional policies. While prior scholarship has widely documented the role of K-12 teachers and K-12 schools in filtering instructional policy (e.g., Coburn, 2001; McLaughlin, 1976; Spillane et al., 2002), the role of teacher educators and program leaders and TE programs in the implementation of instructional policy has been less widely studied. Our findings suggest that TE programs are a key site in the implementation of instructional policy. Individuals’ prior commitments to equity significantly shaped their buy-in for the policy and their ability to support the critical reflection of their programs. Frequently, however, K-12 instructional policy calls for shifts in teacher practice, without studying how TE

programs prepare to make those shifts. Prior work has examined the role of TE programs in the implementation of Science of Reading standards (e.g., Relyea et al., 2026); however, our study raises new questions about the role of TE programs in the implementation of instructional policy more broadly. Future scholarship should examine how TE programs shape the implementation of other race- and equity-related instructional policies, such as Ethnic Studies, or, conversely, state-level mandates to limit instruction related to race and equity.

Implications for Policy and Practice

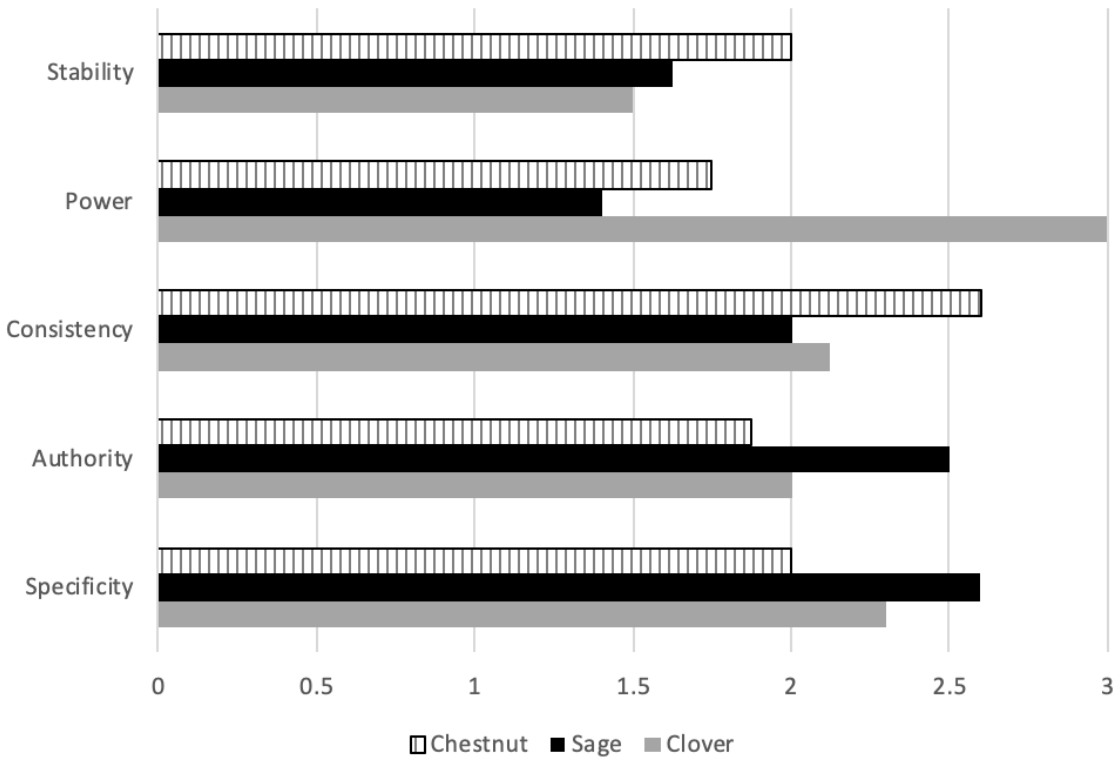
Our findings offer several important implications for educational policy and practice. First, our work extends findings on the salience of non-system actors, like IOs (e.g., Coburn, Coburn, 2006; Trinidad, 2025), documenting that they are particularly critical for the implementation of race- and equity-focused policies operating in politically hostile climates. Our findings show that IOs can do more than support implementation: in Pennsylvania, the IO both shaped the CRSE guidelines' development and sustained their survival when PDE stepped back. As state education agencies face mounting political pressure, non-system actors will likely become even more critical in bridging implementation gaps for equity-focused policies. Institutions must therefore invest in the IOs building these networks, so that IOs are not expected to absorb the full financial and political costs of sustaining equity-focused reform on their own (Baker-Doyle & Mawhinney, 2024; Muñiz, 2025).

Second, sustaining race- and equity-focused policies requires organizations to institutionalize support for their equity advocates. This means financially compensating the often invisible "racialized equity labor" these advocates perform (Lerma et al., 2020), granting them greater authority over decision-making, and revising structures such as tenure and promotion policies so that this labor is recognized within traditional metrics of organizational work. Institutionalizing such support would relieve equity leaders of shouldering the burden and risk

alone. Ultimately, this requires organizations to assume more of the risks of implementing race- and equity-focused policies, rather than offloading those risks onto individuals.

Figures and Tables

Figure 1. Policy Attributes by Program



Note. 1=low, 2=medium, and 3=high.

Figure 2. Program Sensemaking Before and After Shift to Common Ground

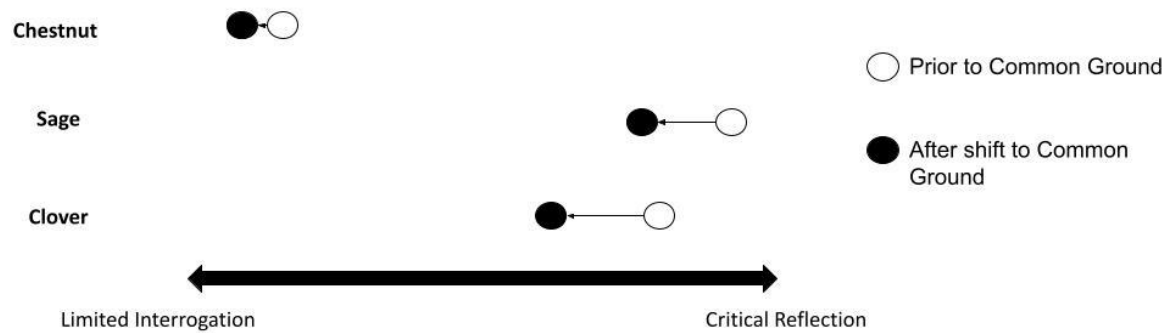


Table 1. Teacher Education Program Contexts

Program	Institution Type	Politics of County	County Demographics
Chestnut	Private	Liberal (~80% D)	~35% White ~40% Black ~10% Asian
Sage	Public	Moderate (~60% R)	~90% White ~5% Black
Clover	Public	Conservative (~70% R)	~90% White ~5% Black

Notes. (1) Exact numbers are rounded in order to help preserve the anonymity of programs. (2) Following prior scholarship (e.g., Hartney & Finger, 2022), we capture local partisan politics by drawing on voting records from the 2020 presidential election voting records to characterize county-level politics. We draw on census data for county-level racial/ethnic demographics.

Table 2. Study Participants

Organization	Name	Role	Race/Ethnicity	Interview(s)
Chestnut	Gary	Program leader	White	Fall, Spring
	Harold	Program leader*	White	Fall, Spring
	Sandy	Teacher educator	White	Fall, Spring
	Margaret	Program leader*	Black	Fall
	Judy	Teacher educator	White	Fall
Sage	Lillian	Program leader	Transracial	Fall
	Elaine	Teacher educator	Multiracial	Fall, Spring
	Charlotte	Program leader	White	Fall
	Betty	Teacher educator	White	Spring
	Susie	Teacher educator	White	Spring
Clover	Jane	Program leader	White	Fall
	Arthur	Program leader	White	Fall
	Dora	Teacher educator	Asian American	Fall, Spring
	Sarah	Teacher educator	White	Spring

State-level	Cassie	Leader	Black	Spring
intermediary	Emmy	Leader	White	Spring

Note. “*” indicates that the program leader also actively teaches at least one course in the program.

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Appendix A. Teacher Education Interview Protocol (Fall)

Introduction and Permission

Thank you for your willingness to talk with me today. As I mentioned over email, I am conducting this study to learn more about how teacher education programs across the state of Pennsylvania are approaching the implementation of the new CRSE standards. In this interview, I am particularly interested in learning more about your individual role in making sense of these new standards and integrating them into your program.

Do I have your permission to record the conversation? I will transcribe the interview for the purpose of my analysis, but will de-identify the transcript and everything you share will be anonymous in any reports or publications. Additionally, no programs staff or leadership from [INSERT PROGRAM NAME] will have access to your identified transcript.

Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?

START RECORDING INTERVIEW

Questions

Personal Background

1. To begin, I'd love to hear more about your own background. Can you share more about your experiences in education before coming to [INSERT PROGRAM NAME] and what brought you to the program?
2. Can you briefly describe your roles in your teacher education program, and how long you've been working for your program?
 - a. Which course(s) do you currently teach in the program, if any?

Personal Beliefs/Values

3. As a teacher educator, what are your goals for your teacher candidates?
4. What type of teachers do you hope that your teacher candidates in your program will become?
5. What does equitable instruction mean to you? *[probe for role of racial equity]*

Policy Background

3. Can you recall when you first learned that Pennsylvania would be introducing the CRSE standards?
 - a. What information did you receive about the new competencies?
 - b. Who shared that information with you? *[probe re: extent to which information came from formal policy channels vs. from peers, organizations like [the state-level policy intermediary, etc.]*
4. What do you see as the purpose(s) of the new CRSE competencies?
5. Since the introduction of the standards, what has been your primary source of information regarding the new standards and your programs' role in responding to the policy?

6. To what extent, if at all, have you been involved in the statewide efforts related to CRSE and teacher diversity in Pennsylvania beyond your individual program? *[probe re: involvement in the state-level policy intermediary]*
7. What do you see as the purpose(s) of the new CRSE competencies?

Politics

8. What has been the response, if any, from your local community to the new CRSE competencies? *[(1)probe for different kinds of community members/groups - parents, community members more broadly, educators from surrounding school district(s), community groups/local organizations, politicians; (2) probe for whether responses were racialized: have responses differed by race?]*
 - a. To what extent, if at all, have these responses from the community shaped your programs' approach to integrating the competencies?

Program-level context

9. What do you see as the **mission** of your program? *[probe for programs' focus and the populations they serve]*
 - a. What types of K-12 students is your program preparing teachers to work with? What types of schools (e.g., public vs. private)?
 - b. If available: ask for data on where teacher candidates go on to teach.**
10. Can you share more about the design of the program? What are the key elements for teacher candidates and/or teacher educators? *[Probe for a lot of details about the key organizational structures of the program - e.g., instructional coaching, cohort model, coursework, fieldwork, race-based caucusing/identity labs, etc.]*
11. How would you describe the **culture** of your program? *[Probe for sense of professional community, how unified values are amongst community, what values are, etc.]*

Program-level adoption

12. To what extent, if at all, are the new competencies aligned with the pre-existing mission and/or programmatic focus of your program?
13. Can you describe your programs' strategy for responding to the new CRSE standards? *[probes: shifts within courses, fieldwork, professional support for teacher educators, program-level mission, etc.]*
14. Can you speak to the ways you see the new competencies to be aligned with the mission/focus of (a) your program; (b) your college of education; and (c) your college/university as a whole?
15. What do you see as the biggest barriers to taking up the CRSEs in your program, college, and/or university specifically? *[probe for potential sources of decoupling]*
 - a. How do those barriers influence your work?
16. What does "successful" implementation of the CRSE competencies look like for you as a program?
 - a. How do you know, **as a program**, you are being successful in your integration of these competencies? *[probe for formal/informal program metrics]*

- b. How do you know that your **teacher candidates** are being successful in their development around these competencies? *[Probe for formal/informal measures]*
- 17. How do you describe your personal identity, and how do you feel like that shapes your work with the CRSE competencies?

*Teacher Educator adoption [**only ask to individuals currently teaching in their programs]*

- 18. To what extent, if at all, are the new competencies aligned with the pre-existing mission and/or programmatic focus of your course(s)?
- 19. Can you describe how you have sought to align your course(s) with the CRSE competencies? *[probe for specific examples from syllabi- pre- and post-policy]*
 - a. When did you start working towards this alignment?
 - b. What resources did you draw on to make those shifts? *[probe for whether these supports are coming from their programs, external organizations in the field, peers, etc.]*
- 20. To what extent, if at all, and in what ways has your program supported you in aligning your work to the CRSE competencies? *[probe for extent program is providing materials supports]*
 - a. What support do you still need from your program? From your university? From the state?
- 21. Is there anything I haven't asked you about that you'd like to share?

Artifact Collection

- 22. *[If any relevant documents were mentioned throughout the interview—e.g., syllabi, recruitment materials, program handbook]:* Would you be willing to share **[INSERT DOCUMENT NAME]**?
 - a. Definitely ask for the syllabi for their courses—previous and current versions [check the syllabus repository beforehand to see if their before/after syllabi are already uploaded]

Appendix B. Teacher Education Interview Protocol (Spring)

Introduction and Permission

Thank you for your willingness to talk with me today. As I mentioned over email, we are conducting this study to learn more about how teacher education programs across the state of Pennsylvania are approaching the implementation of the CRSE standards, which now sit under the Common Ground framework. The goal of this interview is to follow up from our conversation from the fall to better understand where your program is at in their implementation of this guidance, particularly given all of the shifts at the state and federal level.

Do I have your permission to record the conversation? I will transcribe the interview for the purpose of my analysis, but will de-identify the transcript and everything you share will be anonymous in any reports or publications. Additionally, no programs staff or leadership from [INSERT PROGRAM NAME] will have access to your identified transcript.

Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?

START RECORDING INTERVIEW

Questions

Policy Background

1. As you know, there have been a number of state-level policy shifts that impact CRSE work in the past several months. In November 2024, the state replaced the CRSE competencies with the Common Ground Framework. Can you recall how you first learned that Pennsylvania would be moving to replace the CRSE policy with the Common Ground Framework?
 - a. When you first learned about this change, what was your reaction? *[probe for affect — do you remember how you felt? were you sad? surprised? frustrated? unbothered?]*
 - b. What has been your primary source of information regarding the new policy language and your programs' role in responding to the policy? *[probe re: the extent to which information came from formal policy channels vs. from peers, organizations like the state-level policy intermediary, institution etc.]*
2. Why do you think the state shifted to the Common Ground framework? *[probe: what led to this?]*
3. What do you see as the purpose of the Common Ground framework?
4. What does this shift to Common Ground actually mean for you? Does it change what you've been doing? And if so, how?

Program-level adoption

5. Can you describe your programs' strategy for responding to the new Common Ground framework? *[probes: shifts within courses, fieldwork, professional support for teacher educators, program-level mission, etc.]*

- a. Has your programs' strategy/approach shifted at all since the shift away from CRSE competencies to the Common Ground framework? If so, how? *[probe for the extent to which they've amplified or pulled back from CRSE work and/or become more public/private around their work]*
 - b. Who, if at all, within your program have been involved in making these decisions? *[probe: is this being steered by central leadership vs. a more distributed approach?]*
 - c. If your program still is integrating the CRSE competencies, how are you communicating these to your teacher candidates?
6. To what extent, if at all, are you, or other members of your program, in conversation with K-12 district partners about these policy shifts?
 - a. *If yes:* To what extent, if at all, are you or other members of your program coordinating your integration of the Common Ground with K-12 partners?
7. What do you see as the biggest barriers to taking up the Common Ground framework in your program, college, and/or university specifically? *[probe for potential sources of decoupling]*
 - a. How do those barriers influence your work? *[probe: how do you see those barriers manifesting/playing out day-to-day?]*
8. In your opinion, what does "successful" implementation of the Common Ground framework look like for you as a program?
 - a. How do you know, **as a program**, that you are being successful in your integration of these competencies? *[probe for formal/informal program metrics]*
 - b. How do you know that your **teacher candidates** are being successful in their development around these competencies? *[Probe for formal/informal measures]*

Politics

9. What has been the response, if any, from your local community to the shift towards the Common Ground framework? *[(1)probe for different kinds of community members/groups - parents, community members more broadly, educators from surrounding school district(s), community groups/local organizations, politicians; (2) probe for whether responses were racialized: have responses differed by race?]*
 - a. To what extent, if at all, are you facing increased scrutiny from the public and/or your institution regarding how you approach this work?
 - b. To what extent, if at all, have these responses from the community shaped your programs' approach to integrating the competencies?
10. To what extent has the shifting state and/or federal policy landscape impacted your program?
 - a. How is your program responding to these shifts, if at all? Your institution? Your local K-12 school districts?
11. In what ways has this policy affected the norms around how leaders and teacher educators in your program approach their work?

*Teacher Educator adoption [**only ask to individuals currently teaching in their programs]*

12. Can you describe the progress you've made towards aligning your course(s) with the Common Ground framework competencies? *[probe for specific examples from syllabi-pre- and post-policy]*

- a. When did you start working towards this alignment?
 - b. What resources did you draw on to make those shifts? *[probe for whether these supports are coming from their programs, external organizations in the field, peers, etc.]*
13. To what extent, if at all, and in what ways has your program supported you in aligning your work to the Common Ground framework? *[probe for extent program is providing materials supports]*
- a. What support do you still need from your program? From your university? From the state?

Questions to ask if you did not ask in Fall interview:

14. ******To what extent, if at all, have you been involved in the statewide efforts related to understanding and responding to this guidance at the state-level? *[probe re: involvement in the state-level policy intermediary]*
- a. Do you know of others at your university who are involved at the state-level? If so, who?
15. From my understanding, CRSE policy originally came from intentions to, in part, support equitable instruction across the state. What does equitable instruction mean to you? *[probe for role of racial equity]*

Program-level context

16. What do you see as the **mission** of your program? *[probe for programs' focus and the populations they serve]*
- a. What types of K-12 students is your program preparing teachers to work with? What types of schools (e.g., public vs. private)?
 - b. If available: ask for data on where teacher candidates go on to teach.**
17. Can you share more about the design of the program? What are the key elements for teacher candidates and/or teacher educators? *[Probe for a lot of details about the key organizational structures of the program - e.g., instructional coaching, cohort model, coursework, fieldwork, race-based caucusing/identity labs, etc.]*
18. How would you describe the **culture** of your program? *[Probe for sense of professional community, how unified values are amongst community, what values are, etc.]*
19. How do you describe your personal identity, and how do you feel like that shapes your work with the CRSE competencies?

Conclusion/Artifact Collection

20. What feelings come up as you think about the future of this work?
21. Is there anything I haven't asked you about that you'd like to share?
22. *[If any relevant documents were mentioned throughout the interview—e.g., syllabi, recruitment materials, program handbook]:* Would you be willing to share **[INSERT DOCUMENT NAME]**?
- a. Definitely ask for the syllabi for their courses—previous and current versions [check the syllabus repository beforehand to see if their before/after syllabi are already uploaded]

Appendix C. State Policy Interview Protocol (Spring)

Introduction and Permission

Thank you for your willingness to talk with me today. As I mentioned over email, we have been conducting this study to learn more about how teacher education programs across the state of Pennsylvania are approaching the implementation of the CRSE standards, which now sit under the Common Ground framework.

Do I have your permission to record the conversation? I will transcribe the interview for the purpose of my analysis, but will de-identify the transcript and everything you share will be anonymous in any reports or publications. Additionally, no one will have access to your identified transcript.

Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?

START RECORDING INTERVIEW

Questions

Personal Background

1. To begin, I'd love to hear more about your own background. Can you share more about your experiences in education before coming to [the state-level policy intermediary] and what brought you to the organization?
2. Can you briefly describe your position with [the state-level policy intermediary], and how long you've been involved?

Personal Beliefs/Values

4. **From my understanding CRSE policy originally came from intentions to, in part, support equitable instruction across the state. What does equitable instruction mean to you? *[probe for role of racial equity]*
5. From your perspective, what role does or should policy play in supporting equitable instruction?

Policy Background

6. As you know, there have been a number of state-level policy shifts that impact CRSE work in the past several months. In November 2024, the state replaced the CRSE competencies with the Common Ground Framework. Can you recall how you first learned that Pennsylvania would be moving to replace the CRSE policy with the Common Ground Framework?
 - a. When you first learned about this change, what was your reaction? *[probe for affect — were you sad? surprised? frustrated? unbothered?]*
 - b. What has been your primary source of information regarding the new policy language and your programs' role in responding to the policy? *[probe re: the extent to which information came from formal policy channels vs. from peers, organizations like the state-level policy intermediary, institution etc.]*

7. Why do you think the state shifted to the Common Ground framework? [*probe: what led to this?*]
8. What does this shift to Common Ground actually mean for you? Does it change what you've been doing? And if so, how?
9. What do you see as the purpose of the Common Ground framework?
10. Since this shift, what role have you played in helping communicate the new guidance to K-12 schools and universities? [*i.e., probe for any artifacts of this communication*]
 - a. What channels have you used to communicate this guidance?
11. [The state-level policy intermediary] is uniquely situated in this work—distinct from PDE/not a formal policy body, composed of a network of mostly volunteer practitioners and researchers. From your perspective, what are the benefits and drawbacks to how the state-level policy intermediary is situated in this work?

Politics

12. What has been your sense of the response to this shift more broadly from different parties? [*(1)probe for different kinds of community members/groups - parents, community members more broadly, educators from universities, school district(s), community groups/local organizations, politicians; (2) probe for whether responses were racialized: have responses differed by race?*]
13. To what extent has the shifting state and/or federal policy landscape impacted the state-level policy intermediary's work, and your member institutions?
 - a. How is the state-level policy intermediary responding to these shifts, if at all?
 - b. How are you responding to these shifts in your work, if at all?

Vision for Program-level adoption

14. From your understanding, can you describe the state-level policy intermediary's vision for how programs respond to the new Common Ground framework? [*probes: shifts within courses, fieldwork, professional support for teacher educators, program-level mission, etc.*]
 - a. Has your vision shifted at all since the shift away from CRSE language? If so, how? [*probe for the extent to which they've amplified or pulled back from CRSE work and/or become more public/private around their work*]
 - b. How, if at all, are you supporting K-12 schools and universities to protect this work?
15. What do you see as the biggest barriers to taking up the CRSEs in the field? [*probe for potential sources of decoupling*]
 - a. How do those barriers influence your work?
 - b. How, if at all, have you responded to these barriers?
16. What does “successful” implementation of the CRSE competencies look like at the field-level?
 - a. How do we, **as a field**, know we are being successful in your integration of these competencies? [*probe for formal/informal state-level policy intermediary metrics, if they exist?*]
17. How do you describe your personal identity, and how, if at all, do you feel like that shapes your work with the CRSE competencies/Common Ground framework?

Conclusion/Artifact Collection

18. What feelings come up as you think about the future of this work?
19. Is there anything I haven't asked you about that you'd like to share?
20. *[If any relevant documents were mentioned throughout the interview]*: Would you be willing to share **[INSERT DOCUMENT NAME]**?

Appendix D. Coding Framework

Code	Definition
Gem Quote	Flag exemplary quotes to pull into papers later
Interesting Moment	Flag exchanges which are notable, but don't fit neatly into existing codes — these might help inspire future papers
Personal Background	Descriptions of an individual's personal backgrounds and identities, especially as they connect to their work related to CRSEs
Role Description	Descriptions of an individuals' role and responsibilities within their program
Equity	Descriptions of how an individual conceptualizes equity and/or their perception of how equity shapes their work (any level) Code for both direct and indirect references to equity/social justice - <i>can be expansive</i> <i>Note: always code individuals' responses to our question "what does equitable instruction mean to you" using this code, but also code for other mentions of equity as they come up in the data</i>
Race	Description of how individual conceptualizes race/racism and/or their perception of how race/racism shapes their work - also includes race-evasive <i>Double-code with Political and/or Normative to get at the idea of racial politics</i> <i>Double-code with Program Culture to get at the idea of racialized climates in TE programs/universities</i>
Sensemaking Codes	
Policy attributes	Descriptions of the nature of policy guidance individual has received related to the CRSE/Common Ground policy (Comstock et al., 2022; Porter, 1994; Porter et al., 1988) <i>**likely to double-code child-codes - these can be individual or organizational</i>
Specificity	Descriptions of how <i>prescriptive</i> the individual perceives the CRSE/Common Ground policy to be; making the policy more concrete
Authority	Descriptions of <i>time/money/resources/charismatic leader and buy-in</i> (both individual and organizational-level buy-in) for the CRSE/Common Ground policy; also about a champion giving authority (may be co-coded with sensegiving)
Consistency	Descriptions of how <i>aligned</i> CRSE/Common Ground policy and other resources/instructional materials
Power	Descriptions of the nature and strength of accountability mechanisms for the CRSE/Common Ground policy (e.g., reporting requirements to PDE) - could be the lack of accountability <i>**reserve for examples of soft power (e.g., resources from state-level policy)</i>

	<i>intermediary that promotes accountability/ incentives/grant funds) and formal accountability</i>
Stability	Descriptions of whether an individual perceives that the CRSE/Common Ground policy is likely to change and descriptions of policy changing About change or things that have been around for a long time
Systemic power	Individuals' descriptions indicating the nature of reflection around knowledge related to the CRSE guidelines, including instances of limited interrogation/ reliance on existing schemas or templates, as well as critical reflection around race, culture, and identity - more at the level of organization "how taken-for-granted knowledge structures and individual and collective identities shape the way actors see the world and act" (Schildt et al., 2020); background knowledge, logics ALWAYS code one of the following child codes
Limited interrogation / Pre-existing templates	Using preconceived language, resources, templates, or strategies (Comstock, 2026) "Automatic sensemaking (committed and pre-conscious) relies on heuristics that connect salient observations and claims to a categorical understanding of the situation with minimal conscious effort or attention (Bingham & Eisenhardt, 2011; Gigerenzer, Todd, & ABC Research Group, 1999)." (Schildt et al., 2020)
Critical reflection	Being open-minded, actively processing new ideas, intentionally incorporating new ways of thinking into their work (Comstock, 2026)
Organizational Structures / Conditions Codes	
Community Context	Descriptions of the role of the local community (including K-12 school district and the broader school communities) in shaping and/or constraining the work within the teacher education program. <i>Local (State is political)</i> <i>Double-code with Racial Politics if this includes descriptions of the local community's racialized support and/or resistance to the CRSE work.</i> Field work - double code with program structures
University Context	Descriptions of the role of the university in shaping and/or constraining the work within the teacher education program - <i>reference university beyond program</i> <i>Double-code with Racial Politics if this includes descriptions of how the university response to anti-DEI pressures has impacted the work on CRSEs.</i>
Program Mission	Descriptions of the organizational mission of the program (both espoused and normative, double coded) <i>Include individual's instructional visions here</i>
Program Culture	Descriptions of program culture as it impacts leaders, teacher educators, and candidates, including, but not limited to: • Norms of teacher educator collaboration

	• Relational trust within program • Racialized dynamics amongst leadership and teacher candidates
Program Structures	Descriptions of program structures, including, but not limited to: • Coursework • Fieldwork • Admissions policies and practices • Faculty meetings • Racial affinity groups for teacher candidates