



Defaults, Discretion, and Local Capacity: District Leaders' Accounts of Automatic English Learner Reclassification

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Automatic policies, which produce a preferred outcome unless implementers act otherwise, are rare in K-12 education and have been studied almost entirely using quantitative methods. In 2019, Michigan replaced its district-led procedure for reclassifying students out of English learner (EL) status with an automatic, state-led one. Drawing on interviews with 17 district EL leaders across 14 districts and a statewide survey of 215 EL leaders, we examine how implementers experienced this shift. Leaders overwhelmingly welcomed it and attributed its positive effects to reduced administrative burden, reduced reliance on local capacity, the resolution of procedural failures, and the deemphasis of subjective input. They were divided on the policy's override provision, and several were unaware it existed.

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Policy design determines how much a policy's outcomes depend on the capacity and judgment of local implementers. Policies that rely on local implementation grant discretion to the actors closest to students, allowing flexibility and responsiveness to local context, but they also make outcomes contingent on local capacity and judgment, permitting differential treatment of similarly situated students (Lipsky, 1980; Mavrogordato & White, 2020; Spillane et al., 2002). Automatic policies sit at the other end of this design spectrum. An automatic policy establishes a predetermined outcome that takes effect unless an implementer deliberately acts otherwise (Herd et al., 2013), shifting the burden of action from those who would enact the preferred outcome to those who would deviate from it (Jachimowicz et al., 2019). A large body of quantitative research shows that defaults substantially increase uptake of preferred outcomes in domains such as organ donation, retirement savings, and voter registration (Garnett, 2022; Johnson & Goldstein, 2003; Madrian & Shea, 2001). In K-12 education, however, intentionally designed automatic policies are rare, have been adopted only recently, and the emerging evidence is almost entirely quantitative (Bartlett et al., 2026; Berg & Plucker, 2023; Vargas Castaño et al., 2026). While existing research shows that automatic policies change outcomes, it cannot explain how the local implementers whose discretion they displace experience those changes.

The reclassification of multilingual students classified as English learners (ELs) offers a case for examining this question. Reclassification, the process by which students exit EL status and services, shapes access to grade-level coursework and long-term educational opportunities. Eligible students who are not reclassified in a timely manner face adverse consequences (Carlson & Knowles, 2016; Estrada, 2014; Umansky, 2016a). Yet under procedures that depend on local

action, many eligible students are not reclassified, and this discrepancy has been linked to local capacity, administrative burden, and subjective educator input (e.g., Bartlett et al., 2026; Robinson-Cimpian & Thompson, 2016; Cimpian et al., 2017; Estrada & Wang, 2018; Mavrogordato & White, 2017; Umansky et al., 2020).

Michigan—a new immigrant destination state where EL expertise is often concentrated in a single district leader—replaced its manual, district-led reclassification procedure with an automatic, state-led one in 2019. Under the automatic procedure, students who meet the state’s proficiency criteria exit by default, and districts must take deliberate action to override reclassification decisions. The shift increased reclassification rates by 35 percentage points among students just above the eligibility threshold, with the largest effects for Spanish-speaking students (Bartlett et al., 2026). Michigan therefore offers a well-suited case: the reform produced a large, documented change in students’ outcomes, and the leaders who administered both procedures can explain why they believe this occurred and how they made sense of the large changes. In this study, we ask:

1. How did district EL leaders in Michigan view the state’s shift from manual to automatic reclassification?
2. What mechanisms did they identify as underlying its impacts?

Drawing on interviews with 17 EL leaders across 14 districts and a statewide survey of 215 Michigan EL leaders, we find that participants overwhelmingly viewed the change as positive and identified four interrelated mechanisms underlying its success: the automatic procedure (1) reduced administrative burden, (2) reduced reliance on uneven local capacity, (3) resolved procedural failures in the manual system, and (4) deemphasized subjective input, including a well-intentioned protective impulse that led educators to retain students who had demonstrated

English proficiency. Leaders described these mechanisms as especially consequential for Spanish-speaking and mobile students, whom they perceived as most disadvantaged by the manual system. Participants differed on the policy's override provision: some viewed it as preserving necessary professional judgment, while others saw it as reopening the door to problematic local discretion.

Our study makes three main contributions. First, we contribute to research on automatic policies by providing what we believe to be the first account of how implementers experience an automatic policy in K-12 education, a dimension that quantitative studies cannot capture. Second, we contribute to the literature on EL reclassification by examining a policy change that prior research has recommended: Estrada and Wang (2018) documented how district variation in capacity, procedure, and staff judgment led to under-reclassification of eligible students and concluded that statewide automation and standardization of reclassification may increase equitable treatment of students and reduce the burden on districts. Michigan adopted this reform, and we describe how leaders experienced this shift. Finally, we contribute to policy implementation research by specifying the conditions under which implementers welcome, rather than resist, the walkback of local discretion. Our findings have implications for policy design: defaults may be especially valuable in policy areas where implementation expertise is scarce and unevenly distributed, such as EL education in new immigrant destination states. They also highlight override provisions as a consequential yet understudied design element of automatic policies.

Background on EL Reclassification

Reclassification is the formal process by which students exit EL status and no longer receive English language development (ELD) services. This process should occur when students

no longer benefit from EL services, so reclassification does not negatively affect their achievement (Robinson, 2011; Robinson-Cimpian et al., 2016). Timing is important because EL classification functions as both a set of supports and a set of constraints. Students reclassified too early lose access to services designed to support their ELD, while students who remain classified after demonstrating English proficiency face constraints, such as restricted access to grade-level and college-preparatory coursework (Callahan, 2005; Estrada, 2014; Umansky, 2016a), reduced likelihood of high school graduation and college enrollment (Callahan & Shifrer, 2012; Carlson & Knowles, 2016), and social costs, including stigma and separation from non-EL peers (Estrada, 2014; Umansky, 2016b). Although the consequences of EL classification and reclassification vary by grade level and ELD program structure (Cimpian et al., 2017; Pope, 2016; Umansky & Reardon, 2014), research evidence indicates that students who demonstrate English proficiency benefit from timely exit. Reclassification is thus a high-stakes juncture in EL students' educational trajectories, determining both their access to ELD services and to mainstream educational opportunities.

Reclassification Criteria and Procedures

Federal law provides broad guidance on reclassification but leaves the specifics of its design to states. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) requires states to annually assess EL students' English language proficiency and to establish standardized, statewide classification and reclassification procedures. Reclassification criteria vary substantially across and within states (Hill et al., 2014; Linqanti & Cook, 2015; Robinson-Cimpian et al., 2016). The federal government requires states to include an English language proficiency assessment score (ESSA, 2015), but many states and districts also require additional evidence, such as content-area assessments, grades, and teacher or parent input (Morales & Lepper, 2024). States and districts

serving higher proportions of EL students tend to adopt more complex processes that incorporate criteria beyond ELD (Morales & Lepper, 2024). Some additional criteria, such as teacher input, require local policy interpretation, introducing subjectivity into reclassification decisions (Estrada & Wang, 2018; Mavrogordato & White, 2017).

Distinct from the question of reclassification criteria is how reclassification is carried out and by whom. Under manual procedures, which have historically been the dominant approach across states, district staff follow a multi-step process: identifying potentially eligible students from assessment score reports, collecting any additional required evidence, convening decision-making meetings, updating student information systems, and notifying families.

In contrast, under automatic procedures, the approach is reversed: students who meet the state's criteria are reclassified with little or no district action, and districts retain the ability to override the default for individual students (Bartlett et al., 2026; Bond & Sato, 2026). Automatic procedures shift responsibility for reclassification from district staff to state data systems. Therefore, automation is only possible when all reclassification criteria can be stored in state data systems. For example, states that require locally administered assessments or teacher recommendations cannot automate without first centralizing or eliminating those criteria. Several states, including Michigan, Delaware, Massachusetts, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Georgia, have adopted automatic procedures (Bond & Sato, 2026; Morales & Lepper, 2024). Emerging evidence indicates that this procedural design choice has significant consequences: in Michigan, shifting from manual to automatic procedures increased reclassification rates by 35 percentage points for students just above the eligibility threshold (Bartlett et al., 2026).

The Under-Reclassification of Eligible Students

Procedural design matters because the under-reclassification of eligible students is well documented. A substantial share of students who meet exit criteria do not reclassify, and reclassification rates for similar students vary widely across districts (Cimpian et al., 2017; Estrada & Wang, 2018; Mavrogordato & White, 2017). Research attributes this variation to several factors: educators’ understanding and interpretation of reclassification policy (Mavrogordato & White, 2017), local criteria that are more rigorous than state requirements (Hill et al., 2014), administrative and procedural hurdles that delay or prevent action on eligible students (Estrada & Wang, 2018), and subjective educator input (Estrada & Wang, 2018; Mavrogordato & White, 2017; Umansky et al., 2020). School leaders’ beliefs about students, understanding of policy, and capacity for implementation further shape reclassification decisions (Mavrogordato & White, 2020), while parents and students typically play little role in the process (Estrada & Wang, 2018).

Under-reclassification is also unevenly distributed among ELs. Latinx and Spanish-speaking students are less likely to reclassify than similarly proficient peers who speak other home languages (Mavrogordato & White, 2017; Umansky et al., 2020). Subjective educator input appears to account for a meaningful share of these disparities (Umansky et al., 2020). The finding that shifting to automatic reclassification in Michigan produced the largest gains for Spanish-speaking students (Bartlett et al., 2026) suggests that reclassification procedures themselves, not simply students’ underlying English proficiency, may contribute to inequities. Understanding why requires attention to the people responsible for implementing reclassification policy and the conditions under which they work.

Mid-Level Leaders as Policy Implementers

Extensive research on policy implementation has primarily examined street-level bureaucrats—frontline workers who directly engage with the public during policy implementation (e.g., Burho et al., 2024; Coburn, 2001; Honig, 2006; Lipsky, 1980; Mavrogordato & White, 2017; 2020; Spillane et al., 2002). These public-facing staff, including principals and teachers, interact directly with students and families and exercise discretion in how they implement policies (e.g., Mavrogordato & White, 2020; Spillane et al., 2002). They do not operate in isolation but receive guidance from district-level leaders who interpret federal and state policies for the schools they oversee, shaping how policies are enacted in practice (see Bartlett et al., 2024; Honig, 2006; Mavrogordato et al., 2022). Although district leaders are not street-level bureaucrats in Lipsky’s original sense because they do not deliver services directly to students, the same discretionary logic applies to them as intermediaries between policy and practice.

This brokering role is especially consequential when policies are new and implementation expertise is limited, as with EL policy in new immigrant destination states. In these contexts, districts vary widely in their history of serving ELs and in their capacity to build EL programming (e.g., Bartlett et al., Under Review; Hopkins et al., 2013; Lowenhaupt & Reeves, 2015). Because many districts lack sufficient EL-certified staff, EL expertise is in high demand and often concentrated among one or a few district-level leaders, who may be the only EL experts in their district or region. The knowledge these leaders hold is thus both scarce and disproportionately important to the educational opportunities available to students.

Limited Capacity and Administrative Burden

This scarcity makes EL leaders’ time a critical resource. For example, if a district has only one EL leader, that leader may wear many “hats,” balancing reclassification procedures,

ELD program design, schools' legal compliance with ELs' civil rights, professional development, and direct support for schools new to serving ELs. Ideally, these leaders would build their expertise and help others across the district serve ELs effectively. Administrative tasks that consume their time and are not directly related to providing student services carry an opportunity cost.

Research on administrative burden provides a framework for understanding how the demands of policy implementation compete with leaders' ability to focus on work they believe is most directly related to expanding students' educational opportunities. Administrative burdens are classified into three types of costs that shape individuals' and organizations' engagement in policy implementation: (1) learning costs, arising from the need to gather information about policy requirements or procedures; (2) compliance costs, reflecting the time, effort, and resources required to implement a policy; and (3) psychological costs, including the stress and frustration associated with policy implementation (Herd & Moynihan, 2019).

Most research on administrative burden focuses on the costs borne by individuals navigating policies, such as families seeking special education services for their children (Cowhy, 2025). We argue that these costs also apply to leaders responsible for implementing policy. When high implementation costs fall on districts with varying capacity to manage them, administrative burden can interfere with implementation. Existing research on EL reclassification has highlighted how administrative burden differentially affects districts' capacity to reclassify eligible students (Estrada & Wang, 2018). In Michigan, the manual reclassification system imposed the same demands on districts with very different EL populations and levels of experience navigating the system, which may have produced differences in reclassification rates unrelated to students' actual readiness to exit EL services.

The Intersection of Default Policy and Local Discretion

Whether reclassification depends on local capacity is itself a function of policy design, or of the default a state sets. A default establishes the outcome that occurs unless an implementer deliberately acts otherwise (Herd et al., 2013). Defaults have been studied across a range of public policy issues. For example, individuals may be asked whether they want to be organ donors when they register for a driver's license. If the default is enrollment, individuals must actively opt *out* to decline to be a donor, and donor registration rates are substantially higher than when individuals are asked to opt *in* (Johnson & Goldstein, 2003). Similar patterns hold for voter registration (Garnett, 2022) and retirement savings (Madrian & Shea, 2001): individuals are much more likely to remain with the default than to take deliberate action to override it.

Research attributes these findings to several mechanisms: defaults reduce the cognitive load and logistical costs for individuals of making policymakers' preferred choice; they signal that the default is policymakers' endorsed option; and they shift the burden of action onto individuals who wish to deviate from the default rather than onto those who wish to adopt it (Jachimowicz et al., 2019).

Both manual and automatic reclassification procedures are default policies that send different signals about what should happen in the absence of districts' deliberate action. Under a manual procedure, the default is *not* to reclassify eligible students: an eligible student remains classified as an EL unless a district leader takes deliberate action to exit them from EL services, positioning reclassification as a choice that must be opted into. Under an automatic procedure, the default is *to* reclassify eligible students: state data systems exit eligible students unless the district takes deliberate action to retain them, positioning reclassification as the opt-out choice. A state's choice between the two procedures is effectively a choice about who should bear the

burden of action and how much policy outcomes should depend on local capacity and discretion. A manual, opt-in policy relies on local expertise to ensure implementation fidelity and privileges districts with the knowledge and experience to determine which students are ready to reclassify, but it also makes reclassification contingent on districts' capacity and time to act. An automatic default reduces reliance on local capacity, ensuring that eligible students are reclassified even when district capacity is limited, but it also removes much of the local discretion that the manual process privileges.

Defaults are not always deliberate design choices: they may simply reflect a status quo that has taken effect in the absence of intentional redesign. This distinction maps onto the case we examine: under manual reclassification, non-reclassification was a default that emerged from historical processes rather than deliberate intent, whereas Michigan's shift to automatic reclassification deliberately reset the default to reclassification for eligible students. In K-12 education, states and districts have begun applying default policies to expand equitable access to programs and services. For example, a handful of school districts and states have enacted policies that automatically enroll students who meet a test-score threshold in advanced coursework unless they opt out (Berg & Plucker, 2023; Vargas Castaño et al., 2026).

Together, this literature frames a state's choice of reclassification procedure as more than a technical decision: a default policy allocates both administrative burden and discretion, determining who must act, at what cost, and with how much judgment. Under a manual reclassification procedure, implementers bear the compliance costs of executing a policy and exercise discretionary judgment to determine which students are ready to reclassify. In contrast, automatic defaults seek to eliminate administrative burden but rarely eliminate local judgment entirely—most retain an exception mechanism, such as an override provision, through which

discretion remains possible. This framing generates competing expectations about how implementers experience this type of policy shift. From the street-level tradition, in which discretion is a feature of professional judgment and identity (Lipsky, 1980), implementers might experience an automatic default as stifling, as it removes decisions they are uniquely positioned to make. From an administrative-burden perspective, in which discretion is bundled with learning, compliance, and psychological costs and scarce capacity (Herd & Moynihan, 2019), they might experience it as supportive because it relieves administrative work that competes with the services they value most. These competing expectations structure our analysis.

Methods

We examine how district EL leaders experienced Michigan's shift from manual to automatic reclassification and which mechanisms they identify as underlying its effects. These questions concern implementers' reasoning and experience, which administrative data cannot capture. We therefore draw on semi-structured interviews with the district leaders responsible for reclassification under both procedures, supplemented by a statewide survey of EL leaders.

Study Context

Michigan is a new immigrant destination state with a rapidly growing, geographically dispersed EL population. In the 2024-25 school year, Michigan served 104,213 ELs, up from 84,640 a decade earlier. Currently, 7.3% of Michigan K-12 students are EL-classified (MISchoolData, 2026). Like other new immigrant destination states, Michigan has many school districts actively building their EL program infrastructure and learning to serve EL students, while a minority have extensive experience serving ELs. EL students in Michigan are predominantly served through pull-out ELD, in which they are removed from general education classrooms for discrete ELD instruction (Personal Communication with MDE, 2026).

Prior to the 2019-20 school year, Michigan required school districts to manually reclassify eligible students through a nine-step process (see Figure 1). Under this procedure, districts identified students who met reclassification criteria and formally reclassified them in the state data system. To qualify for reclassification, students needed to achieve an overall score of 4.5 or higher on the WIDA ACCESS 2.0 English proficiency assessment (hereafter, WIDA), a WIDA reading domain score of 4.0 or higher, a WIDA writing domain score of 4.0 or higher, and a score of “proficient” on a locally chosen reading assessment. Districts selected their own local reading assessments from a list of state-approved options (e.g., NWEA, AIMSWeb, DIBELS Next, iReady) and set their own proficiency thresholds within those assessments, creating variation across districts in both the assessment used and the score required to demonstrate proficiency. Districts were not required to submit these thresholds or student performance data on local reading assessments to the state.

[Figure 1 About Here]

The process placed significant responsibility on district staff. After collecting WIDA and local assessment data, district leaders were required to enter EL exit information into their district’s student information system, notify district pupil accounting staff, upload the exit information to the state data system, and verify that the upload was successful. The process also had to be completed within a narrow summer window, which posed challenges in districts where EL leaders worked on school-year contracts and were unavailable during the summer.

Recognizing the gap between the number of students meeting reclassification criteria and those actually reclassified, Michigan shifted from manual to automatic procedures in fall 2019. Under the automatic procedure, MDE assumes responsibility for reclassifying students directly through state administrative data systems upon receiving WIDA scores. This process removes

districts' responsibility for reclassifying students in district and state data systems. MDE also simplified reclassification criteria by eliminating the WIDA reading and writing domains and local ELA assessment requirements. To maintain rigor in reclassification criteria, MDE raised the overall proficiency level required for reclassification eligibility from a 4.5 overall WIDA score to a 4.8 overall WIDA score. Districts retain the option to override automatic reclassification for individual students who have met exit criteria if they believe continued EL services would benefit the student.

In sum, the 2019 reform bundled three distinct changes: (1) who executes reclassification (state data systems rather than district staff, flipping the default policy from non-reclassification to reclassification); (2) what the criteria are (a single, statewide criterion rather than multiple domain scores and a locally chosen reading assessment); and (3) how rigorous the threshold itself is (4.8 rather than 4.5). Because these components changed simultaneously, we cannot isolate the default policy's contribution in our interviews. Our analysis therefore attends to which component of the reform each perceived mechanism addresses (see Table 1). Some mechanisms leaders described, such as the resolution of procedural failures, likely stem solely from automating the reclassification procedure, while others, such as the deemphasis of subjective input, operated through both procedural and criteria changes. We return to this point in the discussion.

Read through our conceptual framework, the reform also reallocated burden and discretion. Under the manual procedure, district EL leaders bore the compliance costs of reclassification (identifying eligible students, entering exits into district and state data systems, and acting within a compressed summer window), but discretion was more dispersed. In some cases, teachers had substantial input into reclassification decisions. In others, particularly in

smaller districts where the EL leader was a teacher, leaders also exercised discretion. The automatic procedure reassigned the burden to MDE and narrowed local discretion—wherever it resided—to the override provision. How leaders experienced this change is the question we aimed to address.

[Table 1 About Here]

Data and Sample

Our data sources include semi-structured interviews conducted in 2024 and 2025 with 17 district EL and data system leaders across 14 school districts, supplemented by survey data collected in fall 2025 from 215 EL leaders representing 168 districts in Michigan. We intentionally recruited district-level EL and data system leaders because they were the primary implementers of reclassification policy and responsible for identifying students eligible for reclassification, completing the manual reclassification process, and exercising the override option when necessary under automatic reclassification. The survey data serve a complementary role (Greene et al., 1989): our interview sample is small by design, and we administered the survey to a broad statewide sample of EL leaders to assess overall sentiment. Together, these two data sources allow us to assess how representative interview participants' views are of broader sentiment in Michigan. Recruitment for both data sources occurred through our research team's established partnership with MDE and a statewide EL advisory council composed of MDE leadership and district leaders.

Data Collection

Interviews

Interview recruitment occurred in two waves. In the first wave, we purposively recruited participants to capture variation in the policy change's impact across districts. We used district-

level changes in reclassification rates for eligible students, calculated from state administrative data for a prior evaluation of this policy (Bartlett et al., 2026), and recruited participants from the highest quartile (most affected by the policy change) and the lowest quartile (least affected). We anticipated that leaders in these districts would have the most direct and distinct perspectives on the policy's effects, and we also included participants from the middle quartiles to capture a range of experiences.

We conducted the first wave of interviews between January and April 2024. In total, we invited individuals from 20 school districts to participate in the first round of interviews, and 11 agreed. Three participants requested that a colleague be included in the interview, reflecting the collaborative nature of the manual reclassification process. As a result, some interviews included two participants, meaning we interviewed 14 participants in the first wave. In the second wave, conducted in fall 2025, we recruited three additional leaders from three school districts to supplement the original sample with perspectives from individuals involved in developing automatic reclassification at the state level. All three were members of the statewide EL advisory council and had participated in policy design conversations. Participants in the second wave of interviews brought a unique perspective, having observed policy development and its effects over multiple years in both their advisory capacity and in their own districts. For participants in both waves who held the same role before the policy change, the protocol included questions designed to elicit pre- and post-period comparisons. Table 2 describes our sample in more detail.

[Table 2 about here]

The first and second authors conducted interviews. The first author attended all interviews, and the second author participated in five. Semi-structured interviews lasted 45-60 minutes and were conducted on Zoom. We recorded and transcribed all interviews verbatim for

analysis. Our interview protocol was designed to address our two research questions. It focused on five thematic areas: participants' background and tenure in their current role; their experience with the manual and automatic reclassification processes; the administrative burden and workload associated with each process; their use of and views on the district override option; and their perspectives on the equity implications of the policy change. The interview protocol is available in Online Appendix A.

Survey

The survey was designed collaboratively by all three authors and administered as part of a broader evaluation of Michigan's EL entrance and exit criteria and policies. We first administered the survey in person during a session for all EL district leaders at MDE's Special Populations Conference in fall 2025. The conference is a statewide convening of district leaders from special populations departments. We subsequently followed up with districts not represented among the conference respondents, inviting their participation. In total, we received 215 responses from 168 districts, which collectively enroll 75% of all Michigan ELs. Respondents were EL leaders from districts across the state, providing a cross-section of practitioner perspectives that extends beyond our interview sample. For the present study, we used only survey items pertaining to leaders' perceptions of automatic reclassification, which we analyzed alongside interview data to assess whether interview participants' responses reflected broader statewide patterns. The set of survey items used in this study is available in Online Appendix B.

Several features of the survey warrant attention. First, the sample is a convenience sample, as respondents were recruited at a statewide conference and through follow-up outreach. Responding districts skew toward those with larger EL enrollments (collectively enrolling 75%

of the state's ELs). Second, some respondents did not answer all survey questions, and 28 of 215 respondents did not answer the item asking for their overall assessment of automatic reclassification. We report the percentage of respondents answering each question. Third, an item asking respondents why they felt the change was positive presented a closed list of reasons constructed by the research team from prior literature and our interview data. Endorsements of these reasons indicate which mechanisms resonate most broadly among supportive leaders and do not independently confirm the mechanisms themselves. We analyze the parallel item for negative respondents and all open-ended comments to capture disconfirming and qualifying perspectives.

Analytic Approach

Our analysis focused on district leaders' perceptions of and experiences with the shift to automatic reclassification, as well as the mechanisms they described as driving the policy's effects. We developed a theoretically grounded coding framework informed by prior literature on EL reclassification (Estrada & Wang, 2018; Mavrogordato & White, 2017), administrative burden (Herd et al., 2013), and default policy (e.g., Jachimowicz et al., 2019). We then reviewed the framework and codes for theoretical relevance and alignment with the research questions.

The first author coded transcripts in Dedoose using a hybrid deductive-inductive approach, applying constant comparison throughout to develop and refine codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Deductive codes were drawn from mechanisms proposed in prior research on reclassification and administrative burden (Bartlett et al., 2026; Estrada & Wang, 2018): that automatic reclassification would increase reclassification rates by reducing the administrative burden on districts, reducing reliance on varying local capacity, and deemphasizing subjective or discretionary input in the reclassification process. Inductive codes captured themes that emerged

from the data but were not anticipated in the prior literature, such as procedural and technical failures in the manual system and leaders' experiences with and views on the district override option. To support cross-district comparison, the first author then developed analytic matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in Excel to organize excerpts by code, participant pseudonym, and district, which facilitated the identification of patterns within and across codes. The first and second authors discussed patterns, variation, and relationships across codes prior to drafting findings. The final codebook, including code definitions and representative excerpts, appears in Online Appendix C.

Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness, we employed several strategies throughout the data analysis. First, we piloted the codebook on the first three transcripts before applying it to the full sample. The pilot phase refined code definitions and identified inductive codes that emerged from the data but were not included in the deductive framework. After coding, the first author wrote analytic memos for each code family. This allowed the author to synthesize patterns and variations in codes before drafting the findings. This process served as a check on the author's conclusions and required articulating evidence for each code and emergent finding before including them in the manuscript. In addition, the statewide survey checked the generalizability of the interview data: the distribution of survey ratings indicates that the positive orientation of our interview sample is consistent with sentiment among EL leaders statewide rather than reflecting our purposive sampling strategy. We deliberately did not treat the survey items as triangulating data because of their display logic and closed response options. Instead, we sought disconfirming evidence directly by analyzing all negative responses and open-ended comments and reporting them alongside our findings.

Positionality

This study was motivated by our shared interest in how policy design shapes the conditions under which education leaders can effectively implement policy for EL students. All three authors have professional and research experience in EL policy design and implementation. The first and second authors serve on Michigan’s statewide EL Advisory Committee through their partnership with MDE, which informed their contextual understanding and facilitated participant recruitment. They also participated in advisory committee discussions on developing, implementing, and evaluating Michigan’s automatic reclassification policy. We approached this study with the understanding that automatic reclassification is intended to expand equity for ELs. At the same time, we sought to present participants’ concerns about the policy alongside their endorsements, built inductive codes to remain open to unexpected findings, and used coding memos to challenge our own interpretive assumptions before drafting findings.

Limitations

We acknowledge several limitations of this study. First, our findings are situated within a single state. Michigan’s context may not fully reflect the diversity of EL policy contexts nationally. Findings should therefore be interpreted with caution in contexts that differ substantially from our sample. In addition, our interview data rely on a small sample of participants’ self-reports of their own and others’ policy implementation practices, and their responses may have been shaped by personal beliefs or social desirability, particularly given our team’s established relationships in Michigan’s EL policy space. Relatedly, because Michigan changed reclassification procedures and criteria at the same time, leaders’ retrospective accounts cannot cleanly separate the contribution of each component, and participants may attribute “automatic reclassification” effects that flow partly from criteria simplification. Our

decomposition of mechanisms across reform components (Table 1) is an analytic interpretation of leaders' accounts rather than a feature of the accounts themselves. In addition, our survey did not include items about the override provision, so our account of override awareness rests on interview data alone. Finally, we examine leaders' perceptions of the policy's mechanisms, but we cannot assess whether automatic reclassification procedures lead to better student outcomes. Reclassification may or may not contribute to students' access to equitable educational opportunities. Research on reclassification outcomes for students exited under automatic versus manual reclassification would advance our understanding of whether the policy change is producing educational benefits.

Findings

Survey responses indicate that district EL leaders overwhelmingly viewed the shift from manual to automatic reclassification as positive: 70% rated the policy change "positive" or "very positive," 3% rated it negatively, and the remainder were neutral ($n = 187$). Among respondents who rated the change positively, the most common explanations (from a closed list constructed by the research team) were efficiency ($n=120/131$; 92%), reduced burden on district staff ($n=107/131$; 82%), fewer errors in the reclassification process ($n=104/121$; 86%), and prevention of bias ($n=84/121$; 69%). These endorsements indicate the breadth of each explanation's resonance among supportive leaders statewide, and interview data provide in-depth accounts of the mechanism findings. In what follows, we present findings in four sections: (1) administrative burden and reduced reliance on local capacity, (2) procedural and technical failures under the manual system, (3) deemphasis of subjective input and local discretion, and (4) equity implications. We close with leaders' disconfirming perspectives and leaders' perceptions of the district override option, which cut across all four themes.

Administrative Burden Reduction and Reduced Reliance on Local Capacity

Consistent with 92% of positive survey respondents, interview participants across all 14 districts described the manual reclassification process as imposing a substantial administrative burden on district staff. The process, which involved gathering WIDA and local assessment data, verifying students' reclassification eligibility against multiple criteria, entering exit information into both district and state data systems, and coordinating among pupil accounting, classroom ELD teachers, and central office staff, required sustained effort from multiple people over a compressed summer timeframe. One participant described the complexity of implementing this process, saying, "It was multiple steps to try and get teachers to move through, and then you might have [teacher] turnover along the way, and you would need to retrain [a new teacher]" (District 3). Another participant highlighted the potential for human error, stating, "Every time data is handed off from one person to the next, you're introducing the opportunity for human error" (District 4).

Interview participants consistently described how automatic reclassification alleviated administrative burden. After the policy change, reclassification workflows simplified dramatically for all participants. As one leader described:

"Now I pull the list [of students' WIDA scores sent from MDE to districts], filter by WIDA score to the 4.8 [reclassification cut point], and send it to buildings and say, 'These are the students that have been exited by the State of Michigan. Please let me know if you have any concerns.' And nobody has responded to that email." (District 6)

For another leader in a large district with a high EL population, the scale of administrative burden reduction was substantial: "If even 10% of students are possibly eligible for exit and you

have to have a meeting to discuss it ...it's a lot of time [and] energy that would go just into that, and I'm not sure that the outcomes were better as a result of that time spent" (District 11).

Overall, leaders described gaining significant time back after the shift. They described redirecting time towards the instructional work they viewed as more central to their roles. For example, one leader framed the shift as allowing them to lean into their professional identity:

"...We're not a compliance job...our job is to make sure kids get their federally mandated services, make sure their civil rights are protected...I don't love sitting in a state data system all day [reclassifying students]. I view myself as an instructional leader" (District 1).

When asked what leaders can prioritize under automatic reclassification that they couldn't under manual, one leader put it simply: "Student services. The important part" (District 14).

Leaders discussed the administrative burden of manual reclassification as intertwined with a second factor: its dependence on local staff capacity, which was unevenly distributed across districts. Participants repeatedly emphasized that manual reclassification required both knowledge (about EL students and state and district data systems) and time (typically during the summer months). Particularly in smaller and/or under-resourced districts, leaders described challenges carrying out the reclassification process. One leader observed:

"Most districts don't have an EL director who works year-round...they have teachers in these positions. When June hits, they're done for the year, and they often don't have access [to state data systems], so they can't even track [reclassification]" (District 1).

Participating leaders who had visibility into other districts' processes (either through second-hand knowledge or as consultants to those districts) were direct about the scope of this problem. One participant described "many" districts that:

“Don’t have a single EL-certified teacher who knows anything about EL programming...a huge piece [of the problem with manual reclassification] is simply human error for a variety of reasons. Not purposeful, just people who are unprepared or uninformed on what the process is and how to make those decisions.” (District 5)

Participants described automatic reclassification as addressing both the administrative burden and capacity constraints associated with manual reclassification. As one leader summarized, “Finally, student proficiency is what drives exit rather than the competency or capacity of adults” (District 5).

Procedural and Technical Failure Under the Manual Reclassification System

Beyond general administrative burdens and capacity concerns, 86% of positive survey respondents and all interview participants described aspects of the manual reclassification system that led to eligible students being missed. Most commonly, leaders described a misalignment between WIDA score release timing and the school calendar. WIDA scores are released by the WIDA consortium to states in late spring or summer, after many school-year teaching contracts end, creating a reclassification window during which EL staff are often unavailable to act on the data. One leader illustrated this dilemma, stating, “What’s most frustrating is that the test results don’t come when people are around who have access to all of that information [to determine reclassification eligibility]” (District 9). Most participants described scenarios in which test scores were released in the summer and the reclassification window closed before staff returned, leaving reclassification-eligible students EL-classified for an entire year longer than necessary.

A second structural failure applied only to transfer students who moved between districts in the late school year or during the summer. Under manual procedures, a student’s WIDA scores were released to the district that administered the WIDA assessment, but were not

automatically transferred to the student's new district if they moved after testing. One leader described this problem directly:

“One of the issues we had [under manual reclassification] was transfer students. We'd get a large influx of ELs, and a lot of times, we were missing students and not reclassifying them because of the window of receiving their data, enrolling them, and then that short window of time to [manually reclassify].” (District 5)

Another leader described multiple instances in which transfer students believed they had been reclassified in their prior district, but the district had not formally processed their reclassification, so they remained classified as ELs in their receiving district:

“We had several students who really thought they had been exited, their districts had told us they were, and then at count day we would get these errors [where the students remained EL-classified].” (District 7)

Leaders described automatic reclassification as resolving both problems by eliminating the summer reclassification window entirely. Under automatic reclassification, MDE processes reclassification decisions at the state level upon receiving WIDA scores. This means that school calendars and cross-district coordination are no longer limiting factors. One participant described this directly, stating, “[automatic reclassification] eliminated the gaps [in reclassification rates for transfer students]. If a student left the district, we may or may not get their scores, but by the time they've [transferred], reclassification is handled at the state level” (District 3). Another participant noted that this shift also dramatically simplified monitoring of transfer students who were ELs or former ELs: “I don't have to try to track their [WIDA score history] down or worry whether the [WIDA score release] dates will cause an error” (District 10).

Deemphasis of Subjective Input and Local Discretion

A third mechanism that 69% of positive survey respondents and 11 interview participants identified was removing subjective judgment from the reclassification process. Leaders described two ways subjectivity operated under the manual system: explicit racialized bias and protective retention.

Notably, leaders located this subjectivity not only in the locally chosen reading assessment (which the state eliminated when it simplified reclassification criteria) but also in the discretionary decision-making the manual default required, even for students who met every criterion. Because the manual system made non-reclassification the default, a fully eligible student still needed their district to make an affirmative decision to exit, and leaders described bias and protective retention operating in that decision space. This distinction matters for interpreting the reform: leaders perceived the criteria simplification as removing one channel of subjectivity (local choices about the reading assessment and its interpretation), but changing the procedure closed the second (discretionary action regarding eligible students).

Six interview participants described explicit or racialized bias in manual reclassification decisions. Leaders described team discussions in which students' racial or ethnic backgrounds, accents, or perceived social behaviors entered into decisions about their reclassification eligibility, even when their WIDA scores met reclassification criteria. One leader recalled "people having really biased conversations about children...two kids would have the same WIDA scores, but bias would come in, and people would be like, 'that kid just got lucky,' or, 'that's not a reflection of their actual English proficiency'" (District 1).

Quantitative evidence has found that eligible Spanish-speaking ELs were less likely than others to be reclassified under manual reclassification (Bartlett et al., 2026; Mavrogordato & White, 2017; Umansky et al., 2020). When presented with this evidence in interviews, one leader

named explicit bias against Spanish-speaking students, stating, “I don’t think it’s any surprise that we do have bias against our Latino students in the education system. That definitely exists” (District 1).

The second pattern was the protective retention of students who met reclassification criteria. Five leaders described this trend as well-intentioned yet inconsistent with the data. Across these districts, leaders described teachers who genuinely cared about their EL students and were reluctant to move them into general education coursework, even when data supported reclassification. One leader described “a fear that we are going to exit this child and, oh my gosh, that’s a big decision, because he is never going to be able to have the support again” (District 13). Another leader plainly stated, “EL teachers personally care about each and every child, and they worry about every child. There might not be data to support [retaining the student]. That was just their feelings” (District 10). Leaders felt this protective impulse was especially pronounced in districts where students received pull-out ELD services; therefore, EL classification had a visible meaning, making the decision to reclassify feel higher-stakes and more consequential than it might under other ELD approaches.

Participants described automatic reclassification as addressing these patterns by replacing human judgment with a uniformly applied threshold. One leader reflected, “It takes out a lot of guesswork. It takes out the possibility of bias and creates a measure that everybody knows” (District 11). Three leaders acknowledged that subjectivity had operated in their district reclassification processes, but expressed some ambivalence about its complete removal. Working through this tension, one leader stated, “Automatic reclassification takes away the bias piece. And that is a good thing. But it’s worrisome to make a huge decision like this based on just one piece of data, just one snapshot of a student at one point in time” (District 13).

Equity Implications

Leaders connected the mechanisms above to equity implications for students, and two distinct themes emerged. The first concerns Spanish-speaking ELs: because prior work has documented that eligible Spanish speakers experienced the largest increase in reclassification following the shift (Bartlett et al., 2026), we presented this pattern to participants and asked them to share their reflections. The second, which emerged inductively, concerns the vulnerability of mobile and transfer students under manual reclassification.

Spanish-Speaking EL Students

In interviews, we presented participants with the quantitative finding that Spanish speakers were differentially impacted by the policy change and asked leaders to consider reasons why this disparity existed under the manual system. Three attributed the finding to the correlation between language demographics and district capacity: “Knowing that pockets of school districts are getting larger Spanish-speaking populations [than others], unfortunately, what I’m seeing is that those are not always the most highly qualified and trained systems,” noted a leader from District 7, observing that schools serving larger Spanish-speaking EL populations often had the least developed EL program infrastructure.

Two participants pointed more directly to a connection between the protective over-retention mechanism and students’ linguistic backgrounds. One participant reflected,

“It goes back to those EL teachers truly caring, getting to know them...because we have more Spanish bilingual staff probably across the state than any other language group, they’re probably like, ‘I want more from them.’ Just that additional connection they may have had.” (District 10)

Five participants made a more direct connection to over-retention of eligible Spanish speakers and racial bias, with one leader noting, “We know...Hispanic students are not doing as well as White students, and bias absolutely played into who was retained [as an EL]and who was not” (District 11). Another participant was equally direct, sharing a contrast between students of different linguistic backgrounds:

“[Bias against Spanish speakers] definitely exists. We also have a large Japanese student population, our expat families, and there have been times where I’ve heard administrators say things like, ‘Keep those Japanese students coming, they do great for our test scores.’ That’s not said about our Latino students.” (District 13)

Mobile and Transfer Students

Interview participants across nine districts independently identified transfer students as systematically disadvantaged by the manual process, often remaining classified as ELs even when they qualified for reclassification. They framed this as an equity concern in its own right: mobile students were among the most vulnerable under manual reclassification because their EL classification depended on between-district communication that the reclassification procedures did not support. A leader from District 1 captured this challenge succinctly, stating, “You’re counting on districts to communicate to each other about the status of students...and sometimes we wait weeks to hear back from other districts.”

Finally, four participants highlighted the intersection between mobility and language background in Michigan, adding further context to the quantitative finding about Spanish speakers. A leader from District 13 stated that some of their “Spanish-speaking students are a more transient population [than students from other language backgrounds].” This observation raises the possibility that part of the quantitative finding about eligible Spanish speakers being

less likely to reclassify than other groups reflects differential mobility patterns rather than, or in addition to, racial bias.

Dissenting and Qualifying Views

Because our interview sample and the survey's positive response rate may overrepresent favorable opinions of the policy change, we separately analyzed the survey's negative response item and all open-ended comments. Among the six survey participants (3%) who rated the change negatively, four provided open-ended explanations. Their concerns focused on distinct components of the reform. Two respondents objected that removing teacher input from reclassification was harmful ("teachers' voices have essentially been removed from this process," "teachers should be able to give their professional opinions"). These concerns align with teachers' apprehensions reported secondhand in interviews and are consistent with our framework's expectation that responses to the reform may diverge by the role the actor held under manual reclassification (e.g., those whose discretion was displaced view the change less favorably than those whose burden was relieved). A third respondent's concern centered on the threshold increase rather than automation ("[students who score 4.5-4.7 are] some of our top students"). Notably, Michigan's override provision, discussed below, does not affect these students: it permits districts to retain students who meet the threshold but not to exit students below it. The fourth respondent expressed a general preference for local control ("we can do it ourselves") but added that "whatever is easiest is fine." No dissenting respondent disputed that the reform reduced administrative burden.

The Override Option: Possibilities and Reach

A key feature of Michigan's automatic reclassification policy is its override option. The override allows districts to intervene and halt reclassification for students who have met the

criteria. Leaders' accounts of the override revealed two patterns that complicate its potential. First, consistent with administrative data showing limited override use (Bartlett et al., 2026), override use was rare among interview participants. Most districts reported never using the override option. Leaders partially attributed this limited use to the rigor of the state's reclassification criteria: "Rarely are you not ready to leave if you are able to [achieve a 4.8 overall score on the WIDA]" (District 6). Despite its limited use, leaders who were aware of the override option appreciated it, with one leader saying it meant that "nobody is saying they cannot [remain EL-classified] if you have a reason they should be. It's just saying, 'we're going to clean everything up and treat every kid the same, and then deal with the exceptions'" (District 10).

Interestingly, four interview participants were unaware that the override option existed. When asked about the override option, a leader from District 1 responded, "I did not know about this." After praising automatic reclassification as a potential to "level the playing field" for students, a participant from District 11 responded, "I am not aware [of the override option]. And I would prefer if you didn't tell anybody about it." A third leader described widespread appreciation for automatic reclassification in their district and observed that educators they worked with "just don't realize they could override reclassification, because why would you want to?" (District 14). Leaders who were aware of the override described using it more rhetorically than functionally, with one participant describing its use "as a way to calm teachers down when they were fearful about someone else making the [reclassification] decision for them, but we have not had to override anybody" (District 6).

Limited awareness and use of overrides affect how the policy operates in practice. Among participants aware of their ability to override automatic reclassification, overrides preserved professional judgment (their intended function) and enabled districts to intervene when

administrative data and local knowledge conflicted. For example, a leader from District 13 described using an override for a student “whose other data showed he was way below grade level,” even though the student met the WIDA reclassification threshold. However, if districts do not know the option exists, the override cannot serve as a safety net when professional judgment should take precedence over the automatic default.

Discussion

In this study, we examined district EL leaders’ perceptions of Michigan’s shift from manual to automatic reclassification and the mechanisms they identified as driving the policy change’s substantial impact on reclassification rates for eligible students. Drawing on interviews with 17 leaders across 14 districts and a statewide survey of EL leaders, we find that participants overwhelmingly viewed the policy change as positive and identified four interrelated mechanisms through which it increased reclassification rates for eligible students: reducing administrative burden, reducing reliance on local capacity, addressing procedural failures in the manual reclassification system, and deemphasizing subjective input in the reclassification process. Interview participants viewed these mechanisms as particularly consequential for Spanish-speaking and mobile students, whom they identified as most adversely affected by the manual system. In what follows, we discuss these findings in relation to prior research on EL reclassification and default policy, highlight implications for policy design and implementation, and identify directions for future research.

Understanding the Under-Reclassification of Eligible Students

Our findings corroborate and extend prior research identifying administrative burden, local capacity, and subjective input as key drivers of variation in reclassification rates for eligible students. Most closely related to this study, Estrada and Wang (2018) documented substantial

between-district variation in California, attributed in part to administrative burden and to staff perceptions of the costs and benefits of reclassification; districts with more standardized processes reclassified eligible students at higher rates. Their recommendations for improving reclassification rates of eligible students (policy clarification, capacity building, monitoring, and standardization) presuppose organizational capacity that many districts in new immigration destination states lack. Michigan's reform can be read as a state-level counterpart: a default that produces standardization without requiring each district to build its own capacity to standardize. Our findings also complement those of Mavrogordato and White (2017), who find that reclassification rates under manual procedures correlate with educators' understanding and interpretation of policy.

Leaders' accounts describe what administrative burden looked like in practice and why it was unevenly distributed across districts, offering an experiential account of the variation documented in prior studies (e.g., Bartlett et al., 2026; Robinson-Cimpian & Thompson, 2016; Cimpian et al., 2017). Leaders described burden and capacity as mutually reinforcing; burden was most consequential in districts with the least capacity to manage it, such that the manual system disadvantaged districts least equipped to navigate it.

Our data also extend prior accounts of two mechanisms. The first is procedural failure, specifically failures rooted in the design of the state's reclassification procedure rather than in district organization. Prior work has documented procedural breakdowns internal to districts, such as errors in applying criteria and burdensome processes (Estrada & Wang, 2018). The failures leaders described in our study could not be easily remedied at the district level: the timing of the WIDA score release was misaligned with staff availability to act on scores, and transfer students were vulnerable to remaining classified because their test scores did not follow

them across districts in a timely manner. This distinction matters for policy design, because failures of this kind cannot be resolved by district-level investments recommended in prior research. In leaders' accounts, automatic reclassification resolved these issues by decoupling reclassification from the school calendar and school districts' responsibilities.

Second, our findings provide a differentiated account of how subjectivity operated under manual procedures. Prior research has documented racial and ethnic disparities in reclassification rates for eligible students (Mavrogordato & White, 2017; Umansky et al., 2020) and described staff perceptions and attitudes as contributing factors, including teachers' judgments that eligible students were not yet "ready" (Estrada & Wang, 2018; Mavrogordato & White, 2020). We reinterpret this pattern, reporting leaders' descriptions of protective over-retention as operating alongside explicit bias but arising from a different source—genuine concern about what students might lose by reclassifying. In Michigan, where EL classification often means daily pull-out instruction, participants understood teachers' reluctance to release students as reflecting the visibility of what exit would remove. Framing this impulse as well-intentioned has practical implications, since interventions designed to address bias may not reach it.

When presented with the quantitative finding that eligible Spanish speakers benefited most from the policy change (Bartlett et al., 2026), leaders offered three explanations: districts serving large Spanish-speaking populations had (1) less developed EL program infrastructure; (2) bilingual staff relationships with Spanish-speaking EL students that contributed to protective over-retention; and (3) explicit racial bias against Spanish speakers compared with students who speak other home languages. These accounts are leaders' interpretations of a finding we presented to them rather than independent corroboration, but they suggest that the disparity had

multiple sources rather than a single cause and that a procedural change could reduce all three by removing the decision points at which they operated.

Finally, automatic procedures are only as efficient and equitable as the policies they automate. Most leaders accepted the 4.8 WIDA threshold as rigorous, and Michigan's threshold is high relative to other states' exit criteria (Morales & Lepper, 2024). That perceived legitimacy appears to have facilitated acceptance of the automatic default. However, acceptance was not universal, and a minority of interview and survey participants questioned whether a single WIDA score adequately establishes proficiency. One survey respondent identified students scoring just below the threshold who remained classified but could have succeeded without EL services. Before adopting automatic procedures, states should be confident that their criteria accurately identify students ready to access grade-level content without EL services.

Implications for Default Policy in Education

Before drawing implications for default policy, we reiterate that Michigan's reform intentionally bundled procedural and criteria changes. Under the manual procedure, reclassification required a score on a locally chosen reading assessment that districts never reported to the state. MDE could not have automated that criterion because the decision relied on data that was not reported to the state. Thus, criteria centralization was a precondition for automation, not a parallel choice.

Of the four mechanisms leaders identified, the resolution of procedural failures is attributable solely to the change in default policy: no change to reclassification criteria could have decoupled reclassification from school calendars or from the transfer of student records across districts. Participants' accounts of the effects of reduced reliance on local capacity also flow almost entirely from the procedural change. Administrative burden reduction reflects both

components: automatic reclassification eliminated compliance tasks in state data systems, while criteria simplification eliminated evidence-gathering and the administration of local reading assessments. The deemphasis of subjective judgment reflects both changes as well, because criteria simplification removed the locally chosen reading assessments through which subjectivity affected criteria setting, and the default change removed the discretionary decision-making through which subjectivity operated on students who had already met criteria (see Table 1). Finally, raising the threshold for reclassification eligibility from 4.5 to 4.8 likely worked mechanically against increasing reclassification rates, which suggests that the procedural change, if anything, drove more than the observed increase. The threshold raise may nonetheless have contributed indirectly, as leaders' confidence that a 4.8 reflects genuine English proficiency appears to have legitimated automatic reclassification and dampened the protective impulses that contributed to over-retention in the manual system.

This study adds to a small but growing literature on default policies in K-12 education (Bartlett et al., 2026; Berg & Plucker, 2023; Vargas Castaño et al., 2026) by providing qualitative evidence of how practitioners experience and make sense of an automatic policy after its implementation, which is difficult to capture with quantitative data alone. Michigan's automatic reclassification policy signals that reclassifying eligible students is the expected outcome and that preventing it requires an affirmative, documented decision by the district. Leaders in our study internalized this signal when they described the policy as establishing the standard and as a cleaning-up process that had previously been left to local discretion. This is consistent with default effects in other domains, where defaults increase the uptake of a preferred outcome by signaling institutional preference (e.g., Madrian & Shea, 2001).

In one respect, our findings depart from the existing literature. The mechanisms described above were not uniformly salient across district contexts. Research on defaults has largely examined individual decisions, treating the mechanisms behind default effects as relatively uniform. Applied to organizations, a default may instead relieve whichever constraint was binding locally, producing uniform outcomes through different pathways. This may be part of what makes defaults attractive relative to capacity-building strategies: when implementing a default, a state does not need to diagnose which constraint is binding in which district. Our sample cannot establish this pattern systematically, and our survey was not designed to detect it. Whether mechanism salience varies with district size, ELD model, and student mobility is a question for future research.

Our findings also extend the default policy literature by documenting a tension in participants' understanding of the override provision, a dimension of some default policies that has received little attention in prior research. For some leaders, the override served as a mechanism for preserving professional judgment, making the automatic default acceptable. For others, it reopened the door to discretionary judgment, which had produced inequitable outcomes under the manual system. This tension, however, existed only among leaders who knew the provision existed. For those who did not, the automatic default operated without a safety valve. The override is also asymmetric in the discretion it restores: districts may retain students who meet the threshold, but have no parallel mechanism to exit students who fall just below it. As one dissenting survey respondent observed, this may result in students remaining classified without any local judgment to intervene.

Among leaders who were aware of the override, perspectives appeared to reflect their underlying theories about the manual system's flaws. Leaders who most directly attributed the

failures of manual reclassification to bias, inconsistent judgment, or inadequate local capacity tended to view the override with skepticism. Leaders who described their prior reclassification practices as more systematic and equitable, or who framed the manual system's failures as primarily procedural, tended to view the override as a reasonable and appropriate safeguard. While our interview sample is too small to draw definitive conclusions on this issue, the patterns we have identified raise questions for future research: Are districts that use overrides most frequently those with strong prior reclassification practices and, therefore, exercising professional judgment judiciously in exceptional cases? Or are they districts whose manual practices were more problematic, and therefore using the override to effectively opt back into a discretionary system that the policy was designed to deviate from? Identifying the characteristics of districts that use the override option would advance our understanding of whether override provisions in default policies function as intended.

Conclusion

Michigan's shift from manual to automatic reclassification offers an early account of how default policies operate in K-12 education from the perspective of policy implementers. The district leaders in our study did not view standardization as a loss. Instead, they saw it as a relief from a burden that competed with the work they valued most and as a corrective to a system whose outcomes depended too heavily on local capacity and judgment. Our findings suggest that defaults may be especially valuable when implementation expertise is scarce and unevenly distributed, and that override provisions—and districts' awareness of them—deserve as much design attention as the default itself. As more states adopt automatic reclassification procedures, understanding how implementers experience these policies will be key to designing defaults that are both equitable and workable in practice.

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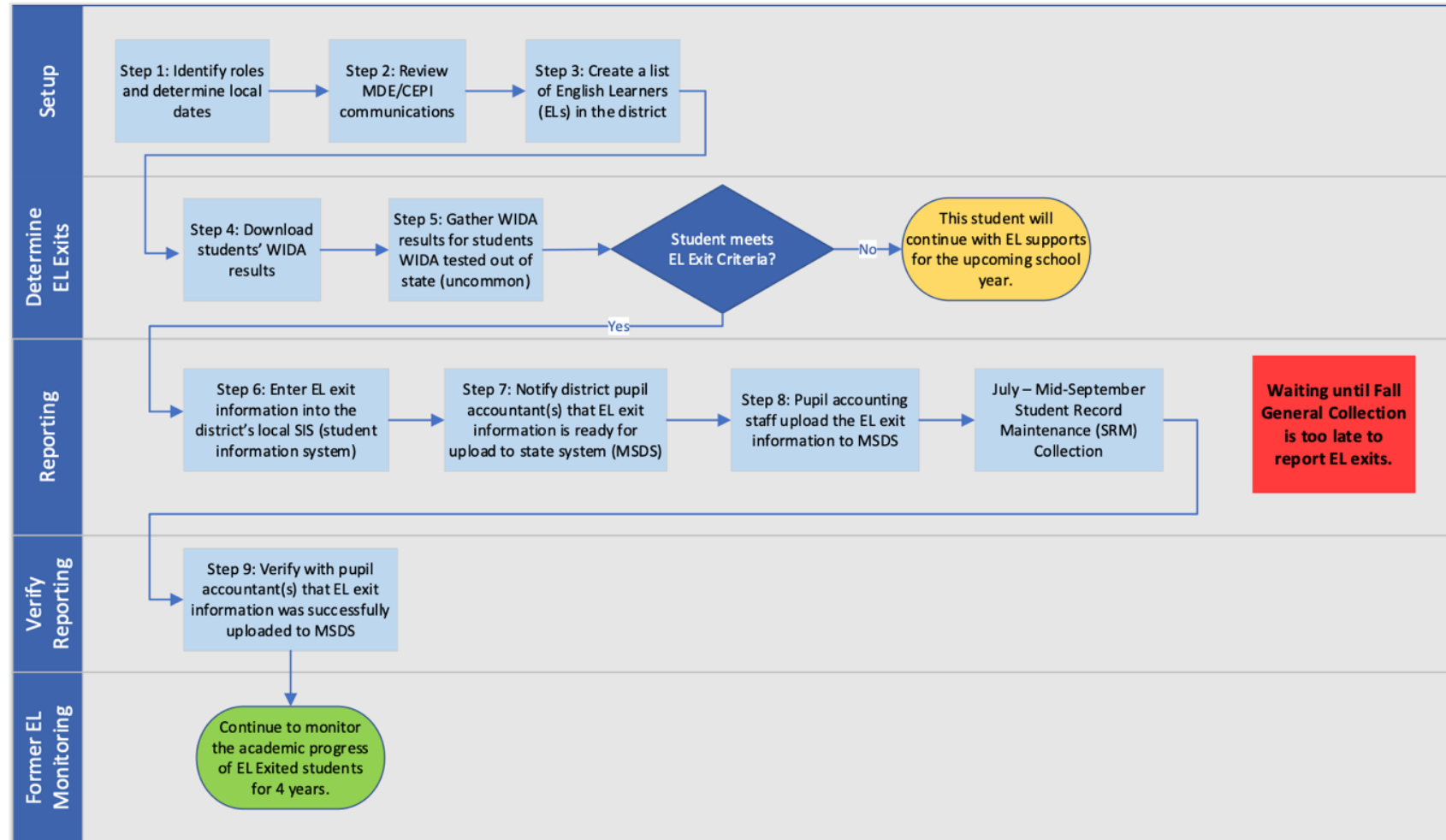
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Figure 1

Manual Reclassification Procedure in Michigan, 2016-17 through 2018-19



Source: Personal Communication with MDE, 2023

Table 1*Mapping Perceived Mechanisms to Components of Michigan's 2019 Reclassification Reform*

Perceived Mechanism	State Execution of Default	Criteria Simplification	Threshold Raise
Reduced Administrative Burden	Primary Contributor: Eliminated district data entry, interaction between districts and state system, and summer reclassification window.	Secondary Contributor: Eliminated collection and documentation of local reading scores.	N/A
Reduced Reliance on Local Capacity	Primary Contributor: Reclassification no longer contingent on district staff knowledge, tenure, or summer availability	Secondary Contributor: No local interpretation of assessment options or thresholds required	N/A
Resolution of Procedural Failures	Sole Contributor: State processing decoupled reclassification from school calendars and inter-district data transfer	N/A	N/A
Deemphasis of Subjective Input	Primary Source for Eligible Students: Removed the affirmative local decision through which discretion operated even when all criteria were met	Primary for Criterion-Setting: Removed the locally-interpreted reading criterion and local threshold-setting	Indirect: Perceived rigor of 4.8 legitimated exits, reducing protective impulses.

Table 2
Participant Sample

Pseudonym	District	Position in District	Interview Wave	District % Change Quartile (for wave 1)	In Role Pre-2019?
13:01	13	ELD Coordinator	1	1	Yes
6:01	6	ELD Coordinator	1	1	Yes
1:01	1	Director of English Learner Programs	1	1	Yes
11:01	11	Director of Research and Assessment	1	1	Yes
8:01	8	Director of Multilingual Programs	1	4	Yes
8:02	8	EL Coordinator	1	4	Yes
12:01	12	ELL Training and Support Coordinator	1	4	No, was an EL classroom teacher before policy change
10:01	10	ESL Coordinator and Head Teacher	1	2	Yes
7:01	7	English Learner Consultant	1	2	Yes
2:01	2	ELL Coordinator	1	3	Yes
2:02	2	Compensatory Education Coordinator	1	3	No, was a principal before policy change
4:01	4	Director of Special Populations	1	4	Yes
4:02	4	Special Populations Specialist	1	4	Yes
5:01	5	Director of EL & Bilingual Programs	1	2	No, was an EL consultant for multiple districts before policy change
9:01	9	EL Coordinator	2	N/A	
14:01	14	Migrant Student Liaison	2	N/A	Yes

3:01	3	Special Populations Specialist	2	N/A	Yes
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Online Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Thank you for taking the time to talk with us. We really appreciate your willingness to share your perspective on the state's shift to automatic reclassification. We have some specific questions that we will ask you, but, in essence, we would like this to be more like a conversation. There are no right or wrong answers. We value your input and ask you to be as honest and candid as possible.

Questions for all participants, regardless of tenure in role

A few years ago, there was a policy change where Michigan went from districts being responsible for exiting EL students who met reclassification criteria to the state automatically exiting students who met reclassification criteria.

1. How long have you been in your current role?
2. Were you in this role or a similar role before the state shifted to automatic reclassification?

If YES: As I ask questions, I'd like you to think about your pre- and post- auto exit experiences. (skip the next section if NO)
IF LEADER WAS IN THEIR ROLE PRE-2019:

- Can you describe how your district exited EL students who met reclassification criteria before the shift to auto exit?
- What challenges did district staff face with navigating the manual process, if any?
- How did your district's reclassification process shift when the policy changed?
- Why do you think auto exit was so successful at reclassifying eligible students compared to manual reclassification?
 - Were there administrative or resource barriers that made reclassification more challenging before auto exit?

If NO: We'll ask more about your current experiences with reclassification and perceptions of the impacts of auto exit.

3. What do you know about automatic exit? What has been your experience with this policy change?
2. What do you think about this change overall?
 - a. Do you feel that this change was positive, negative, or neutral? Why?

Administrative Burden and Workload

- How has automatic reclassification affected your workload or your EL staff's workloads?

- Have any administrative tasks associated with reclassification become easier or less time consuming?
- Has this shift freed up time for other responsibilities? If so, what can you prioritize now that you couldn't before?
- Are there any parts of the reclassification process that still feel burdensome?

Overrides

- Are you aware that districts can override the automatic reclassification process to keep an EL student classified even if they have met exit criteria?
- What do you think about the fact that districts can override the automatic reclassification process?
- Has your district overridden automatic reclassification for any students? If so, can you share examples?
- What does the override process look like for you? Is it easy or difficult to navigate?
- Does the override process add or reduce administrative work?

Equity

8. Do you think automatic reclassification has helped ensure more equitable outcomes for students from different backgrounds, for example different home language groups?

If they ask for more information show table:

	Percent of ELs who met exit criteria who were reclassified		Pre and post policy difference
	Before policy change	After policy change	
Spanish	51%	96%	45%
All other languages	67%	97%	30%

Our analyses show that the shift to automatically exit students who met reclassification criteria moved the needle more for Spanish speakers. Before the policy change, 51 percent of Spanish-speaking ELs who met exit criteria were reclassified, and this number rose to 96 percent following the policy change. ELs with other home languages who met exit criteria were reclassified 67 percent of the time, which increased to 97 percent.

9. From your standpoint, do some students still require more case-by-case attention before you would feel comfortable reclassifying them? (Probe for examples).

10. Have any teachers from your district raised any concerns about automatic exit?

I'd like your thoughts on whether you see opportunities to leverage a similar policy design in other areas of education.

10. Are there other areas of your work where you think automation could reduce administrative burden/tasks without undermining professional judgment?

Thank you once again for taking the time to speak with us today!

Online Appendix B

Survey Items

Q6.1: A few years ago, Michigan shifted from districts overseeing the process of exiting EL students to a process where the Michigan Department of Education automatically exits EL students who have met criteria. Please consider the following statement on MDE's automatic exit process:

Overall, shifting to a process where students who qualify to exit are automatically exited by MDE has been: Very negative, Negative, Neutral, Positive, Very Positive

Q6.2 (displayed for “Positive” or “Very Positive” response to Q6.1) I believe the shift to automatically exit EL students who meet criteria has been positive for the following reasons (Check all that apply): Automatic exit is more efficient, Automatic exit reduces burden on district staff, Automatic exit minimizes errors during the reclassification process, Automatic exit prevents bias from entering the reclassification process, Other: (Please explain)

Q6.3 (displayed for “Negative” or “Very Negative” responses to Q6.1) I believe the shift to automatically exit EL students who meet criteria has been negative for the following reasons (Check all that apply): EL students would benefit if districts had more input into the reclassification process like they did before automatic exit, Since automatic exit began, students are being exited who are not actually English proficient, Other: (Please explain)

Q6.4 If you have any additional comments on the automatic exit process, please record them here:

Online Appendix C

Codebook

Parent Code	Child Code	Definition	Example
Overall Assessment of Auto Exit		Leader's general orientation towards the shift from manual to automatic reclassification. Can be positive, negative, or neutral overall.	
	Positive Overall	Leader clearly supports the shift to auto exit. Statements reflect a positive view of the change as beneficial for students, staff, or the overall system, without caveats.	"I definitely think it was a positive change...we are much more equitable now with our students. The right students are being exited and given the opportunity to be able to demonstrate their proficiency and be acknowledged for that and reclassified when eligible." (5:01)
	Conditional Positive	Leader is generally positive about the change, but has meaningful reservations, conditions, or tradeoffs.	"Auto exit is amazing...but, I don't want to use one data point to limit a kid." (13:01)
	Neutral	Leader is neither in support of or opposed to auto exit.	N/A - Survey Response
Perceived Mechanisms	Negative	Leader expresses opposition to, or skepticism about, the shift to auto exit.	N/A - Survey Response
		The causal explanations leaders offer for why auto exit increased reclassification rates. These codes operationalize the hypotheses from prior literature and additional mechanisms that emerged from the initial round of coding.	

Administrative Burden Reduction	Leader attributes the increase in reclassification rates (or describes a benefit of auto exit) to the reduction in administrative tasks, paperwork, or compliance tasks, or time demands that were associated with the manual reclassification process. Draws explicitly or implicitly on the idea that administrative burden was a barrier to manual reclassification processes.	"First of all, many school districts don't have a single ESL certified teacher period who knows anything about EL programming. And so [during manual reclassification] they were reliant on all different sorts of individuals [in their central district office] who were just given the MDE newsletter for dates and deadlines for the exit process. And we never know when the WIDA data is going to come in. I just remember it being very confusing and a lot of brain power and time and energy was spent on that process where that time could have been spent bolstering systems and programs and opportunities for kids." (5:01)
Reduced Reliance on Local Capacity	Leader attributes the increase in reclassification rates to the fact that auto-exit no longer depends on individual staff members' knowledge, training, or tenure. The mechanism is that manual processes created variation driven by capacity differences, and auto exit eliminates those. Leader describes specific procedural gaps, technical errors, or systemic oversights under the manual process that caused eligible students to be missed (not because of bias or inadequate capacity, but because of how the system was structured...e.g., data timing, mobility, enrollment periods).	"From my experience, the students who weren't getting exited weren't getting exited because [districts] didn't have a system in place...whoever was overseeing the EL program wasn't always a central office position. And if it was central office, it was siloed. However, those who had a system in place where those EL people were at the table and coordination of pupil accounting was happening, those students were being exited correctly. And that was really more of being part of a stronger system versus relying on local control at the building level perhaps." (7:01)
Procedural or Technical Failure	Leader attributes reclassification outcomes to the removal of subjective, discretionary, or potentially biased human judgment from the reclassification process. Includes both intentional and unintentional subjectivity (e.g., deliberate decisions to retain students and staff impressions or non-data factors that influenced decisions). Leader attributes the improvement in reclassification rates to uniform application of exit criteria cross all districts and schools by a state-level administrative process.	"Not everybody has a designated person to [reclassify students], and sometimes the people who are designated to [reclassify students] might be teachers who then have to go in during the summer because they don't have somebody who manages their side of the data. And it's just one more step. So anytime you add another layer, you have another margin for error." (9:01)
Removal of Subjective Input/Local Discretion		"There [was] always a fear that, 'we are going to exit this child', and, 'oh my gosh, that's a big decision because he is never going to be able to have the support again,' and, 'he's just going to be out there flailing on his own, he might not be ready for that.' But, he's met this criteria...we have so many safety nets and supports in place...but we still might be a little worried that, 'oh, he's still going to need some TLC,' but he is going to get that. We have other district supports." (13:01)
State-Level Standardization		"There wasn't going to be wiggle room [under automatic reclassification]. There was, 'This is the threshold to meet exit.' The state says it. This is the exit from here. It made things a lot easier...so that was very, very welcome." (8:01)

Override Practices		Captures leaders' knowledge of, attitudes towards, and experiences with overrides. Overrides are a bridge between state standardization and local professional judgment.	
	Awareness	Leader is aware (or not) of override option.	"I can still do manual [reclassification, via the override]...we still have the flexibility we need to make the decision that's best for the kids without just the one data point." (10:01)
	Override Use and Frequency	Leader describes whether their district has used the override option, and if so, how frequently.	"I think it's great to have [overrides] if needed. You have keep track of [reclassified students] for a couple years, so they've become a part of that multi-tiered system of supports. I don't think we really even had to do the override, to be honest. I don't really know why they would do it. But if we needed it, it's nice to have. I just don't, we haven't needed it, to be honest." (2:01)
	Rationale for Overrides	Leader explains the reasons or criteria by which they decide to use or not use the override for individual students.	"[A student's reclassification was overridden] after sitting down with the parents...it was a family and school decision...it was just...we don't know how he [met reclassification criteria] because all of his other data shows that he's way below grade level and we do think it's due to the language barrier." (13:01)
	Experience	Leader explains their experiences with the override provision.	"[The override] was never presented as something that we could really take advantage of." (4:02)
	Override as Professional Judgment Preservation	Leader frames the override as a safeguard (or not) that preserves local professional judgment.	"I think you'd have to put guardrails around [the override provision]...people do dumb stuff. But I can see an argument for [the override provision] for sure...[but]...I cannot imagine a scenario where you're going to say, we're going to keep somebody in if we trust the test." (11:01)
Equity Perceptions		Leaders' views on whether and how auto exit affects equity outcomes, particularly across language groups.	
	General Equity Framing	Leader Frames auto-exit in terms of fairness, equal treatment, or access to opportunity, without necessarily specifying a particular student subgroup.	"Most of the EL programs across the state of Michigan are a segregated pullout model. To force kids into that segregation, or that schedule, when it might not be what they actually need, simply due to human error, I feel like that was a huge equity piece that we were able to address and clean up from the auto exit." (5:01)

Concerns/Limitations	Language Group Disparities	Leader specifically addresses whether auto exit has affected students from different home language groups differently (e.g., Spanish speaking vs. other home languages).	"[automatic reclassification] takes bias out...we know that Hispanic students are not doing as well as white students...there's a lot of reasons for that, but part of it is just the bias that occurs in the classroom. Do those students feel like they belong?...Do they think they're as capable?...in general, Hispanic students don't get considered as capable as other students. And so that bias, that frankly racism extends to what we see with [eligible students not reclassifying]." (11:01)
	Student Mobility	Leader discusses how auto exit particularly benefits or protects highly mobile students.	[When asked why there were such large gaps between eligible and reclassified students under manual reclassification] "My first wondering would be, how does transiency play a role in what happened there? If they were a student with us in February, when we tested on the WIDA, and the score came back in July, if they were no longer our student at that point...was that where we missed some kids?" (9:01)
	Reservations, criticisms, or perceived limitations of auto exit.		
	Single Data Point	Concern that basing reclassification solely on WIDA score is an inadequate basis for a consequential reclassification decision, even if it is practical.	"With [automatic reclassification]...all the qualified students do get exited. I believe it's more of the exit criteria change that is a negative, because it is an overall 4.8 on the WIDA. That is the only exit criteria. And a 4.8 on the WIDA does not mean that a student is proficient." (4:01)
	Students Needing Case-by-Case Attention	Leader identifies specific student populations or situations where they feel a student who has met (or missed) exit criteria still needs individualized review before reclassification (or retention).	"I have arguments with students [who do not meet exit criteria] about, 'I got a six on the reading and listening [components of WIDA],' I'm like, 'all right, I'll see you next year.' The kids kind of have a point. If they got a six on reading and listening last year, why are we assessing them and reading and listening again if they've already shown mastery of it? They finally give up and just write out, refuse and say, 'I'm not going to do it anymore. So I do wonder if there should be some [alternative reclassification criteria].'" (13:01)
	Teacher/Staff Pushback	Leader reports teachers or other staff in their district have expressed concerns about auto exit.	"[the automatic reclassification process consists of] filtering out a spreadsheet, and all of the kids who had this number next to their name were exited from a program that provides a lot of support. They don't know who that kid is...and that did worry everyone in my department. But like I said, having that safety net where we could always pull them back in made us feel better." (13:01)

Concern About
Premature or
Delayed Exit

Concern that students are being reclassified too
early or too late.

"I think that there are kids that definitely exit and are still lacking in other areas, but I'm wondering as district, if those are just interventions that we have to put in place as we monitor over the three years after they've exit it...having a safety net in place for those students." (4:01)
