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"The Lady from North Carolina": The Perils and Limitations of External Expertise

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Abstract

This paper examines a state department of education's (SDE) decision to contract a consultant to "turnaround" schools, per a logic of outsourcing for external expertise. Our ethnographically informed case study explores whose knowledge had the most worth in diagnosing areas for improvement and identifies this case as part of a trend to rent competencies, under a neoliberal guise of efficiency, but at the expense of system capacity or learning.

Keywords: School improvement, education policy, consultants, accountability, state department of education

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> "I love America more than any other country in this world and exactly for this reason I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually." — James Baldwin

Introduction

Nebraska, like all states, is host to a number of consistently low-performing schools. This is by definition, as under the influence of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) and its more recent replacement (the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, or ESSA), schools are compared with each other using the same test score metrics and some fare worse than others. In turn, Nebraska, like a lot of states, recently determined that state-led interventions were needed to help these consistent low-performers "turn around." This paper, derived from a dissertation (Phillips 2017) that examined much of that effort (from the Nebraska legislature, to the state board of education, to the state department of education, and then ultimately out to four targeted schools), examines one curious, but sadly not unique, dimension of Nebraska's effort: Despite state intervention being rationalized under a logic of there being extant expertise at the state level (as well as a supposed dearth in the intervention schools), the state rather quickly turned not to its state department of education (SDE) but to a North Carolina-based consultant to lead the interventions.

Making schools equitable has long been a preoccupation of policymakers, practitioners, and anthropologists of education, but it remains the case that that intent too often falls short in practice (Au 2009; Lashaw 2010; Peck and Reitzug 2014; Trujillo and Renée 2013). So, informed by the very large (and career-spanning) question of "why do certain kids struggle at school?" or phrased inversely, "why do certain schools struggle with certain kids?" we ask here an anthropology of policy implementation question (Hamann and Rosen 2011): Where is the expertise that could enduringly help a struggling school purported to be? Or, as an overlapping question, whose expertise counts when the task is to help four very different (albeit similarly low-scoring) schools? In posing these questions, we note that decisions made away from schools (in district offices, state offices, and legislative

chambers) can be substantively consequential for what happens at schools, so asking about why certain schools struggle with certain kids (and struggle broadly if there are a lot of "such kids"), we assert that schools are not the only settings where our questions should be pursued. Furthermore, if we assume that expertise is built through intervention and acknowledge that Nebraska's rationale for targeting specific schools from a larger universe of identified schools was to build expertise that would eventually help these other identified schools, we can pose one more question: How was a system that spans from state legislature to struggling classrooms supposed to learn? If it learned, how would it keep/store the expertise it developed?

We acknowledge that these are big questions, but we insist that they are important questions, because they help us transcend a challenge identified by then-AEQ Editor Katie Anderson-Levitt (1997, 316) more than twenty years ago in her introduction to a special issue (organized by Margaret Gibson) concerned with schooling and equality. She explained, "For all that 'failure' is artificially constructed by schools, it is constructed on the backs of some students more than others. We would have to be blind not to notice that, in spite of individuals' strategies of resistance and thousands of success stories, we can predict with some regularity which racial and ethnic categories encompass disproportionate numbers of students failed by the system." Part of the work of anthropology of education is to locate where the challenges to educational success emerge (including well away from the affected students) or, framed more particularly, why do some interventions, that may well be characterizable as substantial and well-meaning, nonetheless not interrupt the dynamics of certain schools' struggles for long?

The case described here allows us to critically examine how education policy investments in external consultants are shaping, "who currently gets to define which forms of knowledge will count as useful for whom" (Moss 2013, 238). It concurrently allows us to investigate what happens to the knowledge, or learning, that comes from the intervention. As we will illustrate, in this case public dollars were invested to essentially develop, then rent, external, *private* knowledge rather than to build local and state *public* capacity. This all said, our study is not intended as a critique of "the lady from North Carolina" per se—she was an experienced educator, although with little

Nebraska experience. Rather, in keeping with the James Baldwin epigram that opens this paper, our intent is to critique the consultocracy that she exemplifies.

This case raises questions about policy prescriptions that (*a*) presume or at least permit that schools with diverse contexts and histories require the same type of intervention, (*b*) assume the primary problem in "low-performing schools" is that local administrators and faculty lack information a consultant possesses, and (*c*) position a consultant to answer to funders (in this case the state board of education [SBOE] and SDE) thereby functioning according to a "political" policy clock (Noble and Smith 2000), rather than in response to the "objects of the political technology at work" (Foucault 1977, 200)—that is, to the students, teachers, and other constituents of the identified schools.

The case also considers the consequences of imagining or failing to imagine a state department of education as a learning organization (Hamann and Lane 2004; Lusi 1997; Whitford and Jones 2000). Findings raise questions about building SDE capacity to support struggling schools when hiring outside expertise and problematize the power constructs at play when an external consultant inevitably marches to the cadence of policymakers' political clock rather than the tempo of change at the building level.

Although the larger case study that this was drawn from was multifaceted, as is appropriate for a dissertation (Phillips 2017), the polemic of this piece is narrower—to describe the problem diagnoses that led to Nebraska's decision to intervene in several low-performing schools, to describe the consultocracy (Gunter et al. 2015) that ultimately became the "efficient" way to support schools and to describe a not-pursued alternative to the consultocracy in which the expertise for helping low-performing schools would come from SDE personnel and remain part of Nebraska's professional public infrastructure supporting other schools.

On April 10 the Nebraska State Legislature (a.k.a., the "Unicameral") passed Legislative Bill 438 (LB 438), which provided a statutory outline for a new school accountability system. All public schools and districts were to be classified into performance levels according to a complex calculation that included student achievement and growth on statewide assessments and school graduation rates. According to LB 438, which became codified in statute Neb. Rev. Stat.

§§ 79-760.06-.07, the SBOE was authorized to help the SDE intervene in up to three "priority schools" identified among schools in the lowest performance classification. SDE intervention teams were then expected to work in collaboration with the local school board and the administration and staff of each priority school to create a progress plan for improvement. As in many other state accountability systems, the improvement in Nebraska's priority schools was to be measured by student performance on statewide assessment (Au 2013; Koyama 2013).

Between April 2014 and December 2015, the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) at the direction of the SBOE developed this accountability system (which came to be known as AQuESTT) and processes for identifying and concurrently intervening in up to three priority schools. When announcing the first three identified priority schools in December 2015, Commissioner of Education Matthew Blomstedt explained that he hoped intervention work would provide knowledge as to how the system of education in Nebraska might be able to support all struggling schools to improve achievement outcomes. Among the 1130 schools in the state, under the new system, 87 schools had been classified as "Needing Improvement." These schools, according to Blomstedt, fell into four primary themes: Native American communities, demographically transitioning communities (read increasingly Latinx communities), small communities with declining population (read "poor white"), and urban school communities (read largely African American; Nebraska State Board of Education 2015). He explained that in recommending initial priority schools he had selected a school representative of three of the four themes. His first three priority schools were Loup County Elementary in Taylor, Nebraska (in a primarily white, rural community with declining enrollment), Druid Hill Elementary (serving primarily African American students) in Omaha, and Santee Middle School (serving Native American students) on the Santee Sioux Reservation. Crucially, the rationale for picking an example of each type of struggling school was that there was no "one size fits all" formula for improvement. Different struggling schools would need different interventions.

Although this was not the first time a state had intervened into the historically local governance prerogative of school system management—New Jersey (Erlichson 2005), Kentucky and Vermont (Lusi

1997), and Texas (Valenzuela 2005) are among the older examples—this was the first time Nebraska had acted in such a fashion. At this stage, turning to a consultant had not been broached, but that would soon change.

Education Policy and Implementation

There is a long history of education reform efforts intended to improve schooling in the United States (Tyack and Cuban 1995). As perceived societal needs shift, what is demanded from the education system also shifts and, thus, the landscape of education policy is ever changing (Apple 2006; Berliner and Biddle 1995; Labaree 2010). Education reforms are often externally mandated (many times coming from legislative action as happened in this case) and are intended to have widespread and deep implementation at the local level, although Coburn (2003) notes how hard it is to actually get reforms to change classroom practice. Like other critical policy studies (e.g., Au 2013; Koyama and Kania 2016), this article seeks to understand the power constructs that exist when an education reform intended to improve schools moves across tiers from conceptualization to implementation at the local level.

One key and pertinent national school-reform-precipitating event was the National Commission on Excellence in Education's publication in 1983 of *A Nation at Risk,* which "sounded alarms about America's dwindling competitiveness...[and] the disparities in achievement among different racial, ethnic, and immigrant groups and classes became cause for public concern" (Knowles 2003, 39). The report, "with its incendiary language... soon became a touchstone in the history of American education" (Gordon and Graham 2003, 1). It largely blamed educators for the "rising tide of mediocrity" and "unilateral educational disarmament" of the nation's public schools and diagnosed the system's main challenge as one of inadequate expectations. So it encouraged policymakers to focus on raising standards in a set of policies variously called the Excellence Movement and the Standards Movement, a movement that called for more rigorous high school graduation requirements, more student assessments, and increased teacher licensure requirements (Proefriedt 2008; Ravitch 2010; Vinovskis 2003).

Buoyed also by the National Governor Association's first-ever Education Summit in 1990, in the 1990s states moved beyond their previous monitoring and funding roles, and constructed policies around the daily work of schools related to more rigorous curriculum standards, higher stakes assessments, and increased educator effectiveness (Schwartz 2003; Sleeter 2007). As part of a larger neoliberal logic that marked much of the policy produced by the Reagan, H.W. Bush, Clinton, and W. Bush administrations, bipartisan policy remedies for school improvement reflected market-based solutions, as both federal and state legislative bodies developed policy around curricular standards, assessments, and educator evaluation tied to student performance (Apple 2006; Cuban 2003). With that as the backdrop, federal legislators debated a more prominent federal role with the drafting in 2001 of a bill to reauthorize the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA). Their product, NCLB, was the major extant K–12 federal education policy until near the end of Barack Obama's second term, when the ESSA formally supplanted it.

Before NCLB, lawmakers had been hesitant to centralize educational reform or accountability, acknowledging that the diversity of communities and schools, with their unique needs and governance structures, presented a challenge to prescribing educational reform that could adequately meet the needs of such varied contexts (Cohen 1995; Gordon and Graham 2003; Labaree 2010). Nonetheless, with an impatience to help struggling schools and an exchange of promised funding increases with the addition of more structure, NCLB was the high-water mark for bipartisanship under President George W. Bush. Introducing ideas and turns of phrase like "adequate yearly progress" and mandating standardized tests at multiple grade levels, NCLB drastically changed public education in the United States (Au 2013; Vinovskis 2003; Weiner 2007).

One consequence of NCLB included emphasizing the "deficiencies of schools and students while deemphasizing collaborative and proactive interventions at the school level" (Hall and Parker 2007, 132). Schools were labeled as "failing" for not meeting performance benchmarks in the law as measured by student performance on high-stakes state assessments. "Failing" schools then crafted and enacted plans for improvement. In the case of one school engaged in a "turnaround," Koyama described the strategy to improve student test scores as

teaching a narrowed curriculum aligned to what would be tested. She noted, "[This] did not take into account the diverse demographics of the students" (2015, 552).

Trujillo and Renée (2013) criticized the over reliance on standardized assessment scores in school turnaround efforts and advocated for more community engagement in the development and implementation of such efforts. Where schools were once presumed to be accountable to their local community and governing board, NCLB made schools accountable to state and federal standards. Under NCLB, states implemented school improvement grants (SIGs) tied to the law and developed their own state accountability systems and interventions. Efforts to "improve" schools at the local level were tied to "evidence-based" models and largely ignored local school context or agency in the design of school improvement plans.

Under a logic of "local control," Nebraska resisted NCLB's changes longer than most states (Gallagher 2007), but eventually it too decided to create a statewide assessment to compare schools in relationship to performance metrics. This is the larger context that led to the state legislation (LB 438) that resulted in the plan, called AQuESTT (short for Accountability for a Quality Education System, Today and Tomorrow), that led to the consulting arrangement further scrutinized here.

The "Consultocracy"

In the quest to reform or "turn around" struggling schools, states and districts have looked outside of their boundaries for programs and people to guide them in rapid improvement (VanGronigen and Meyers 2019). As Sturges (2015, 129) asserts, these "neoliberal policies have opened the door to a steady stream of contract providers who assist struggling schools while producing market-ready reforms." Ball (2009), (2012) and Ledger and Vidovitch (2018) describe the phenomenon as "outsourcing" and, in turn, describe the outsourcing of policymaking and implementation and curriculum and assessment.

Gunter et al. (2015, 518) describe the increasing role of private consultants or consultancy groups and the power they have been given by government organizations as an emerging "consultocracy." Mahony et al. (2004) have termed this the growth of "edu-business," and as VanGronigen and Meyers (2019) point out in their survey of SDE capacity to "turn around schools" under ESSA plans, eight states rely entirely

on external consultants to lead improvement efforts and many more create hybrid options for local schools to contract with such consultants to support implementation of improvement plans.

To make sense of the consultocracy, we draw upon Michael Apple's (2004) description of neoliberal ideology in education as a framework for school reform that privileges the private sphere and borrows from corporate business models that eschew conceptions of education as a public good that advances democratic aims. Consistent with a neoliberal logic, the market's competitiveness is supposed to create innovation and expertise, and there is no need per se to build or sustain expertise among those employed by public bureaucracies. So there has been a shift of expertise to consultants, that is, "new knowledge actors" (Mills 2015, 209) or "corporatized actors" (Courtney 2015, 214).

As Datnow et al. (2005) found in their study of external school reform models, there is little evidence to support the rationale that what works to improve one school can be brought, cookie-cutter fashion, to improve another school. Yet, in states like Nebraska, the political pressure for system accountability and rapid reform drives policymakers (legislators, state and local board members) toward systemic reforms that often embed "one size fits all" strategies even as some rhetoric may acknowledge local differences. Indeed the existence of that rhetoric may obfuscate how the state intervention strategy is so homogeneous.

State politics explain Nebraska's decision to act (Phillips 2019) in 2014 and, in turn, make relevant Noble and Smith's (2000) clocks metaphor that was derived from their study of school reform implementation by Delaware and Arizona's SDEs. Noble and Smith (2000, 181) asserted that the educational reform "doesn't run at the same speed for everyone," identifying three types of clocks in the implementation—a political clock, a professional clock, and a teacher clock—adding, "the source of reform determines the speed of the clock, and the history of varied success of specific policies and initiatives is readily explained in this way." Because the reform in this case was initiated by the state legislature, which then charged the SBOE to craft a plan that the SDE would implement, the political clock is the dominant frame. We will reference these contrasting clocks (and their different speeds) as we analyze what unfolded in Nebraska's priority school intervention and the positioning of an external consultant financially incentivized to answer to the SBOE rather than to attend to practitioners across contrasting local contexts.

Methodology

In ethnography that "studies up" (i.e., considers the powerful), the questions asked should guide the methodology. The research strategy employed should be "eclectic in its methods [and] broad in its vision of what it takes to understand [humans]" (Nader 1972, 293). In acknowledgment of the very different situatedness of legislative, SBOE, SDE, district, school, and consultant actors in this case, we have not called the larger study that this was drawn from an ethnography, instead preferring ethnographically informed comparative case study (Bartlett and Vavrus 2016) because of its attention to the vertical and transversal axis of examining how policy is implemented across scales in a particular moment in policy history.

We used an ethnographically informed approach, "borrowing from ethnographic techniques" (Wolcott 2008, 44), in order to access the complexities of the policy across tiers of implementation. The fieldwork occurred over an extended period of time (2013–2016); it opportunistically incorporated an array of data collection methods in order to support our understandings of various organizational cultures of the space, emerging patterns, and insider (*emic*) and outsider (*etic*) perspectives (Atkinson 1990; Van Maanen 1988). Data include transcripts from seventy-two legislative hearings and SBOE work sessions and meetings that included state senators, elected state board of education representatives, the commissioner of Education, and staff of the SDE. We collected more than 250 public artifacts or "material culture" (Hodder 2012) from state-policy documents as well as artifacts from local implementation in each of the first three priority schools.

This data collection was substantially facilitated by Phillips's role as a full-time SDE employee and designated liaison to one of the AQuESTT focal schools.[1] That role also meant she spent more than 200 hours engaged in fieldwork at the school, interacting with local school board members, school administrators, teachers, staff, and community. As such, she interacted with educators at that school both in the presence of the lady from North Carolina and in her absence. Phillips

1. Hamann has long studied education policy implementation by SDEs (among other actors) and has engaged in limited consulting for NDE. His broader familiarity with SDE-supported school reform efforts (e.g., Hamann and Lane 2004]), offered useful broader context to Phillips's insider perspective with NDE.

also met regularly with the other SDE liaisons to the target schools and can vouch that the expectations for liaisons (a new role, given that the priority schools were newly designated) were only vaguely enumerated, but liaisons were clearly subordinate to the consultant although designated to work *with* her, not *for* her.

Toma (2000) described the benefit of proximity in qualitative research. An insider has an understanding of a particular context or culture that is hard for an outsider to quickly gain. They are fluent in the jargon of the study setting and their presence is welcome and expected, rather than awkward. Toma acknowledges that insiders can be blind to noticing "what seems normal." By coauthoring this piece and engaging with the literature we have tried to notice what an insider could miss. Similarly, Toma acknowledges "insider accounts" can be seen as interested. He suggests the best way to mitigate such a concern is to be transparent to readers, to position you to determine if the account seems credible. Our analysis was an iterative process that included review, coding of themes, and analytic memos (Bowen 2009; Owen 2014). We were able to triangulate data and to examine how themes interacted across discourse from transcripts, artifacts, and field notes. We also provided opportunities for member checking (McQuillan 1998) in an effort to ensure triangulation and validity.

As a final methodological note, although it is possible from the public record and newspaper accounts to identify the consultant we are describing here (so we would not be violating any presumption of confidentiality if we did so), we have chosen to reference her only as "the lady from North Carolina" and "the consultant." We hope this directs attention away from her biography or personal story because our intent is to critique a role, not an individual. We did not formally interview her following the data collection for the broader study on AQuESTT's implementation, although she is quoted directly in several of the textual artifacts we examine. We should add that in one of the newspaper articles where she is quoted, a state senator is also quoted complaining about the cost of her consulting and wondering whether it is "efficient" (Dejka 2019).

Again noting the public record dimensions of most of this, we do refer to the commissioner and SBOE members usually by name. They were public figures doing public jobs. Within those roles it was important to situate the relationship of the SBOE to the work of the

commissioner, his deputies, and NDE. The members of the SBOE were elected officials and thus must be attentive to their populous in order to maintain their positions. The commissioner was hired by the board and, in a sense, serves at its pleasure. Deputy commissioners and employees of the SDE were hired with the approval of the commissioner.

The Lady from North Carolina

In December 2015, Commissioner Blomstedt announced his recommendations for three AQuESTT priority schools selected for state intervention based primarily on student performance on standardized statewide assessments, graduation rates, and the fact that each was an exemplar of a type of struggling school. SBOE members responded positively to his recommendations. The president of the SBOE highlighted the role of the intervention teams that the Commissioner proposed which would provide guidance and input to "see that the continuous plan that's in place…is going to have some positive results" (Nebraska State Board of Education 2015).

Another board member, one whose district included the Loup County priority school, described the disposition an intervention team ought to have, "not there to punish, or to say 'you're doing it all wrong, or you put this on the shelf,' but that we're there to work *with* them and listen to them" (Nebraska State Board of Education 2015, emphasis added). She acknowledged that as the intervention team worked with each priority school and as each school implemented its progress plan, "[O]ther schools that are in the Needs Improvement category are going to be watching how we treat and how we intervene…I just hope that we go in with the respect for what they are doing" (Nebraska State Board of Education 2015).

The commissioner agreed and stated his intention was to attend to locality in the development of improvement plans. He anticipated that in studying the "types" of schools struggling according to AQuESTT's performance metrics there might be patterns of action to support improvement at other schools and cast a vision that the SBOE could develop larger "system of support" for all schools in the state. Whether this was conceptualized as "finding what worked and moving it cookie-cutter fashion elsewhere" (which Datnow et al. [2005] have pointed

out does not work) was not clear yet. The original plan did seem to suggest that at least the different types of challenged schools should not be approached the same way. That acknowledgment, however, did not address whether it was appropriate to measure "success" the same way at all the schools. (It was later made clear that the metric for success would be rather narrow—improvement in students' standardized test scores.)

Looking For External Solutions

Only a month later in January 2016, NDE Deputy Commissioner Frison announced to a small group of staff who had worked on the AQuESTT project team (Phillips included) that NDE would issue a contract to a consultant from North Carolina to complete reviews of priority schools to assess what needed to go into improvement plans according to each context. The lady from North Carolina (as she was referred to at several sites) was a recently retired assistant superintendent of Instructional Design and Innovation from a 12,000-student North Carolina district that was two-thirds white, but also approximately 15% each African American and Hispanic. (Her record did not include prior work with reservation schools.) Through her hiring, Nebraska was following precedent set by other states, calling upon external expertise and "market-ready reforms" to improve priority schools (Sturges 2015; VanGronigen and Meyers 2019). Perhaps explaining why she was picked, before taking on the AQuESTT role the lady from North Carolina had already consulted in Omaha at Druid Hill Elementary, one of the three priority schools.

At the January meeting, Frison told members of the nascent intervention teams that the consultant would join a small project team—including the accountability coordinator, an NDE liaison to each priority school, representation from each school's intermediate service agency (Nebraska has Educational Service Units that act as regional intermediaries between often quite small districts and NDE), and Frison herself—on visits to the three schools. A month later this team made initial visits to all three schools with the stated purpose of establishing a positive working relationship that would support the development and implementation of a progress plan tailored to each school. The lady from North Carolina played a central role in these

conversations, asking principals how often they were in classrooms observing instruction, what professional learning staff had been provided throughout the school year so far, and what the vision for the school would look like in the next couple of years.

She returned to the state again in early March 2016 for a two-day trip to complete “diagnostic reviews,” again with the stated intention of studying the local context in order to develop progress plans for each of the three “types” of schools each priority school represented. Visits in each school included classroom observations, conversations with the administrative team, and a “glows and grows” process to gather input from a cross-section of teachers, community members, and students. On the surface, the lady from North Carolina’s approach aligned with Trujillo and Renée’s (2013) recommendations for cultivating democratic school turnaround efforts (e.g., engaging authentically with teachers, families and community in the design process and focusing on teaching and learning).

Following those visits, the consultant compiled her findings into approximately twenty-page reports for each school, completing and delivering them before the end of the month. Despite the contrasting needs of the three priority schools, evident in the raw data included in the appendices of each report, her recommendations for prioritizing objectives for improvement plans were organized around identical needs and what she described as her “three levers of improvement”: Clear and Compelling Direction, School Culture, and Instructional Capacity (Nebraska Department of Education 2016, 2).

The lady from North Carolina again visited Nebraska in May to outline for NDE staff the process for crafting priority school progress plans prior to the August SBOE meeting (when according to the legislation all priority school plans were to be approved). She indicated which goals should be part of each school’s plan and how they ought to be aligned to her three levers of improvement. She instructed NDE’s accountability coordinator on strategies to facilitate work with the handful of staff in each school to ensure the determined goals were identified and drafted. The focus of the goals and strategies described below were the same across the three priority schools.

The June 2016 SBOE monthly work session included an update on the work in the priority schools. The commissioner, after making a couple remarks about the need to support improvement in the priority

schools turned it over to the consultant and NDE's accountability coordinator. The lady from North Carolina began her presentation, outlining her levers of improvement. She explained that "Clear and compelling direction... focuses on the vision of the school—the core values and not just having a sense of mission." The sense of the school's purpose, she clarified, should be present across all stakeholders from the local board of education, to students and families, and to educators. "It's really looking at overall direction of how the school prepares the students for the world of work, to pursue college education, or serve in the military" (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016a). The second area in her model examined staff and student culture, "to determine if the schools were places where students wanted to attend" (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016a). She looked at whether or not "the staff wanted to be there to teach the students and have that sense of urgency around educating students and meeting the needs of the children there" (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016a). Additionally, she explained, an element of the culture was also related to whether the school, "is a place where parents want to send their students to learn and feel safe in doing so" (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016a). The lady from North Carolina then described the third and final component of her review: instructional leadership capacity. Each of the schools would focus on:

> developing the talents of teachers...providing support to them with curriculum alignment to the Nebraska state standards, also their lesson planning processes [and] are they adding rigor to the curriculum and differentiating instruction for students who need it most on both ends of the spectrum... [and] most importantly getting students ready for the next level of learning. (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016a)

She then clarified that the information included in the review report for each school would inform the progress planning and ensure goals are "attainable" and "specific" in order to "help them get out of priority status quickly" (Nebraska Department State Board of Education 2016a). The goal would be, she explained, "to learn from the processes that we create so that we can replicate those other places" (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016a). She did not comment

on the premise that these schools had different challenges and might thus need different support. She also did not comment on the premise that getting "out of priority status quickly" meant boosting student achievement scores on statewide assessments, and thus, each school would have essentially the same plan focused narrowly on instruction in reading and math.

Commissioner Blomstedt expressed his appreciation in seeing all the pieces coming together in the progress plan, stating that, "I think it's a quite remarkable process…the fact of the matter is, we're trying to build *a model* that helps these three schools" (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016a, emphasis added). The work would inform how the state should approach supporting improvement in Needs Improvement schools by providing, "a road map for how schools generally get their improvement strategies done…It's a unique time because we're doing that work from a state level" (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016a). No longer were there discussions about attending to the context, complexities, or assets in each school community or what it would mean to improve schools or systems according to broader indicators of success.

It is important to note here that, whereas the lady from North Carolina's three levers encompassed indicators beyond those related to raising assessment scores (i.e., mission and vision, building culture) in the "road map" provided to each school, in their progress plans, her consulting support focused on building principal instructional leadership capacity and ensuring standards-aligned instruction. Both of these were intended to boost statewide assessment scores in each building. The sincere (but simplistic) assumptions did not take into account the context and histories of each local school or acknowledge that some intractable and long-term challenges (i.e., staff turnover, student mobility, poverty) do not have quick solutions that can be achieved through the work of a single external expert.

The SBOE did not meet between June and August 2016. However, revisions of progress plans continued. Not surprisingly, each plan contained nearly identical goals and strategies that would be implemented under the consultant's direction one to two days a month. One priority school administrator commented on this in a meeting about his school's progress plan. He questioned how plans for such different schools in such different community contexts had plans that

could look so similar. He wondered how one person might be an expert on how to help such different places. There was no response to this statement.

Instead of relying on local knowledge or regional expertise (or following through on the initial intention to "respect what's been done"), the pursued policy prescription determined that there were similar knowledge deficits at each of the struggling schools that could be corrected through the knowledge of the same external consultant carrying out the same actions in each school. In this way, AQuESTT's implementation was constructed on a neoliberal premise set forward by NCLB, "that schools alone are unable to close the achievement gaps across social class and racial fissures and that they are in need of outside, often businesslike, intervention" (Koyama 2011, 20). In turn, the knowledge of most worth (Moss 2013) was knowledge that could be rented for one to two days a month rather than the local knowledge embedded in the community and working in the school every day. This presumption that once knowledge or skill gaps were corrected by the external consultant, barriers to improvement would be dismantled and improvement sustained in each place, ignores larger questions about the ways education policy attends to or reinforces structures of power (Hall and McGinty 1997; Young 1999) and the sometimes competing policy cadence of policymakers and practitioners in policy implementation (Noble and Smith 2000).

Influence of the Political Clock

By the time the August SBOE meeting arrived the lady from North Carolina was ready with a progress plan draft for each of the three priority schools. When she and NDE's accountability coordinator moved to sit at the table before the board, the commissioner told board members that it was, "a monumental point in time for us to look at priority schools [and how] our role as an agency is changing" (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016b). Just as she had in June, the lady from North Carolina described the "levers" of her process. She described how the voices of a range of stakeholder groups was involved over "many hours, many, many hours creating the plans that they have submitted for your approval" (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016b). She asserted that each of the three school's plans were unique, "based

on the needs that they have within their community and within their school district," (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016b). However, as she outlined key components of each school's progress plan reflecting her three levers of school improvement, the similarities (beyond the structure) were evident.

As Phillips later summarized in an analytic memo

> Throughout this presentation, I sat in the public gallery in the state board room directly behind the [Santee Middle School administrative team]. I wondered how the school representatives felt as they listened to the discussion of their schools, their staff members, and their students. I wondered, because in the presentation to the SBOE, representatives from Santee were never asked what they thought. When the lady from North Carolina described "the many, many hours" she had spent on developing the progress plans I wondered whether SBOE members would notice that, according to the contracts they had approved in previous months, she had spent a total of a day and a half in each building. Apparently, 30 hours, or 10 per school, was "many, many." (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016b)

At the meeting Commissioner Blomstedt and Deputy Commissioner Frison expressed appreciation for the consultant and the NDE staff's work on coordinating progress plans. "We have come," Frison said, "so very far" (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016b). In their discussions of the plan, board member Glen Flint asked about exit criteria and Frison responded that, "I don't think there is exit criteria in the plan, and I would almost emphasize the fact that the plan is so to speak, fluid" (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016b).

Board member Patrick McPherson was not satisfied with this response, asking, "Wouldn't it make sense though, to have some kind of tangible exit criteria goals for these schools so that, you know...they know what they've got to achieve in order to get off the list?" (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016b). Commissioner Blomstedt reminded the board that each school is, "a priority school until this body says that they're not" (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016b). The progress plans, Blomstedt said, would last for one year and in that

time, "it gives us a chance to kind of dissect that, and by next year... we make judgment about where they're at in those plans" (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016b). This discussion highlighted the emphasis SBOE members and SDE leadership placed on time. Statutory language stated that a priority school must demonstrate sufficient improvement to be removed from priority status within five years. The political policy clock (Noble and Smith 2000) was ticking and elected SBOE members were determined to see improvement.

When the SBOE president moved to a discussion of the consulting contracts for the priority schools, Commissioner Blomstedt clearly stated the intention to develop a standardized response to priority schools when he told the board that he wanted consistency across how each progress plan was implemented and development of:

> a specialized type of approach to how we think about turnaround in schools, how we do that work, and so, right now, we're trying to use [the consultant's] work to help us actually in the long run build capacity to do that work...[She] brings a special level of expertise to get that work accomplished. (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016b)

Board member Flint posed the first question regarding the contracts. "I was just wondering, it is quite a chunk of money, it's like $256,000. Is she bidding hours? Does she have a bio or what other schools she's helped out or something?" (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016b). Frison explained that the consultant had provided a schedule for the days she would work at each school. "At a minimum, three days a month she [or her associate] would be there [in each school] just coaching the staff in classrooms" (Nebraska State Board of Education 2016b). Board member Lillie Larson inquired about the length of the contract and Frison responded that the contract was for the 2016–2017 school year.

With no further questions regarding the priority school implementation contract, the SBOE President moved on to the next discussion items on the board agenda. These included documents related to the priority school implementation beyond each school's progress plan. There were two additional contract rationales for the lady from North Carolina's consulting practice (and a third contract rationale with a

regional educational service unit for the instructional coach at Santee Middle School). With the approval of these additional contracts the total amount contracted for the lady from North Carolina was $300,000 between March 2016 and the end of the 2016–2017 school year (i.e., sixteen months).

Although in all this contracting there was one awarded to a public Nebraska entity (i.e., the regional ESU), during the meeting no one asked whether the SDE could/should be doing this work instead. Three hundred thousand dollars over sixteen months could have supported three FTEs (full time equivalent) of well-trained SDE professionals, buying more than three days a month of time, permitting easier sharing with less-involved SDE staff, improving the likelihood of continued interaction with involved schools and school districts when the contract was over, and having any lessons learned added to the SDE's overall capacity.

The consulting contract to support the first year's progress plan implementation in the three priority schools (for the 2016–2017 school year) was ultimately approved. Despite the SBOE's significant investment, there was no formal inquiry into her model, nor any planned external evaluation of the first-year's implementation at each school. Just after the end of this study period, in August 2017, it was announced that Druid Hills Elementary had "improved" and was being taken off the list (with a small-town high school that served a majority Latinx enrollment replacing it on the list).

Following the conclusion of the study, the lady from North Carolina's contract was renewed in 2017–18 and again in 2018–19, pushing the state investment in her company near the million-dollar mark (Dejka 2019). No doubt her multi-year involvement in the state made her wiser and wiser about how Nebraska works, but it is worth naming the obvious: that expertise and familiarity was only available to the state if the consulting contracts continued to be renewed. While her reports would be delivered to the SDE (and through them to the SBOE), there was no described mechanism for how those reports were to be operationalized to change processes at other schools or SDE interaction with them. There was certainly not discussion about the ways to customize her levers of instruction to the unique contexts of different priority schools.

Toward a Learning System?

One could quibble with the strategies and tactics she employed in developing progress plans (or in the later implementation of those plans) or with the contract amounts she received. But ultimately, the purpose of this study is not to critique the external consultant's efforts specifically but rather to question the broader roles external consultants or the "consultocracy" are playing in policy implementation efforts to improve schools according to standardized strategies and metrics of success and, from that, to question what capacity-development opportunities SDEs are squandering. As others like Ball (2009) or Mills (2015) have pointed out, the rhetoric around bringing in outside expertise to implement "best practices" can be alluring, however; it is worth examining the danger in standardizing and privatizing efforts to improve schools. Renting expertise (as a less-costly alternative to hiring an individual and paying a pension) demonstrates a short-term way of thinking about capacity. This stands in contrast to the rhetoric behind AQuESTT, which promised permanent capacity building. It raises the question: How can a state build permanent capacity with temporary investments? The goal of building long-term solutions through contracts with the lady from North Carolina (at the time of this study) was not met. The narrative here is not unique to Nebraska, which makes it worth pausing to question whether reliance on the "consultocracy" is wise and to interrogate what is lost when external knowledge has the most worth.

The school accountability legislation passed by the Nebraska Legislature in 2014 authorized the SDE, at the direction of the SBOE, to develop processes to classify schools, designate priority schools, and develop interventions for each. Throughout this implementation, there were decision points where the unique needs of local schools enduring mandated school improvement could have been prioritized according to the initial stated intention to attend to local context (Nebraska State Board of Education 2015). But the hiring of the lady from North Carolina reduced the role of SDE staff to support for a consultant (with an occasional second role managing incredulous comments from local sites) while sidestepping any consideration of how the consultant's finding might build NDE capacity to work with struggling schools. The mooted "template" or "scale up" prospects (however skeptical

the research literature is of such prospects) seemed to matter more as rhetoric than actual plan.

The assumptions undergirding intervention work and the structures and processes developed to carry out intervention work reflect some of the reform clock collisions Noble and Smith (2000) described in their study of SDE-driven reforms in Delaware and Arizona. Intervention work in the three priority schools was determined by the political clock, which "runs fast," and "rarely provides sustained support for any initiative" (Noble and Smith 2000: 182). A real tension grew in the initial progress plan development and later plan implementation as the tempo of the political clock (which the SBOE and commissioner needed to abide by) collided with the "teacher clock" (which included site-based school leaders in this case), which "runs slowly" (Noble and Smith 2000, 185).

The contrasting tempos of the reform clocks in Nebraska's case illuminate the political power constructs at play. The lady from North Carolina answered ultimately to her funders (the SBOE) rather than to those who were the "objects of the political technology at work" (Foucault 1977, 200)—the practitioners and students in the schools. Thus, an element of her role was to maintain the tempo of the political clock in pursuing an improvement process in each school rather than to respond to the perspectives of local educators for whom successful change efforts require time to "allow for teachers' sense of agency to grow [as] pivotal to movement toward authentic change" (Noble and Smith, 2000, 185).

There was a similar paradox here to one Koyama (2011) uncovered when studying supplemental education service providers working in public schools per guidelines from NCLB. Koyama found these external providers were not held to the same level of accountability for their performance as the schools in which they worked. Similarly, there was no objective accountability for the lady from North Carolina's work in the priority schools. As long as she kept her employers happy (allowing them to appear to be working on helping a variety of struggling schools), she stayed in favor.

When Commissioner Blomstedt asserted that Druid Hill—the school where the lady from North Carolina had consulted prior to the creation of AQuESTT—had made enough progress in one year to remove it from priority status and discontinue state intervention (Dejka 2017, 1),

the SBOE agreed. They did so despite not having an exit process in place and with the question about "tangible exit criteria" raised by board member McPherson in August 2016 still unanswered. With Druid Hill's release, a new school, Schuyler Central High School, was designated as a priority school in August 2018, "despite angry appeals by the district to reconsider the designation" (Reist 2018, 3). Contracts with the lady from North Carolina continued, as did her prescription for "turning around" yet another school context.

In January 2019, the state's largest newspaper, the *Omaha World Herald,* noted that $965,000 dollars had been paid out to the lady from North Carolina's consulting firm and asserted that she "perhaps more than any other person, outside of government officials, has put her fingerprints on school improvement in Nebraska" (Dejka 2019, 2-3). Their article did not say this occurred even though alternatives could easily have been imagined that would have leveraged existing or developed state capacity to construct long-term, sustainable solutions. For example, there could have been multiple consultants with expertise variously related to urban, rural, and American Indian education who could have worked alongside priority schools while also training SDE employees. This would have attended to the reality that the priority schools were pretty different from each other and would have cultivated expertise at the SDE level.

Priority school intervention and the reliance on an external consultant in Nebraska highlights questions about policy prescriptions that privilege the needs of higher policy tiers (i.e., the SDE or SBOE), that ignore local context and knowledge, that rely on the work of external consultants who answer to funders (in this case the SBOE and SDE), and that are not designed to develop sustainable changes relevant beyond the borders of the state.

The "consultocracy" is flawed when addressing state needs from a design perspective. Yet AQuESTT implementation did not have to proceed this way. The SBOE, the commissioner, and others could have asked what the state needed to do to develop an enduring capacity to help Nebraska's different types of challenged public schools. Not only did that not occur, it seems that no one noticed that it could occur. The premise of turning to a consultant raised a few questions about whether she and her company were too expensive (worries she seems to have known how to successfully placate), but none about whether

turning to *any* consultant as the primary service provider intrinsically constrained capacity- building goals. Questions like these are significant for states designing systems to intervene in local schools as a part of ESSA implementation as well as for policymakers in a neoliberal era of education reform.

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