

LEARNING FROM DISTRICTS SERIES BRIEF 1

Increasing Teacher Buy-in to Improve Policy Implementation

SIX LESSONS

Research has shown that five key attributes play into a policy's success or failure in the classroom:

- **Specificity:** How detailed and specific is the policy?
- **Consistency:** How well does the policy align with existing policies and practices?
- **Authority:** How much do educators believe in the policy? What resources exist to support the policy?
- **Power:** How are policies reinforced or required?
- **Stability:** To what extent does the policy remain stable or change over time?

From 2015–2020, the Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning (C-SAIL) used a framework built on these key attributes to study the implementation of academic standards in more than 170 districts in five states (California, Massachusetts, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas). Our study included a special focus on understanding similarities and differences in supports and implementation for teachers of English language learners, students with disabilities, and general-education students.

We distilled six lessons for leaders who want to deploy the key attributes to support educators in translating a new practice to classroom instruction.

Lesson 1: Balance specificity with flexibility.

Teachers succeed in implementing new practices when they have clear, detailed guidance in policy language and curriculum materials, but when that guidance is too specific, it doesn't allow room for teacher creativity, autonomy, and innovation. Leaders who use **flexible specificity** provide educators with enough detail to understand their charge but also allow them leeway to exercise their professional judgment and adapt the materials to fit their classrooms. We found that specific guidance that didn't allow for autonomy was a particular hindrance for teachers of English language learners and of students with disabilities.

RECOMMENDED ACTION

- **Facilitate flexible specificity by communicating via “continuous feedback loops,”** dialogues in which teachers can articulate the supports they need and leaders can share how they will address these needs. Leaders should ensure that all stakeholders know how feedback will be gathered, how participants can best communicate needs, and how leaders will determine next steps.
- **Tap into Regional Service Centers (RSCs),** which can help districts build flexible specificity. RSCs operate as liaisons between state or federal governments and local districts and can support educators by helping to translate policies to meet local needs while identifying areas of flexibility.

Lesson 2: Implement changes consistent with current policies, practices, or beliefs

The way educators view a new policy, curriculum, or professional learning and how it will fit into their current practice can influence its overall success. The more an educator must modify established practices to accommodate a new policy, the more difficult implementation will be.

RECOMMENDED ACTION

- **Build in continuous feedback loops** that can help ensure consistency by providing teachers the opportunity to talk about how the policy integrates into their current practice and to suggest ways to adapt the policy to better fit their instruction and their students' needs.

- **Bring together teachers** of students with disabilities, English language learners, and general education to build mutual understanding of the policy and its supports, and to share ideas and strategies for implementation. To promote alignment between the policy and current practice, consider holding learning sessions that all teachers and staff attend together.

Lesson 3: Make power smart, not hard.

Policy changes are often implemented with ties to accountability, such as rewards or punitive actions based on what outcomes are achieved. “Hard” power tactics such as public grading of schools, merit pay, and teacher dismissals can create a threatening environment. Instead of focusing on developing the best positive learning environment for students, teachers feel stressed to meet stringent requirements.

Use **smart power** instead. While rewards and sanctions are important in changing teacher practice, they need to be balanced with the other key attributes and build in more local control and stakeholder participation. This approach helps policies achieve better success, because it creates a safe trial-and-error environment for teachers to discover how to make policies work in their classrooms.

RECOMMENDED ACTION

Put smart power into action by:

- varying accountability systems;
- using teacher-led curriculum;
- using affirming language and providing teacher supports;
- keeping negotiations active via continuous feedback loops among teachers, principals, coaches, and support staff;
- encouraging improved teaching and learning through additional resources aligned with teacher needs; and
- involving teachers in shaping policy.

Lesson 4: Consider the history of stability.

Every time a classroom policy changes, teachers must modify their practices and relearn new requirements, resources, and content. Districts that change direction more often may have more trouble garnering support from educators. Longer-standing policies are more likely to meet with success.

RECOMMENDED ACTION

- **Allow time** for teachers to learn the content related to a policy, integrate it into their instruction, and adjust it to their own classrooms. Educators are more likely to invest in policies that they think will be around for a while.

Lesson 5: Acknowledge and encourage teacher authority.

When introducing a new policy, administrators often tell teachers which changes to make, when, and how. This top-down approach doesn't consider how teachers view the policy. Our study found that teachers had lower authority, or buy-in, on the new policy than principals did, and that teachers of students with disabilities had lower authority than general education teachers. For both kinds of teachers, those with less authority for the policy were less likely to teach the content in the standards.

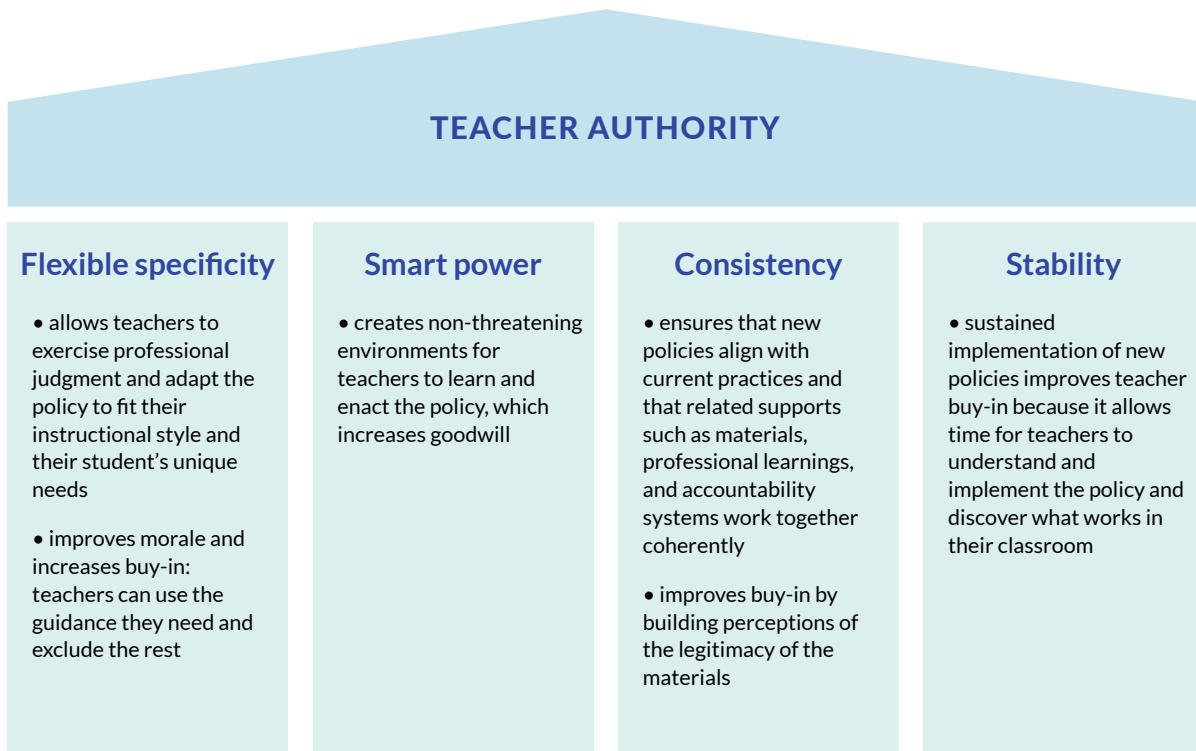
Teachers are the primary implementers of change, and the more they believe in the wisdom of a policy change, the more they include the policy change in their instruction.

RECOMMENDED ACTION

- **Bring teachers into policy discussions early.**
- **Provide opportunities for teachers to give feedback** about policy guidance and implementation.
- **Provide examples of how policies or interventions improve student learning;** teachers tend to buy-in to policies they think are good for their students.

Lesson 6: Build teacher authority through the other four key attributes.

Teacher authority is key for successful policy implementation at the classroom level. The way to build that authority is through **flexible specificity**, **smart power**, **consistency**, and **stability**.



In Sum

Education leaders can use the five key attributes to create a positive environment and support teachers' efforts to integrate a new practice into their repertoire. While our study focused specifically on academic standards, we believe these principles hold promise for implementation across a variety of reforms and contexts.