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**VALUES AND POWER AS LEVERS TO INFLUENCE  
ACCOUNTABILITY POLICY IN VIRGINIA: A CASE STUDY**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **VALUES AND POWER AS LEVERS TO INFLUENCE ACCOUNTABILITY POLICY IN VIRGINIA: A CASE STUDY**

Angela M. Rhett  
Old Dominion University, 2022  
Chair: Dr. Jay Scribner

The education landscape has been inundated in recent decades with a plethora of accountability measures. New mandates and processes are conceived at the hands of policymakers, and concepts such as power and values are at the core of accountability changes. The purpose of this research study was to uncover the web of unwritten structures and systems in place that influence the educational accountability policy process using complexity theory as the guiding theoretical framework (Shoup & Studer, 2010). Complexity theory dispels the notion of simplistic cause and effect relationships as predictors for accountability trends, and, instead, posits the multiplicity of factors that lead to decisions and outcomes. Particular attention was paid to the role values played in stakeholders' motivations and their uses of power (Fowler, 2013; Lukes, 2005; Shoup and Studer, 2010).

This qualitative case study design examined the values that motivated policy decisions around landmark accountability mandates in Virginia over a twenty-year span and uncovered how and in what ways educational stakeholders attempted to influence the degree of decision-making. Data collection included numerous interviews beginning with an initial group of stakeholders who were privy to accountability decisions. Snowball sampling was then used to identify additional interviewees. In addition, a variety of press releases, public documents, and media articles were analyzed to understand the public narrative. Findings revealed how values and power were driving factors in decision-making and how stakeholders work toward the policy

goals. Further, findings illustrate how societal values can work in tandem or in opposition in the pursuit of policy goals and how stakeholders utilize distinct sources of power available to them with disparate effect.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my amazing parents. Their unwavering support throughout my life made this dream possible. They raised me to believe that, with hard work, I could accomplish anything. They led by example and I am blessed to have known their unconditional love my whole life. I have always known that I could turn to them and they would be there in a moment's notice. Finishing my dissertation was a professional goal; living my life like them is a personal goal. Mom and Dad, thank you for always being in my corner. I love you!

Standing before them, I dedicate this achievement to my beloved grandparents who never had the privilege of completing their formal education. I stood on their shoulders to become the person I am today and hope they are looking down, beaming with pride.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Policy decisions have expansive consequences that impact education across a multitude of contexts and levels (Fowler, 2013). The policy process is often viewed as a linear trajectory with precipitating events identified through immediate cause and effect relationships. This narrow view of the policy landscape limits one's ability to fully understand, react to, and anticipate politically-mandated decisions. Complexity theory offers a framework for examining nonlinear relationships and causalities to better understand how decisions were made (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014; Stacey, 1995). Shoup and Studer (2010) posit a "hidden architecture" behind our education system that explains the relationship between powerful actors, competing values, and subsequent policy outcomes. Complexity theory demonstrates the multiplicity of precipitating reasons for any singular action, revealing an underlying web rather than a simplistic progression of events (Cairney, 2012; Shoup & Studer, 2010). The notion of complex and interconnected political factors is evidenced through the historical and current accountability context in Virginia, which is the focus for this research study. In particular, this research analyzes the values and power relationships that influenced the decision-making process around educational accountability in Virginia with a focus on the inception and rejection of the Common Core State Standards in the Commonwealth. Closer examination uncovered entrenched, politically-motivated actions best described using complexity theory. With this understanding in mind, it is important to understand the sociopolitical context in which this framework was applied.

The bipartisan No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is viewed as one of the most drastic measures to influence accountability that our K-12 education system had ever seen

(Klein, 2014). NCLB effectively scaled up federal involvement by holding schools accountable for outcomes in unprecedented ways (Klein, 2015). Student performance was assessed by subgroups to address the “soft bigotry” of low expectations, and schools were held accountable for either improving performance or empowering parents by offering school choice in chronically underperforming schools (The Bush Record, 2009). The growing federal footprint in K-12 education, coupled with the reality that fully eradicating failure is impossible, made this policy change a highly controversial one (Klein, 2015). The metrics for reporting data were equally flawed. States were tasked with reporting proficiency toward growing targets, but each state had the autonomy to define proficiency and standards. This ambiguity led to widespread disparities in performance (NGA & CCSSO, 2016).

The next great accountability reform seemed to emerge from the ashes of NCLB. In 2009, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative rolled out, featuring college and career-ready standards that were collaboratively developed with high hopes of achieving a historic feat – creating consistent standards that ensured rigorous learning for students across the country (Goldstein, 2021). By simple analysis of timeline, the inception of the CCSS appeared to be a natural evolution following the dismantling of NCLB. However, the seeds for change were sown nearly 25 years earlier when former President George H.W. Bush engaged in a summit with state governors calling for standards-based accountability and reform to meet the growing demand in ensuring students were graduating college and workforce-ready (Klein, 2014). In spite of these calls for reformation, it took more than two decades to gain momentum around common standards. Once again, this political act was wrought with controversy, largely from perceived overreaches of federal intrusion in the education system and the attachment of grant funding to influence implementation (Goldstein, 2021). However, the CCSS initiative rolled out to

widespread support with 46 states voting to the adopt the standards. Four states, however, opted to reject the CCSS in favor of their existing standards. The states that rebuffed the federal standards included Alaska, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

This research study is situated within the sociopolitical context of this twenty-year timespan in educational accountability and seeks to understand more about the influences and motivations that drove decision-making in Virginia. During this time, officials faced a looming question, whether to accept the CCSS and align with the majority of the states who were onboard with the initiative or whether to reject the CCSS in favor of the state's existing Standards of Learning (SOL). This decision was further complicated by the potential for federal Race to the Top grant funds available to states who adopted the standards and agreed to other measures during a major economic recession. Ultimately, Virginia opted to reject the CCSS following an initial period of public support for the movement. However, there is limited discussion on the reasoning that led to Virginia's rejection of the standards with hints of political tension in the public discourse available. Thus, the purpose of this research was to uncover the complex factors that interplayed to give authority to important accountability and policy decisions in Virginia, with significant discussion around the rationale for rejecting the CCSS.

In this context and based on the assumption that policy decisions are guided by influential actors and dominant values, the case analysis was driven by the following research questions:

1. What factors and policy conditions led the Commonwealth of Virginia to decide not to adopt the CCSS?
  - a. What values motivated policy decisions around landmark accountability decisions in Virginia over a twenty-year span?

- b. Given the motivations to engage in the accountability debate in Virginia, how and in what ways did educational stakeholders attempt to influence the course of decision-making, and to what degree of success?
2. How did stakeholder values, motivations, and influence lead to rejection of the CCSS?

### **Significance of the Study**

The Virginia case is dually significant. First, analysis of the decisive events preceding hallmark accountability decisions in Virginia provides insight into the multifaceted relationship between political actors and driving values. Inherently, the underlying web of influences best explained through complexity theory is revealed. Furthermore, analyzing these accountability events chronologically provides an opportunity to explore the “story” of accountability in Virginia beyond a series of seemingly isolated headlines separated by years of political inactivity. This examination revealed trends to help predict future courses of action.

Additionally, complexity theory offers an effective, yet underutilized lens for understanding past policy decisions and predicting future actions. Substantial research exists exploring intended outcomes of accountability mandates and subsequent state responses (McDermott, 2003; McDermott, 2007; McDonnell, 2012; Shaul & Ganson, 2005; Srikantaiah, 2009). However, there is a dearth of literature on the complex motivations behind accountability decisions. Instead, accountability mandates and policy reform have been devised and applied as though schools are machines to refine through leadership and bureaucratic shifts (Cuban, 2012; Ravitch, 2010). This tactic ignores the complexity of the school organization and the policy context in which it thrives. Furthermore, this linear approach disregards the societal values and tensions that factor into the complex environment surrounding the policy process. These reasons

make analysis of the Virginia case insightful and significant.

### **Brief Overview of Theoretical Framework**

While new educational policies are often erroneously characterized as shifts in a swinging pendulum, reform is more accurately described as complex and nonlinear (Shoup & Studer, 2010). Complexity theory outlines seven broad concepts that explain how systems survive by revealing nonlinear patterns that offer a level of predictability within dynamic systems (Cairney, 2012; Shoup & Studer, 2010). Among these seven concepts is the notion of strange attractors, or dominant values, defined as “a point in the system where the pattern will eventually end up at any point in time” (Shoup & Studer, 2010, p. 11). Similarly, Fowler (2013) argues the educational policy process is understood by considering competing values and existing power relationships. When woven together, strong similarities exist between strange attractors and competing values, both of which lead to policy reform and shifts in the larger system.

Tensions result from political conflict around competing values as power is exercised. Fowler (2013) argues power is contextual and evident in social relationships. Power is symmetrical or asymmetrical, depending on whether it is distributed equally or if one actor has greater resources than another (Fowler, 2013). Power is explicitly exercised through force, economic dominance, authority, or persuasion or implicitly exercised by limiting meaningful participation of certain groups (Fowler, 2013). Ultimately, power is enacted through the control of material, social, or knowledge resources (Fowler, 2013).

The theoretical framework for this study weaves together tenets of complexity theory along with competing values and power relationships to offer a lens that yields deeper insight into the educational accountability decision-making process. Analysis with this framework sheds



light on the motivations behind the debate for varying courses of action and the ways powerful actors influence the course of decision making.

### **Key Terms**

There are several key terms that are vital to the understanding of this research study. The terms and their abbreviations will surface throughout the remaining chapters.

- **Common Core State Standards (CCSS)** – A set of national, high-quality academic standards in English/language arts and mathematics that outline what students should know and be able to do by the end of each grade with a focus on skills necessary for success in college, career, and life (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2022).
- **Competing Values** – Core values are either general social values, democratic values or economic values, including choice, excellence, efficiency, equality, order/safety, quality, and individual freedom, that are prominent when a system shifts, pulling the system to reorganize in favor of the dominant competing value (Fowler, 2013; Shoup & Studer, 2010; Wirt et al., 1988).
- **Power** – The ability for one actor to influence the behavior or thoughts of another (Muth, 1984). Powers surfaces in relationships and can be symmetrical, with equal degrees of power, or asymmetrical, with one actor having greater power over another (Fowler, 2013).
- **Race to the Top (RttT)** – A key educational reform initiative under former-President Obama that offered incentives to states who were willing to undergo significant educational reform through the adoption of rigorous standards and assessments, the use of improved data systems to track and communicate student progress, the implementation of a teacher evaluation framework that supported growth, and an emphasis on resources

to turn around low-performing schools. States who were willing to adhere to the four key areas applied for a share of the \$4.35 billion dollars in grant funding that was available (The White House: Education, 2017).

- **Standards of Learning (SOL)** – A set of rigorous standards establishing minimum expectations for what students should know and be able to do at the end of each grade or course in English, mathematics, science, history/social science, and other subjects (Virginia Department of Education, 2022).

### **Organization of the Study**

The remainder of this study is organized into four additional chapters. Chapter Two reviews current and significant literature around complexity, modern complexity theory, competing values, and power, and also provides added insight into the context of this study. Chapter Three details the methodology used and provides an overview of participants and how they were chosen, the types of data collected, and how that data was analyzed. Chapter Four communicates the research findings with a discussion on stakeholders, values, and sources of power. Finally, Chapter Five weaves the findings together to draw conclusions and offer implications for research and practice.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Regardless of the context, policy decisions have expansive consequences that impact actors across levels. This idea was made prominent in recent decades with the advent and termination of educational accountability mandates, such as the No Child Left Behind Act and Adequate Yearly Progress mandates. Policy decisions at national and state levels influence direct actions at the local level. This research seeks to better understand how state education accountability policy is influenced by the values and power relationships of various actors. Thus, this chapter lays out a framework used to examine and analyze the policy actions of one state, Virginia. First, the author will begin by tracing key foundational concepts, such as culture, political culture, and early complexity theory, to pertinent historical roots. General complexity and systems theory are concepts actively explored to make sense of modern complexity theory. Next, four important complexity theory insights that are scientifically well-established will be explored. These include ideas such as systemic evolution, homeostasis, attractors, sensitive dependence, and feedback loops. Then, research will be reviewed on three dimensions of power and the importance of values in power relationships. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a brief overview of the national education context during the time era in which this larger research study is situated, 1990-2010. Specifically, this literature review will look at prominent decisions that impacted statewide actions related to educational accountability and standards.

Policy decision-making is driven by actors and their guiding values, a concept rooted in the field of political culture. Before delving into political culture, it is important to first understand the concept of culture. Wildavsky (1987) defines culture as “shared values legitimating social practices” (p. 6). Inglehart (1988) argues culture evolves and adapts to its

environment. Further, Hofstede and Bonde (2001) define culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or society from another” (p. 34).

Taken together, these definitions reveal culture as a living, adaptable entity constructed through social processes. Conflict is a natural byproduct in any culture; differences between cultural identities solidify our own understanding of culture (Laitin & Widalvsky, 1988; Widalvsky, 1987).

Diversity of opinions and values exist within all cultures (Laitin & Widalvsky, 1988). Widalvsky (1987) outlines a four-box matrix of culture types to describe the limited number of cultures defining the majority of human relations. These include apathy (fatalism), hierarchy (collectivism), competition (individualism), and equality (egalitarianism). Each cultural type is classified by the strength of group boundaries and the number and variety of prescriptions imposed on the group (Widalvsky, 1987). For example, an apathetic culture develops when members have no control over what happens to them. Instead, they abide by externally-imposed, hierarchical rules. Meanwhile egalitarians utilize criticism and coercion to highlight corruption as the blame for inequality (Widalvsky, 1987). Ultimately, this framework reveals an entrenched debate about freedom, hierarchy, and authority.

This same debate regarding levels of imposed oversight and regulations is evident in the field of political culture. Elazar (2003) defines political culture as “the pattern of orientation to political action in which a political system is embedded” (p. 256). An intangible component of any political culture is the presence and prevalence of dominant values that reside in members’ minds and drive decision-making (Fowler, 2013). In society at-large and, more specifically, in the field of education, values interact with each other through on-going and cyclical shifts in policy (Fowler, 2013).

According to Elazar (2003), there are three basic political cultures in the United States: traditionalistic, moralistic, and individualistic. These differing political cultures explain why uniform public education structures operate differently across the 50 states (Fowler, 2013). The traditionalistic political culture, dominant in the south, is characteristically ambivalent toward commercial enterprise and believes an “established elite” is worthy of political leadership (Fowler, 2013). Furthermore, the role of government is to oppose interventions except those necessary to maintain the status quo (Fowler, 2013; Morgan & Watson, 1991; Sharkansky, 1969). The traditionalistic culture is limited by resistance to change and a sense of elitism that discourages more pervasive political participation (Fowler, 2013). Second, the moralistic culture, predominant in the New England area, views political participation as a duty of all citizens (Sharkansky, 1969). The moralistic culture welcomes government intervention and new programs as positive additions for the greater community (Sharkansky, 1969). This positivist outlook can become a detriment if fanaticism prevails (Fowler, 2013). Finally, the individualistic culture exists from the Mid-Atlantic states and westward (Fowler, 2013). Members of the individualistic culture participate in politics to improve their own position (Fowler, 2013, Sharkansky, 1969). In this culture, politics is seen as a business with favors transacted (Fowler, 2013). Not surprisingly, this level of political action can lead to corruption. Understanding each of these political cultures, traditionalistic, moralistic, and idealistic, can yield insight into how states structure and respond to programs and mandates. However, decision-making is predicated on a multitude of other factors, and analyzing these dynamics can help to explain how and why political systems shift.

### **Complexity and Complexity Theory**

It is tempting to view educational policy shifts as the simplistic back-and-forth swinging

of a constantly-moving pendulum. This narrow viewpoint is evident in decades of educational reform that reveal a trend in the way policymakers think about and react to education. Reform efforts are reactive, cyclical, and largely rooted in the concepts of scientific management (Cuban, 1990; Tyack, 1974). Policymakers have tended to treat schools like machines that can be fixed through structural or bureaucratic changes (Cuban, 2012; Ravitch, 2010). This can be partially attributed to the tendency for organizations to over-simplify their work (Scott, 1998). Similarly, Simon (1957) argued that organizations shaped by over-simplification apply simple cause and effect and linear rationality to what is complex and interconnected. This straightforward and narrowed viewpoint limits understanding of the many competing factors influencing organizations, policy, and decision-making.

While new educational policies are often erroneously characterized as cause and effect-like shifts in a swinging pendulum, policy reform is more accurately described as complex and nonlinear (Shoup & Studer, 2010). Complexity theory offers an introspective look at dynamic situations to reveal the various factors and interactions leading to a social reality. Before examining the tenets of complexity theory, it is first important to have a common understanding of the notion of complexity and its roots. A review of literature uncovers multiple interpretations with little academic consensus for the meaning of complexity (Anderson, 1999; Byrne & Callaghan, 2014; Geyer, 2012; Manson, 2001; Snyder, 2013). However, general commonalities can be found among each of the definitions.

According to Byrne and Callaghan (2014), complexity is a property of systems in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Further, the authors argue “general complexity is composed of complex systems which are not just the product of simple interactions but have properties which are not to be understood in those terms and have to be addressed as real in and

of themselves” (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014, p.5). Snyder (2013) differentiates between simple, complicated, and complex systems to explain that complex problems cannot be solved through traditional linear approaches. Simple problems are solved by following a replicable formula to achieve stable and consistent results, whereas complicated problems require a higher level of expertise to reach success (Snyder, 2013). Snyder (2013) argues “complicated contexts are the realm of expertise and data analysis – the known unknowns. Cause and effect are not self-evident but can be teased out through analysis” (p. 7). Geyer (2012) concurs with Allen (2001) regarding a definition of complexity by drawing on the work of Richardson and Cilliers (2001) to define complexity as being:

about systems whose internal structures are not reducible to a mechanical system. In particular, it is about connected complex systems...such systems coevolve with their environment, being ‘open’ to flows of energy, matter, and information across whatever boundaries we have chosen to define. These flows do not obey simple, fixed laws, but instead result from the internal ‘sense making’ going on inside them, as experience, conjectures, and experiments are used to modify the interpretive frameworks within (Allen, 2001, p. 39-40).

Geyer (2012) offers an example around the school evaluation process to help makes sense of this concept. He argues that each major evaluation of a school can serve as a significant gateway event in the evolution of that school, also known as the “emergent complex system” (p. 36). The experience of one evaluation stacking on top of another informs how the system evolves. After each evaluation, a school does not necessarily grow along a linear trajectory. Instead, there are a growing range of possible pathways that develop (positive or negative) over time in response to each new evaluation (Geyer, 2012).

Each of these definitions portrays complexity as part of a larger, nuanced system rife with fluidity, interaction, and change that requires a more in-depth analysis to fully understand and appreciate. These common understandings regarding complexity help us to identify the historical underpinnings of modern complexity theory.

### **Historical Roots of Complexity Theory**

Several theoretical bodies of knowledge have contributed to our understanding of complexity theory. Conceptual roots begin as early as the 1940s and 50s in previous work on general systems theory (Manson, 2001; Snyder, 2013). General systems theory suggests the laws of thermodynamics that applied to closed systems were ineffective in understanding systems of actors with individual motives and behaviors (Snyder, 2013). The open-systems view of organizations from the 1960s serves as an additional philosophical antecedent for complexity theory (Anderson, 1999). Open systems are made of interconnected components that work together and exchange resources with their environment (Anderson, 1999). For example, a healthy organization works to understand its environment through market research or evaluations, while also trying to influence its external environment through lobbying, advocacy, public relations, or advertising. Finally, the field of cybernetics contributes to our understanding of positive and negative feedback as a “governing mechanism” (Snyder, 2013, p. 11) for open systems, which leads to groups of actors who are able to self-organize and allow new behavioral patterns to emerge. Concepts such as self-organization, feedback, and emergence are integral to complexity theory (Anderson, 1999; Snyder, 2013; Shoup & Studer, 2010).

Complexity theory, however, differs from and expands upon its open-systems historical roots in several important ways. First, complexity theory examines nonlinear relationships and causalities leading to a current reality (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014; Stacey, 1995), while previous



systems research studied fixed entities connected through linear relationships defined by “flows and stocks”, such as energy and information (Manson, 2001, p. 406). Second, the systems perspective valuing the flow and stock of energy and information measures quantities rather than the quality of the information flow (Manson, 2001). On the other hand, complexity theory is interested in the content of communication, exhibited through feedback and values, which lead to stable and non-stable outcomes (Manson, 2001; Shoup & Studer, 2010; Stacey, 1995). Finally, systems theory posits a simplified process assuming a system exists in equilibrium, rejecting the need to explore changing relationships within the system (Manson, 2001). Complexity theory is based on the premise that systems are in a state of constant evolution on a quest for systemic equilibrium (Snyder, 2013; Shoup & Studer, 2010). In other words, modern complexity theory focuses on the content of the communication flow and the way systems continuously evolve and emerge in relation to feedback.

### **Modern Complexity Theory**

Byrne and Callaghan (2014) assert an ontological viewpoint of complexity theory by describing it as a framework for viewing and understanding the world, rather than a scientific ‘theory’ designed to explain a situation. Snyder (2013) more specifically argues the systems we view through a complexity theory lens “begin as collections of individual actors who organize themselves and create relationships” (p.11) in response to feedback, allowing new structures and behaviors to emerge. Systems are constantly evolving in new ways to seek a healthy and balanced equilibrium (Shoup & Studer, 2010). Mason (2008) differentiates complexity theory from other constructs:

Where complexity theory differs from other theories that may exhibit reductionist tendencies in research rationale and methodology, is that it suggests that it is in the

dynamic interactions and adaptive orientation of a system that new phenomena, new properties and behaviours emerge, that new patterns are developed and old ones change. Complexity theory seeks the levers of history, the sources and reasons for change, in the dynamic complexity of interactions among elements or agents that constitute a particular environment. It is in this sense that seemingly trivial accidents of history may increase dramatically in significance when their interactions with other apparently minute events combine to produce significant redirections in the course of history, significant shifts in the prevailing balance of power (p. 35).

A complexity approach acknowledges the multiple dimensions and interconnectedness of the level of focus, regardless of whether a system is small or large scale in size (Kuhn, 2008). Complexity theory outlines broad concepts that explain how systems survive by revealing nonlinear patterns that offer a level of predictability within dynamic systems (Cairney, 2012; Shoup & Studer, 2010). Further, important insights that are scientifically established have emerged from the body of complexity research. These serve as common constructs to enhance our understanding of complexity theory.

First is the notion that many dynamic systems do not reach a fixed-point equilibrium (Anderson, 1999). Instead, systems are in a constant state of flux with emergent behaviors surfacing (Snyder, 2013). As the system changes, it goes through a transition process known as self-organization in which the system is able to better interact with its environment (Manson, 2001). Alhadeff-Jones (2008) conceives complex systems as “autonomous systems whose evolution is a function of both their environment and the relationships among their own components” (p. 68). Furthermore, self-organizing behavior typically manifests from a random state and evolves toward greater order (Anderson, 1999). In the policy realm, patterns emerge

and complex problems are addressed when levels of communication within the system are increased to the greatest level that is manageable (Snyder, 2013). Snyder (2013) asserts the policymaker's role is to assemble requisite minds, foster differences of opinion, and avoid stagnancy in analyzing an issue. High levels of communication are critical because solutions are not singularly replicable. For example, what works for one child, teacher, or district is not a guaranteed fix for another. This is what makes the governance of education challenging and thus illustrates the importance of communication in complex systems (Snyder, 2013).

Snyder (2013) offers a rich example of self-organization based on the launch of literacy reformation in Ontario in 2003. Ontario sought to improve poor literacy scores by targeting three elements: respect for staff and professional knowledge, comprehensiveness, and coherence and alignment. Intentionally created feedback mechanisms revealed capacity building and professional development as crucial with an assumption that student performance would improve as a by-product. There was no centrally scripted mandate for new teaching practices. Instead the initiative cultivated school-based innovation and growth through collaborative practices. The government invested heavily in positions, smaller class sizes, and partnerships with universities to increase communication between entities. The results showed consistent growth with student achievement steadily increasing each year from 54% in 2003 to 71% in 2013. Taken together, this shows how communication and feedback loops are essential as a system self-organizes (Snyder, 2013).

Homeostasis is the notion of seeking balance and, paradoxically, this equilibrium is sought through the constant process of change (Shoup & Studer, 2010). According to Manson, (2001), the complex system is not bound by the environment; instead, it actively “shapes, reacts, and anticipates” (p. 410). The system emerges through self-organization to seek sustainability

(Manson, 2001). Self-organized criticality is a form of self-organization in which the rate of change is rapid but necessary for survival (Manson, 2001). This spontaneous and temperamental flux allows the environment to rapidly evolve (Manson, 2001; Shoup & Studer, 2010; Stacey, 1995). The concepts of homeostasis, change, and self-organized criticality allow complex systems to survive at the edge of chaos through dynamic evolution (Anderson, 1999; Shoup & Studer, 2010). One of the main drivers of systemic change and adaptation is the emergence of strange attractors.

A second common complexity tenet that emerges from research is the understanding that seemingly random processes may be the product of complex interactions as a system is drawn to an attractor (Anderson, 1999; Shoup & Studer, 2010). Byrne and Callaghan (2014) describe an attractor as “something towards which a dynamical system evolves over time” (p. 27). Attractors comprise limited areas within the phase space of a system, meaning the system shifts within that space if it is not close to the dominant attractor (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014; Anderson, 1999). Chaotic systems revolve around “strange attractors,” fractals that constrain a system within and toward an established space in a never-ending series of shifts (Anderson, 1999). Strange attractors are called “strange” because the force causing movement of the system is not always tangible (Shoup & Studer, 2010). They are points on the equilibrium that intangibly attract or repel dynamics within a system (Anderson, 1999; Shoup & Studer, 2010). Anderson (1999) argues chaotic systems are driven by strange attractors. Furthermore, strange attractors maintain the system within a somewhat stable pattern (Geyer, 2012). While behaviors at the edge of stability follow a level of unpredictability, they shift within given limits bounded by the existing strange attractors (Stacey, 1995).

According to Shoup and Studer (2010), strange attractors shift a political system toward evolving cyclical points based on four competing values: excellence, efficiency, choice/liberty, and equality/accessibility. The pull toward the competing values is made prominent through organizational and leadership actions. Systemic complexity increases relative to the number of existing strange attractors; chaos breeds with competing demands (Shoup & Studer, 2010). Thus, the random appearance of processes may be the product of chaos as an organization shifts along the equilibrium (Anderson, 1999). Ultimately, norms, values, and formal and informal leaders serve as strange attractors (Shoup & Studer, 2010). Morrison (2008) suggests strange attractors are a central point of interest and should be the focus of research within a larger web-like unit of analysis.

A third insight scientifically derived from complexity theory research is the sensitivity of a system to seemingly small conditions, also known as sensitive dependence. Complex systems share a commonality in the presence of “tipping points” that have cascading effects (Snyder, 2013). Consequently, systems move in a new and often radically divergent direction as a result of a minute difference (Anderson, 1999). Geyer (2012) refers to this disruption as punctuated equilibrium, or the uneven evolution of a system. For example, a system may appear relatively stable for a significant time period before undergoing a large upheaval resulting from a minor event. Sensitive dependency acknowledges the large effects attributed to small changes, sometimes known as the “butterfly effect” (Anderson, 1999; Doll; 2008; Geyer, 2012; Shoup & Studer, 2010). The butterfly effect is a mathematical nod to describe how small variations in the specification of quantitative parameters can result in drastically unexpected outcomes (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014; Shoup & Studer, 2010). Within complex systems, sensitive dependence “recognizes key leverage points that the system is especially responsive to for maintaining or

changing the system” (Shoup & Studer, 2010, p. 18). Within the policy realm, Snyder (2013) asserts that identifying tipping points can be difficult, but policymakers should strive to recognize these moments will occur, limit the unintended consequences of shifts, and harness them to impact positive change. To illustrate this concept, Snyder (2013) offers the example of earthquakes, which happen suddenly, cannot be prevented, and result in a range of devastation. Attempting to stop earthquakes is futile, but scientists can plan carefully in anticipation of the inevitable to ensure the best possible outcome. Sensitive dependence shows that phenomena can be predicted and controlled to a degree, but minor variations have the capacity to influence unpredictable effects (Geyer, 2012).

A final commonality research has identified in complex systems is the importance and interconnectedness of feedback loops (Anderson, 1999; Morrison, 2008). According to Haggis (2008), dynamic systems are comprised of many components interacting in dynamic ways. Dynamic systems are cybernetic as they rely on feedback to self-regulate (Shoup & Studer, 2010). For example, one basic dynamic social system is the family unit. Families with children rely on feedback between teachers, other parents, coaches, and family friends to yield insight on how their children behave. News of misbehavior spreads through social feedback loops and helps parents focus attention to establish and maintain behavioral expectations. However, not all feedback is given equal attention, and parents must be judicious in how they respond to feedback (Shoup & Studer, 2010).

This same level of thought applies in dynamic systems. Leaders must build intentional methods for capturing feedback to shape the desired systemic culture since systems emerge in the direction of valued feedback (Shoup & Studer, 2010). Interactions involve complex feedback loops to adjust and modify the parts of the system and the system as a whole (Haggis, 2008).

Shoup and Studer (2010) recognize feedback as the means in which the system regulates itself. Nonlinear feedback loops influence systemic evolution (Anderson, 1999; Snyder, 2013; Stacey, 1995). Moreover, systemic implementation thrives when feedback loops grow in influence as the effects spread laterally and vertically to a greater number of actors within a system (Snyder, 2013). Complex systems, driven by strange attractors, rely on feedback to survive (Shoup & Studer, 2010). New structures and behaviors emerge through interactions; positive feedback moves a group closer toward a perceived goal and negative feedback drives the system toward equilibrium (Snyder, 2013). Feedback can sustain or threaten an organization's survival depending on whether that feedback is a "squeaky wheel" or valuable insight (Shoup & Studer, 2010). For example, leaders who continually respond to misleading feedback or equally regard every voice demanding attention can push an organization to peril. Similarly, being too selective in accepting feedback is also detrimental as the organization becomes unresponsive to needs (Shoup & Studer, 2010). According to Morrison (2008), closed systems in equilibrium die; disequilibrium is necessary for survival. Additionally, systems that self-regulate gather specific feedback relative to strange attractors guiding the system (Shoup & Studer, 2010). Feedback guides a perpetually changing and complex organization.

The complexity theory constructs work in tandem to keep dynamic systems from the brink of chaos in an ever-evolving pattern of change. Systems develop and evolve as individual actors form relationships within the structure. The system shifts as reformation favors a dominant attractor. The entire process is driven by feedback loops and occurs within a degree of uncertain predictability based on the attractors guiding the system. A system survives for an extended time with little obvious change, though a deeper look would reveal ongoing shifts toward attractors. Finally, radical change is often spurred by a small event that seems inconsequential, leading to

an emergence and reorganization of the system. These intangible concepts serve as ongoing drivers for reformation. A similar intangible concept that is also important when considering policy reform and decision making is the notion of power.

### **Power**

The term “power” is an elusive concept because research defines and acknowledges it differently, ranging from post-structuralists who believe power pervades every situation to utilitarians who deny its existence (Fowler, 2013). Muth (1984) defines power as “the ability of an actor to affect the behavior of another actor” (p. 27). The tension resulting from political pulls around competing values leads to power struggles and subsequent policy reform. Fowler (2013) argues power is contextual and evident in social relationships. Power is symmetrical, meaning actors have equal degrees of power, or it is asymmetrical, where one actor has greater resources than another (Fowler, 2013). Fowler (2013) summarizes three dimensions of power based on the work of Lukes (2005) and Gaventa (1980) (as cited in Fowler, 2013). Power can be explicitly exercised through force, economic dominance, authority, or persuasion or implicitly exercised by mobilizing bias to limit meaningful participation of certain groups (Fowler, 2013). Ultimately, power is enacted through the control of material, social, or knowledge resources (Fowler, 2013). From a political standpoint, this level of control promotes competing values and influences discourse, political action or inaction, and policy development. The resulting shifts and tensions around competing values and power are part of a complex, interconnected web (Shoup & Studer, 2010).

### **Dimensions of Power**

The three-dimensional model of power developed by Lukes (2005) and Gaventa (1980) synthesizes major theories to discern differences between uses of power while recognizing the



simultaneous application of power in social settings (as cited in Fowler, 2013). The first dimension of power includes the explicit employment of power, often in an observable format. This happens in a multitude of ways, including physical or mental force, economic dominance, sheer authority, or persuasion (Fowler, 2013). Lawrence, Mauws, Dyck, and Kleysen (2005) conceptualize power similarly with the idea of episodic power, or discrete and strategic political acts, in contrast with systemic power, exercised through processes that are socially engrained. Taken together, both models recognize how power is employed discretely or is embedded through culture to achieve a specific end goal. Furthermore, power occurs through a relationship, but that relationship is not limited to actors. The relationship between actors and resources is also a way to deploy power.

In the first dimension of power, resources are controlled by powerful people, and the employment of resources impacts outcomes (Fowler, 2013). Material resources include money, time, and energy, while social resources involve access, popularity, social status, or visibility (Fowler, 2013). Finally, knowledge resources equate power and knowledge, which recognizes that withholding or sharing information is a source of power (Fowler, 2013). Lawrence et al. (2005) build on this concept by explaining that systemic power has the capacity to institutionalize learning when new ideas are shared in multiple ways by key actors. Fowler (2013) extends on this idea by identifying discourse as a knowledge resource that is a key component of power (Fowler, 2013). The ability to shape language in an attempt to sway agendas and draw attention to or away from a topic is one example of discursive power (Fowler, 2013).

Overall, political actors and governance bodies operate largely with first dimension power (Fowler, 2013). The use of economic dominance, authority, and access to resources

present an abundance of uneven power relationships. As a result, laws, policies, and rules are developed by these groups, often with only select voices influencing the conversation.

The second dimension of power differs from the first in that power is exercised implicitly through the “mobilization of bias” (Fowler, 2013, p. 30). This level of power is most obvious when there is a limit to the meaningful participation of certain groups, particularly marginalized populations (Fowler, 2013). Coupled with complexity theory, the limitation of participation removes valuable voices from the feedback loop. This restricts the use of cybernetics to gain insight and shift and react within a complex system. Finally, the third dimension of power is known as the shaping of consciousness (Fowler, 2013). This occurs through unusual empowerment, which is the notion of entitlement, or the other extreme, unusual disempowerment, a self-learned belief of low status and apathy (Fowler, 2013). In basic terms, consciousness is shaped through familiar social structures, such as the family unit who passes along beliefs and values, along with schools and religious organizations (Fowler, 2013). Unusual empowerment surfaces when society shapes our understanding of positions who should lead others and those who should accept being dominated, while unusual disempowerment emerges from years of hearing messages of low status. This includes populations or groups who have been marginalized or exploited by organizations and government entities (Fowler, 2013).

Power permeates the education system and political world. The dimensions of power offer a framework for understanding how power is exercised in society as they operate simultaneously in most social settings (Fowler, 2013). Most importantly, stakeholders possess differing levels of power to influence (or have little impact on) the policy process. When political power is employed through knowledge, discourse, and resources, it can steer political agendas

and decision-making. Ultimately, power helps political actors advance their own agendas, often aligned to values they are promoting through policy.

### **Power Exercised Through Values**

Strange attractors, or dominant values, are an intangible concept defined as “a point in the system where the pattern will eventually end up at any point in time” (Shoup & Studer, 2010, p. 11). Wildavsky (1987) refers to driving values as “preferences...that emerge from social interaction in defending or opposing different ways of life” (p. 5). We are free to make choices about the values we believe and the policies we support that espouse our beliefs (Wildavsky, 1987). Furthermore, Fowler (2013) argues the educational policy process is understood by considering competing values and existing power relationships. When woven together, strong similarities exist between strange attractors and competing values that lead to power tensions, policy reform, and shifts in the larger system.

Shoup and Studer (2010) outline four strange attractors, or dominant values, that explain why educational reform is continuous and repetitive. Likewise, Fowler (2013) offers three categories of competing values, general social values, democratic values, and economic values, which describe the interests of those in power. Proponents of particular values regularly compete to prioritize their beliefs in the policy realm (Fowler, 2013). The competition and subsequent policy outcomes breed changes in the larger policy landscape. In essence, reform efforts shift the system toward a dominant value. Complexity theory explains that change is necessary for achieving equilibrium (Shoup & Studer, 2010). Therefore, as reforms cater to competing values, subsequent reformation will shift the system toward a different attractor (Shoup & Studer, 2010). Fowler (2013) argues, “A central goal of sound education policymaking is therefore to establish a balance among the most important values so none is seriously compromised” (p. 104).

Paradoxically, change surrounding the competing values is essential for maintaining balance, or homeostasis (Shoup & Studer, 2010).

The first strange attractor, excellence (Shoup & Studer, 2010), complements the economic value of quality outlined by Fowler (2013). Excellence implies striving for above average achievement, evoking notions such as world-class and high performance (Fowler, 2013; Shoup & Studer, 2010). Modern political discourse addresses concerns about excellence in education through a focus on higher, more intellectually demanding standards (Fowler, 2013). Wirt, Mitchell, and Marshall (1988) argue quality is proof of the importance of education in preparing a citizen for success in our complex world. However, Shoup and Studer (2010) warn an inadvertent consequence of excellence is a narrow focus on few standards with performance measured by a single high-stakes test.

The next strange attractor is efficiency, representing an economic value (Fowler, 2013; Shoup & Studer, 2010; Wirt et al., 1988). Efficiency is driven by limited resources and a desire to streamline activities to essential components (Shoup & Studer, 2010). The concepts of cost-effectiveness and accountability are associated with efficiency (Fowler, 2013; Wirt et al., 1988). Further, efficiency frequently manifests as a goal with leaders seeking to impact the means rather than the end (Wirt et al., 1988). Once again, Shoup and Studer (2010) caution that efficiency reduces students' quality of education when a single standardized test is used to measure excellence. The end result is a narrow curriculum and scripted lessons.

The third competing value is choice/liberty (Shoup & Studer, 2010). Fowler (2013) defines this as an economic value and an essential component of democracy that drives many educational value conflicts. Choice implies freedom and possibilities and frequently surfaces in the form of public or private school options or diverse curricular programs (Shoup & Studer,

2010). Wirt et al. (1988) argue the importance of analyzing deeply when choice is the dominant value as other underlying values are often present. Further, while choice is ideal and guaranteed through our basic rights granted in the U.S. Constitution, imprudent choices can unintentionally result (Fowler, 2013; Shoup & Studer, 2010).

Finally, equality is the fourth strange attractor and is classified as a democratic value (Fowler, 2013; Shoup & Studer, 2010). Educational equality is also known as equity or social justice (Fowler, 2013). Equality is driven by a guiding belief that all should have the same access to opportunities. Inherent in equality is the notion that every individual in society has worth (Wirt et al., 1988). Policies focused on equality open doors for historically marginalized populations (Shoup & Studer, 2010). The nobility of equality is challenged when advancement is promoted while ignoring achievement (Shoup & Studer, 2010).

These four competing values serve as strange attractors that shift the system in an effort to seek equilibrium and homeostasis, the balance sought in the dynamic, complex system (Shoup & Studer, 2010). The concept of balance is, however, defined based on who has power and how it is enacted; balance is not enacted in a pure sense. Instead, power players use available resources to ensure the existing system lands in their favor. Moreover, each shift in the system is precursor to future reformation. Power is exercised through the promotion of competing values in discourse, action, and policy. In fact, the way states and stakeholders interpret and respond to accountability mandates varies, just as values, perspectives, and beliefs differ. These interpretations and responses shed insight into value stances and, at times, how we interpret the beliefs and motivations of others.

The pursuit of competing values can also serve as a masquerade for other motivations. Stakeholders may publicly espouse one competing value when the fight they are waging is to

maintain status quo. For example, access to charter schools and school vouchers are often interloped in conversation about excellence and freedom (Fowler, 2013). However, many powerful and advantaged parents are ultimately battling to control what their children experience in school, including minimizing racial issues and maintaining segregation (Stanford, 2022; Torres, 2018). Additionally, the pursuit of excellence is accepted until it means embracing equality for all. Within the last year, rhetoric around critical race theory and culturally responsive teaching became a platform for arguing that schools are indoctrinating students by teaching them what instead of how to think (Cavanagh, 2022; Sawchuck, 2021). The notion of inculcating students in a political mindset has a longstanding place in our country's history with critical race theory being the latest victim in the perpetual debate (Sawchuck, 2021). This belief is in spite of experts arguing that critical race theory is not taught in public schools. As a result, several states began banning textbooks, educational resources, and ways teachers can speak about "divisive" concepts over concerns about critical race theory (Cavanagh, 2022; Schwartz, 2021). Furthermore, language against critical race theory became a unifying argument among those in power (Schwartz, 2021) who felt threatened by equality with little merit or attention given to what role (if any) these concepts have in public education.

With a firm understanding of the historical and modern theoretical constructs outlined by complexity theory, along with relevant research on the concept of power, values, and how they are enacted, it is now imperative to delve into the context in which this research study is situated. Briefly examining the educational accountability landscape on a national and state-level reveals the narrative that existed across the country within a twenty-year span. This national perspective sets the stage for the debate that raged and decisions that were enacted in Virginia.

### National Accountability Context

More than 25 years ago, former President George H.W. Bush and our states' governors engaged in a summit arguing the need for standards-based accountability and reform (Klein, 2014). During this period, business leaders lobbied for significant educational reform, maintaining graduates were ill-prepared for college, the workforce, or global competition. Their arguments were driven by a desire for higher standards and excellence in education. Legislation such as Bush's America 2000, which proposed voluntary national standards, and Clinton's Goals 2000, which provided state grants for standards writing, were products of this push (Rudalevige, 2003). Throughout these subsequent presidencies, however, the goal for widespread standards-based reform never fully took root until the drastic accountability measures and mandates associated with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act were instituted (Klein, 2014).

NCLB was a joint legislative act outlining sweeping reformations to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) originally signed in 1965 (Rudalevige, 2003). NCLB was authorized in January of 2002, marking unprecedented federal oversight over states and local schools. However, the seeds for NCLB were sown years earlier with previous legislation, and President George W. Bush proved to be the final necessary component who persuaded Republican support of the legislation (Rudalevige, 2003). Predictably, discontent erupted in the quest toward "leaving no child behind". NCLB changes only required assessment reporting, and a challenge lingered. Every state had its own definition of proficiency, and the lack of standardization led to wide disparities in expectations (NGA & CCSSO; 2016). The context was rife for the impending reform.

In 2008, the National Governors Association (NGA), Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and Achieve, Inc. released the report *Benchmarking for Success*, which

recommended states adopt a common core of internationally benchmarked standards. This publication was steeped with first dimension power as large organizations and interest groups, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, helped fund the endeavor. In 2009, NGA and CCSSO received commitment from governors and chief school officers in 51 states and territories to begin the process of developing common standards in English and mathematics (NGA & CCSSO, 2016). In this same year, development around the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) continued as formal work groups and feedback groups convened, seemingly to compose, edit, validate, and review drafts of the standards (NGA & CCSSO, 2016). Participants were representative of many states, with mainly higher education and state officials comprising teams, including a representative from Virginia. Further, NGA and CCSSO released drafts of the standards for public comment. Nearly 1,000 responses were collected (NGA & CCSSO, 2016). The public appearance of a collaborative process undertaken to develop representative teams and gather widespread feedback points to intentional actions to limit accusations of using first- and second-dimension power to develop the standards (Fowler, 2013).

In 2010, states began their own processes for reviewing and considering adoption of the CCSS. Initial support was extensive among many high-profile organizations, such as the National Association for Secondary School Principals, American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association, and Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (NGA & CCSSO, 2016). In all of these cases, support was overwhelming for the idea of higher standards and a push for excellence in education. In fact, according to NGA & CCSSO (2016), the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development asserted:



For decades, the United States maintained various academic quality standards among states, resulting in wide disparities in student proficiency as measured under the No Child Left Behind Act and highlighted by National Assessment of Education Progress scores. The adoption of the Common Core State Standards by more than 40 states might be the first step toward meaningful and comprehensive comparisons of student performance and achievement among states. Under these new standards, educators across the country will work under the same guidelines for what students need to know and are expected to do. ASCD is an endorsing partner of the Common Core initiative. The newer, higher standards will require schools and communities to better and more comprehensively support student learning if students are to meet these enhanced expectations.

Also in 2010, President Obama and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan introduced the Race to the Top grant. The funding served as a financial incentive to encourage states to embrace policies favored by the administration, including teacher evaluation, aggressive school turnaround, and the adoption of rigorous, common standards.

Currently, the Common Core debate continues across the nation. The number of states actively participating has decreased from 46 to 41. Further, original supporters have spoken out against the movement (Burke, 2013). For example, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, claimed the roll-out of the standards was botched (U.S. News and World Report, 2016). Additionally, Diane Ravitch (2013) voiced grave concerns:

For the past two years, I have steadfastly insisted that I was neither for nor against the Common Core standards. I was agnostic. I wanted to see how they worked in practice. I wanted to know, based on evidence, whether or not they improve education and whether they reduce or increase the achievement gaps among different racial and ethnic groups.

After much deliberation, I have come to the conclusion that I can't wait five or ten years to find out whether test scores go up or down, whether or not schools improve, and whether the kids now far behind are worse off than they are today. I have come to the conclusion that the Common Core standards effort is fundamentally flawed by the process with which they have been foisted upon the nation.

Once again, widespread frustration and discontent provided a welcome environment for reform.

In December 2015, President Obama signed legislation reauthorizing ESEA with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Most notably, the new legislation shifted power for designing accountability structures, supports, and interventions back to states (Darling-Hammond, Bae, Cook-Harvey, Lam, Mercer, Podolsky, & Stosich, 2016). ESSA supports a more holistic approach to assessment with multiple measures, and gives states freedom to address prevailing inequities in student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). While the more prescriptive mandates associated with NCLB, such as Adequate Yearly Progress targets, were removed, ESSA still embodies an assessment-based model for measuring learning (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016).

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This research study seeks to uncover how societal values, power tensions, and feedback factor into the complex environment surrounding the policy process. Complexity theory uncovers seemingly innocuous forces that are rarely fully examined. Examining these forces reveals the influences that drive the inevitable change necessary for system equilibrium and survival (Shoup & Studer, 2010). Through an in-depth look at the major and minor events surrounding the accountability policy debate in Virginia over a twenty-year span, an underlying story emerges. This helps us understand how driving values, power relationships, and other motivating factors guide policy decision-making and predict future courses of action (McMillan & Schumaker, 2010).

This chapter includes detailed information on the research questions and methodology employed to analyze accountability policy, particularly around the immediate years preceding and following 2010, when Virginia rejected the CCSS. Also included is information on participants interviewed as part of the research study. The chapter continues with an examination of the data collection and analysis process. Finally, chapter three concludes by identifying strengths and limitations of the study.

#### **Research Design**

The widespread perspective of viewing the policy process as a linear trajectory is inherently limiting. Specifically, it hinders one's ability to fully understand and anticipate policy decisions by overlooking the complexity of the political arena. Complexity theory reveals myriad reasons behind policy decisions, uncovering an interconnected web rather than simplistic cause and effect relationships (Shoup & Studer, 2010). This research study seeks to understand accountability policy decision-making in Virginia by examining power relationships and the way

stakeholders actualize policy decisions to promote competing values. Thus, the research is guided by the following questions:

1. What factors and policy conditions led the Commonwealth of Virginia to decide not to adopt the CCSS?
  - a. What values motivated policy decisions around landmark accountability decisions in Virginia over a twenty-year span?
  - b. Given the motivations to engage in the accountability debate in Virginia, how and in what ways did educational stakeholders attempt to influence the course of decision-making, and to what degree of success?
2. How did stakeholder values, motivations, and influence lead to rejection of the CCSS?

A qualitative research design was selected for this study to understand the complex situation of accountability decision-making more deeply. Qualitative research describes a social phenomenon within a specific context (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this case, the phenomenon is the way stakeholders use power and other means to influence accountability decision-making. The qualitative researcher explores a phenomenon through observation and investigation and uses inductive reasoning to develop, verify, and confirm emerging theories (Anfara & Mertz, 2006; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; McMillan & Schumaker, 2010).

Furthermore, a historical case study design was chosen for the research. A case study is bound by a specific place, time, and series of events around an issue (McMillan & Schumaker, 2010) and offers a detailed examination of one setting or event while employing multiple sources of data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; McMillan & Schumaker, 2010). Drawing on the work of Yin

(2011) and Diem, Frankenberg, and Cleary (2015), a case study proves the best choice because it provides insight into specific events that unfold over time, allowing exploration of the larger sociopolitical context. Characteristics of historical studies and case studies often intersect; a key characteristic of a historical case study includes the examination of a specific phenomenon over a period of time (Merriam, 1998). A historical case study approach is appropriate for studying political discourse (Widdersheim, 2018). Historical studies seek to uncover happenings in the past and relate those past findings to the present and future (Merriam, 1998). In this research design, the case is Virginia and the subsequent accountability policy decisions made over a twenty-year span. This timeframe covers major and recent accountability events, including the adoption of the Standards of Learning, inception of NCLB mandates, application for Race to the Top funding, and, most recently, the rejection of the Common Core standards.

### **Participant Selection**

Policy decisions are not made in isolation, thus there are a number of stakeholder groups whose perspectives and insights were sought. Initial research into the topic of accountability in Virginia revealed stakeholders, particularly those who had a voice or experiences with any number of recent accountability mandates. In addition to initial research, a variation of snowball sampling, in which one participant recommends others (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; McMillan & Schumaker, 2010), was used to identify other potential interviewees. Specifically, the technique of identifying “key informants” ensured interviewees had insight and knowledge about specific accountability events (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 231). Key informants for this study shared two characteristics. First, whether they worked in a political context, at the state level, or in higher education, key informants all served in a leadership capacity and were privy to decision-making conversations around accountability, many with firsthand knowledge of events. Second, key

informants all had strong convictions about accountability decisions in Virginia, which revealed values and motivations. In all, a total of five interviews were conducted across stakeholder groups with three additional potential interviewees declining an interview.

Based on the use of key informants, an initial group that surfaced as an important participant was the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE). The VDOE operates in concert with the Virginia Board of Education (BOE) to increase student learning and achievement across the Commonwealth. The VDOE develops and implements strategic plans and implements performance measures to track progress. As a government agency, the VDOE is responsible for writing the Standards of Learning (SOL) and recommending educational decisions in the interest of PK-12 students, while the BOE serves as the governing and policy-making body for Virginia's system of public elementary and secondary schools. Early research began by interviewing key leaders within these organizations, particularly those who had an integral role in landmark accountability decisions for the commonwealth. A position group of interest included content coordinators who led development of the SOL and instructional resources. Coordinators with extensive experience leading the state in their respective areas were identified to learn more about decision-making related to the standards. Additionally, an interview with the former state superintendent for public instruction was sought without success, but a discussion with the present state superintendent for public instruction was conducted. The state superintendent's office is the administrative agency for the commonwealth's public schools. The superintendent establishes direction through strategic planning and works in collaboration with the BOE who institutes corresponding policies.

Another key stakeholder group identified through snowball sampling was public and higher education leaders. Several university professors played key roles or had unique

perspectives into Virginia's accountability decisions. Scholars were identified based on their experiences relative to different accountability eras. In particular, an interview was secured with a professor who also has experience in division-level leadership and broader knowledge of the policy realm. This provided insight into the early days of SOL implementation and the way policy was received and enacted at the division-level.

Additionally, a select group of public and higher education personnel led or participated in workgroups in recent years to examine the accountability system in Virginia. A whitepaper was written as a product of one of these recent workgroups, and a state-commissioned SOL Innovation Committee convened as a result. An interview was conducted with a higher education leader who had an integral role in this work.

State lawmakers and political figures served as a final stakeholder group identified through early research and snowball sampling. An important figurehead in this group is the Secretary of Education as this position works in collaboration with the governor to spearhead legislative initiatives that impact public schools. I sought an interview with a former Secretary of Education who had a pivotal role in Virginia's decision-making. The interview attempted to shed light on some tumultuous and recent decisions, including the debate around the Common Core standards. Finally, interviews with several longstanding legislators who serve on Republican and Democratic education committees were unsuccessfully sought on multiple occasions. The sensitive and political nature of the discussion made these interviews more difficult to secure. Instead, public comments from Virginia legislators serve as a conduit for learning more about lawmakers' perspectives.

## **Data Collection**

To gain better insight into the specific and hallmark decisions around Virginia's accountability policies, this research study uses two sources of qualitative data, interviews and document analysis, to uncover themes, trends, and tensions. In-depth interviews are purposeful conversations using an interview guide with a few selected topics and probes (McMillan & Schumaker, 2010). Qualitative interviews vary based on the degree of structure with semi-structured interviews providing comparable data across subjects and unstructured interviews allowing the subjects to structure the topic themselves based on the given probes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), the level of structure should align with the research goals. Therefore, a semi-structured interview protocol featuring open-ended questions was used for this research study. A semi-structured protocol ensures pre-determined questions are answered to seek specific insight from the various stakeholder perspectives.

For this research study, a common list of interview questions was developed to gain broad perspective on accountability in Virginia (appendix A). Interview participants represented key stakeholder groups, including VDOE representatives, public and higher education leaders, and a former state Secretary of Education. Interviews sought to provide a descriptive account of how various events related to accountability in the Commonwealth unfolded. Interview questions were structured to explore accountability through a broad lens before narrowing in on watershed moments based on each interviewee's unique experiences. Interviewees were selected for their ability to provide accounts of events that were not fully explained through published documents. For example, the most elusive of these events is the decision-making behind Virginia's decision to reject the Common Core standards. Thus, the interviews sought to "fill the gaps" present in the published literature to fully understand the motivations behind such decisions.



Document analysis serves as the second source of data for this qualitative study. The increasing use of documents as a primary source of data in qualitative research is partially attributed to the influence of discourse theory in literature (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). While there are three main types of data prevalent in qualitative research: personal documents, official documents, and popular culture documents/artifacts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; McMillan & Schumaker, 2010), this research study relies solely on official documents. Press releases and official publications from the VDOE and BOE detailed stances around the Standards of Learning, the Common Core standards, and the accountability debate. Additionally, media releases and news stories offered a viewpoint of stakeholder value stances. Analysis also included the whitepaper on Virginia's assessment system that became the work product from the Secretary of Education's commissioned taskforce and pertinent minutes from the SOL Innovation Committee, which was the group appointed by the Governor to make recommendations on the accountability system. Relevant discourse was analyzed regarding the inception of the Standards of Learning, the transition to high-stakes testing under the No Child Left Behind mandates, the debate around the Common Core standards, and the push for Race to the Top funding. Taken together, these data sources offered a detailed chronological account of the policy debate and events that transpired. More importantly, analysis sheds insight into the motivations, power relationships, and value stances of the relevant stakeholders.

### **Data Analysis**

The study sought to more fully understand the Virginia case beyond the loosely related headlines that have permeated the news over the past few decades. Successive rounds of open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were used to analyze interview transcripts, pertinent documents, and media releases. Theoretically, the coding was guided by the tenets of critical

discourse analysis, which focuses on the relationship between the use of language and power as it relates to policy making (Fowler, 2013). According to Fairclough (1995), critical discourse analysis seeks

to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power (p. 132).

Pertinent discourse was analyzed according to the theoretical framework. Initial analysis was conducted to reveal evidence of driving values and the ways power was exercised. A second round of analysis uncovered underlying values and looked for themes and relationships connected to the conceptual framework, including value stances, the tenets of complexity theory, and the exertion of power to influence policy. Upon completion of each phase of data collection, themes were honed and follow-up questions developed for pursuit through future data analysis. Data was disaggregated using the tool, Analysis Framework: Discourse Surrounding Virginia Accountability Movements (appendix B), to explore the complexity that bred shifts on the larger landscape.

As data was analyzed, a codebook was developed to organize discourse and arrange by similar codes. The coding system used in the codebook was developed and refined as a result of patterns in the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The codebook made visible the emergence of themes through analysis of evidence across data sources. Furthermore, after each new data source was analyzed, a memo was written to summarize what was learned, reflect on emerging trends, synthesize the growing body of data, and test early themes.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Case studies allow an in-depth look at a single system, event, or case (McMillan & Schumaker, 2010) and historical case studies study that event over time (Merriam, 1998). Data collection is extensive and varied to provide the researcher enough information to reach an in-depth understanding of the case. However, there are several inherent limitations when using this design. One limitation is the challenge in generalizing case study findings to the general population. Because case studies are bound within a specific timeframe and situation, generalizing beyond the specific population and context is not possible (Flyvbjerg, 2004). A second limitation of the historical case study design is the type of information the research yields. By nature, most case study designs produce practical rather than theoretical knowledge. A limitation of my research design is the hesitation some stakeholder groups feel in talking openly and freely about the content. In some instances, the political and sensitive nature of the topic of accountability left some interviewees wishing to speak “off the record”. Similarly, multiple stakeholders from the state legislator and other stakeholder groups were unwilling to participate in interviews about the topic.

### **Summary**

Policy decisions impact education across myriad contexts and levels. To understand the policy process, we must look closely at the decision-making and available discourse surrounding accountability decisions. The qualitative design of this study can provide insight into the ways that stakeholders exercise power and actualize driving values through policy implementation. The analysis of interviews and documents provide a rich data source for understanding the Virginia case.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

This research study was driven by several guiding questions that explore policy, values, power, and motivations as they relate to the CCSS and accountability decisions in Virginia. The following research questions and sub-questions were examined through semi-structured interviews and document analysis:

1. What factors and policy conditions led the Commonwealth of Virginia to decide not to adopt the CCSS?
  - a. What values motivated policy decisions around landmark accountability decisions in Virginia over a twenty-year span?
  - b. Given the motivations to engage in the accountability debate in Virginia, how and in what ways did educational stakeholders attempt to influence the course of decision-making, and to what degree of success?
2. How did stakeholder values, motivations, and influence lead to rejection of the CCSS?

This chapter outlines the research findings, beginning with an overview of the political and policy context and a description of the stakeholders interviewed. The chapter continues with an analysis to uncover the motivations and value stances of the various stakeholder groups. The analysis reveals the symbiotic nature of values with two themes emerging, *Values Conflicting* and *Values Working in Tandem*. Next, the chapter continues by detailing three broad ways power was enacted with numerous subthemes for each. Broad themes include *Power Wielded by Position*, *Power Exerted Through Expertise, Reward, and Resources*, and *Power Exercised Through Discourse*. Figure 1 provides an overview of themes and subthemes in the chapter.

**Figure 1***Research Themes and Subthemes*

<b>Research Connection</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subtheme</b>
Stakeholder Values Motivating Decisions	Symbiotic Values	Values Conflicting
		Values Working in Tandem
Power to Influence Decision-Making	Power Wielded by Position	Bureaucratic Power Exercised Through Political Clout
		Exercising Power Through Policy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Policy with Funding</i></li> <li>• <i>Political Posturing</i></li> <li>• <i>Policy to Advance Change</i></li> <li>• <i>Policy to Override a Constitutional Mandate</i></li> </ul>
	Power Exerted Through Expertise, Reward, and Resources	Funding with Strings was a Tipping Point
		Power Multiplied <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Expertise and Material Resources</i></li> <li>• <i>Authority and Time</i></li> </ul>
	Power Through Discourse	Feedback Beyond an Obligatory Process
		The Language of Values Controls the Narrative

*Figure 1.* Graphic represents the themes and subthemes that emerged in the research analysis.**Political and Policy Context**

History provides a clear account of the factors that prioritized and served as the impetus for greater accountability in education. Furthermore, complexity theory offers a useful lens for helping us understand the events as they unfolded. The seeds for a national movement related to common standards and a universal accountability system were sown more than 25 years ago when former President George H.W. Bush engaged our states' governors in a summit arguing the

need for educational reform. Throughout four subsequent presidencies, the goal for widespread standards-based reform never took root until the accountability measures and mandates associated with No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Strange attractors drive any system toward the dominant value, and order and efficiency became paramount within this new accountability regime. Multiple-choice testing, even to the detriment of learners, became standard practice as the new changes only required assessment reporting and proof of reaching an increasing benchmark. A host of challenges lingered, and one overt effect was the “watering down” of standards. Every state had its own set of standards and definition of proficiency, and the lack of standardization led to wide disparities in expectations.

In 2008, momentum around the call for common standards was revitalized when the National Governors Association (NGA), Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and Achieve, Inc. released the report *Benchmarking for Success*, which recommended states adopt a common core of internationally benchmarked standards. This recommendation laid the foundation and allowed for an emergence within the existing system, in this case the CCSS. In 2009, NGA and CCSSO received commitment from governors and chief school officers in 51 states and territories to begin the process of developing common standards in English and mathematics (NGA & CCSSO, 2016). In this same year, development around the CCSS continued as formal work groups and feedback groups convened, seemingly to compose, edit, validate, and review drafts of the standards (NGA & CCSSO, 2016). Feedback, or cybernetics, is a critical component of complexity theory as the feedback often guides the system, particularly if it is not simply viewed as “white noise”. Participants were representative of many states, with mainly higher education and state officials comprising teams, including a representative from Virginia. Further, NGA and CCSSO released drafts of the standards for public comment; nearly

1,000 responses were collected (NGA & CCSSO, 2016). On a national level, there was a clear public appearance of a collaborative process undertaken to develop the standards.

During this same timeframe in Virginia, public discussion took place around accountability and standards. Virginia is considered a state at the forefront of accountability in education. The Passport to Literacy assessment was an original test that tied high school graduation to a test score. This assessment was replaced by the Standards of Learning (SOL), which went into effect in 1998. The SOL represented a uniform set of standards that students were expected to meet by content area and grade level. End-of-year assessments measured achievement against the standards, but accountability implications elevated with the inception of NCLB, a result of the system shifting to a model of efficiency and order. The SOL became part of practice. Further, Virginia code mandated revisions to the standards occurring on a seven-year cycle. With more than ten years of SOL resources, data, and work invested, the discussion regarding switching to the CCSS in Virginia fostered an ideal environment for debate.

Political happenings, both in Virginia and nationally, during the years 2008-2010 add another interesting element to the discussion. Virginia's governors are elected to a four-year term, and they are not eligible for re-election. There was a change in office and political affiliation during the time of the CCSS debate with former Governor Tim Kaine, a Democrat, holding office from 2006-2010 and former Governor Bob McDonnell, a Republican, taking over in 2010. There was a stark difference in the public comments both former governors offered about the CCSS. Governor Kaine publicly expressed initial support for the standards and Virginia's participation in the movement. However, evidence of that public support waned near the end of Kaine's term, and McDonnell also expressed opposition. Further, happenings on the national level offer some perspective.

A change in the national landscape strongly influenced the standards conversation by introducing an element of power through money. In 2010, the federal government tied education funding made available through the Race to the Top (RttT) grant to implementation of college and career-ready standards in K-12 schools. The “dangling carrot” of money made the implementation of CCSS lucrative to many states, and thus a tipping point, also known as sensitive dependence, swayed the system. For the first time in the history of public education in America, a set of common learning standards was agreed to and a vast majority of states adopted those standards. An educational system that had long operated with states having autonomy shifted toward one with greater federal involvement. The lure of potential funding, particularly at a time when the economy was in a recession and money was scarce, had a disproportionate effect on the situation. While stipulations never specified the necessity to adopt those exact standards, states were required to prove implementation of college and career-ready standards. Many states openly expressed allegiance to the CCSS and quickly adopted them. However, Virginia decided to remain loyal to the SOL and publicly rejected the notion of adopting CCSS. While public discourse around Virginia’s decisions to reject the CCSS was scarce, several related events add to the story. Most importantly, Virginia applied for RttT funding but was eliminated in the first round after placing 31<sup>st</sup> among 41 states that entered. Following elimination, former Governor McDonnell spoke of wanting to keep the federal government and bureaucracy out of the schools in Virginia. Choice became a prominent strange attractor as the governor rejected intrusion or oversight on a federal level.

Thus, this research study is situated in this context. There is a gray area surrounding available discourse related to the CCSS debate in Virginia. Public discourse seems to jump from a show of support to a defiant stand for independence, all in a relatively short time period. The



findings provide greater insight into the debate in Virginia, and complexity theory, along with our understanding of power relationships, helps to make sense of the events.

### Stakeholders

There were three primary stakeholder groups who were represented in interview to share their insights on the CCSS and accountability debate in Virginia. A total of five interviews were conducted and remaining data was gathered from document analysis. Interviewees included two individuals who worked at the Virginia Department of Education, one of whom was a division-level superintendent and high-ranking committee member during this era, two individuals representing higher education, and one political figure. Figure 2 provides an overview.

**Figure 2**

*Overview of Interviewees*

<b>Interviewee Pseudonym</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Connection</b>
Dr. Flynn	Higher Education	•Served on and co-chaired committee to examine SOL innovation and accountability
Dr. Grant	Higher Education	•Former division-level assistant superintendent •Author of General Assembly update memos for leaders
Dr. Jacobs	Virginia Department of Education	•Former division-level superintendent •Member of SOL Innovation Committee •State-level superintendent
Ms. Smithley	Virginia Department of Education	•State-level curriculum coordinator •Represented Virginia on CCSS work group
Mr. Underdue	Political Figure	•Former state Secretary of Education

*Figure 2.* Chart presents overview of interviewees from various stakeholder groups.

### Stakeholder Values Analysis

There were multiple stakeholder groups at play in the CCSSdebate in Virginia, all with a vested interest and many with differing goals. Complexity theory asserts the greater the number

of stakeholders involved, the more complex the system. Furthermore, various stakeholders are driven by different motivations and competing values, leading to the potential for power conflicts and growing frustrations. Feedback was gathered from major stakeholders in the Virginia case, which shed insight into the outcomes they sought.

### **Virginia Department of Education**

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) was a prominent stakeholder in the CCSS debate. The VDOE sets the course for statewide work happening in Virginia and operates in partnership with the Board of Education (BOE) to make recommendations about standards, accountability, and other education-related decisions. The former Superintendent for Public Instruction who led the department during the CCSS movement, Pat Wright, was a longstanding leader, having spent nearly 30 years within the state organization. Wright was credited with a number of major accomplishments, including introduction of the Commonwealth's SOL, the revision of the standards to emphasize a more rigorous level of college and career readiness, and the expanded use of technology in assessment. Under Wright's tenure, Virginia students outperformed most of their peers on SAT and ACT college-admissions assessments, the Commonwealth ranked third in the nation in the percentage of students who qualify for Advanced Placement examinations, and student achievement on all these national measures improved. Public discourse around Wright reveals her as a public servant and advocate for students who was motivated to seek excellence through implementation of high standards, holding schools accountable for student learning, and closing the existing achievement gaps. A former BOE president was one of several to publicly express this viewpoint (Virginia Department of Education News, 2014).

Pat was adamant that we put the long-term interests of students first. This included raising standards so students would be better prepared for college and the work force and holding high schools accountable for graduation and dropout rates.

Aside from the State Superintendent for Public Instruction, the VDOE also employs a number of experts who lead their respective departments. One such expert interviewed, Ms. Smithley, was the content coordinator for a specific subject area. Smithley also had a long history with the VDOE and, at the time of the interview, was the only existing coordinator who served in the department during the CCSS debate. Furthermore, Smithley had a unique role because she was the representative tapped from Virginia to serve on a CCSS work group. Smithley shared her experiences serving on this group and expressed frustration between the public perception of the CCSS work teams and the actual working contributions of the group. Smithley entered into the role believing she could help contribute toward the drafting and revising of high-quality standards. Her first assignment on the work team was to share obstacles or pitfalls she encountered when writing state standards and, shortly after providing feedback, the first draft of the CCSS was released. Smithley never participated in drafting or offering input toward the standards themselves. Further, she noticed the first draft of the CCSS looked very similar to Achieve's standards, and this revelation frustrated Smithley. Smithley and her VDOE team were already working with Achieve to revise the existing Virginia standards and ensure a focus on college and career readiness. From Smithley's perspective, the CCSS were a duplicate of Achieve's work and lacked the specificity and customization that existed within Virginia's SOL. Smithley was motivated by a quest for excellence and a desire to have rigorous and relevant standards for Virginia's students. Smithley argued, "Well, the 2010 English and math

standards, we had already laid this groundwork. Our standards were vetted by national organizations as being college and career-ready.”

A common motivation among discourse from both members of the VDOE, along with available discourse from the BOE, includes the notion of excellence. All believed the Virginia SOL matched or exceeded the quality of the CCSS. Furthermore, in their eyes, the addition of the many resources available to accompany the existing SOL made the current Virginia state standards superior. Smithley speaks about a side-by-side comparison that proved the superiority of the SOL.

For the 2010 English standards, there is a side-by-side that takes the Common Core State Standards and shows you one-by-one where it is. With our corresponding curriculum frameworks, we have everything they have, plus we have more... and if you look at the Common Core State Standards, they're very, very packed for example, and they're written in grade bands. So, where ours are, and particularly with the 2017 state standards, we said students will be able to write in these modes but with this specific focus in these grades. So like it's not everything. So some of it, we felt like, was developmentally inappropriate. I'll give you an example. In the K-2 band in the Common Core State Standards, they were saying persuasive writing. I would argue, I would argue that they're not really writing yet, let alone writing persuasively.

Document analysis revealed others at the VDOE who share a similar perspective. Wright asserted strong opinions regarding the quality of the CCSS in relation to the Virginia SOL. Throughout her tenure, Wright never publicly wavered from belief that Virginia should remain loyal to the SOL. In fact, in Pyle and Grime's (2014) VDOE news release announcing Wright's retirement, Wright mentioned immense pride with the decision to reject the CCSS.

One of the most critical decisions during the last six years was in 2010 when the Board of Education accepted my recommendation not to adopt the Common Core State Standards, as all but a handful of states had already done. Looking back, I remain convinced that this was the right decision for our students, teachers, and schools. Virginia schools are now in their third year of implementing college- and career-ready standards and assessments and we are already seeing progress as more and more students and schools meet these higher expectations for learning and achievement in all content areas.

While excellence was certainly a motivator for the VDOE and BOE's actions surrounding the CCSS debate, discourse also hinted at an underlying theme, the quest for efficiency. Virginia was well underway with accountability measures and standards. Years of time, energy, and efforts were poured into developing resources for teachers. The notion of starting over with a new set of standards meant previous work developed would be lost. While this thought was revealed in several ways, it never emerged paramount to the notion of excellence. For example, the BOE released a statement opposing national standards over the SOL. Among the rationale offered, the BOE cited several reasons revealing an underlying theme of efficiency. Examples include the "disruption to instruction, accountability, and professional development" that would follow word-for-word adoption of "comparable standards", along with the absence of "curriculum frameworks, scope and sequence guides, and other materials related to the standards" if Virginia were to pursue the CCSS. In essence, had the CCSS proven superior in the eyes of the VDOE and BOE, it is unclear the role efficiency would have played in the decision making. However, because these stakeholders viewed the SOL as superior, this debate never came into play.

### **Political Figures**

The topic of the CCSS debate is a politically charged discussion wrought with strong emotions and feelings. For that reason, it was difficult to secure interviews with political figures to discuss their viewpoints. Public discourse through the media is limited, and motivations are inferred from various public statements. For example, Governor Kaine's initial support for the CCSS offered an early notion of Virginia's openness to participate, though the notion of maintaining state choice remained important. Kaine expressed the need for higher standards across the nation and the ability to measure Virginia students in a more global way. After signing a memorandum of agreement committing the Commonwealth to participation in the "State Common Core Standards", Kaine shared his viewpoints.

This process respects state sovereignty and our federal system while recognizing that America's future prosperity hinges on the ability of our public schools to produce young men and women who can hold their own with their brightest peers in the developed and developing worlds.

However, Kaine's own initial support is contradicted a little over a year later with the introduction of RttT funding. Publicly, the tipping point of introducing funding appears to be a key factor behind the decision-making in Virginia. In a letter to United States Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan, Kaine expresses the need for state autonomy and control in decision-making and argues that funding and prioritization for states who adopt the CCSS verbatim takes away the voluntary nature of the standards.

Governor Bob McDonnell publicly appears to double-down on the resistance toward the CCSS. Much like Kaine, McDonnell's motivations seem driven by the necessity for choice and autonomy, desiring freedom from federal intrusion. McDonnell also hints at the quality of the existing system in Virginia when he argues his points publicly.

I don't want to have a federal bureaucracy monitoring whether or not we are having the right programs in our schools. The bottom line is, we don't need the federal government with the Common Core telling us how to run our schools in Virginia. We'll use our own system, which is very good. It's empirically tested.

Though the governors represented different political affiliations, both came to public agreement opposing adoption of the CCSS.

While these findings were derived from public discourse, additional insight was revealed through an interview with Virginia's former Secretary of Education, Mr. Underdue. Underdue was one of the secretaries who served with McDonnell, and discussion with him painted the picture of an administration that toiled with, and very nearly accepted, the idea of adopting the CCSS. Underdue describes tension between the administration and the VDOE and labeled himself the "disruptor" in the group who challenged the predominant line of thinking. Through the lens of complexity theory, Underdue's role challenged homeostasis within the system and brought about discourse for change.

Underdue's role as a former educator and administrator among a team of politicians gave him a unique perspective. For example, Underdue discussed strong feelings about the differences in worth between formative and summative assessments and argued that growth should be the ultimate goal rather than achievement. Underdue was driven by a quest for transparency in the accountability system. He expressed a strong desire for the public to have a clear understanding of how a school was performing and for leaders to have a good understanding of how students were performing, not only against their state-wide peers, but also on a national landscape.

Underdue believed the CCSS would have allowed such comparisons. Ultimately, Underdue was

also seeking a level of excellence. He sought this level of quality in a more political fashion, vying for comparisons and broad data to prove Virginia students were performing at a high level.

Underdue also references how other states were quickly jumping onboard with the CCSS. His comments reveal a motivation to join the group and the power of influence.

The governor and I met some key leaders from across the country... And so I met some players. Everyone was wondering why are you not talking Common Core? Massachusetts is; they're Common Core. If they're doing it, we all should be thinking about doing it... We were about to adopt the Common Core.

While details about the final decision to reject the CCSS remain confidential, Underdue vividly remembered the day the group made the ultimate decision. Moreover, the motivations for the decision to reject the CCSS never related to inherent beliefs about what was best for students, learning, or assessment; instead, the decision was politically-motivated. Underdue asserted the ultimate decision related to political party affiliations during an election year. Republican leadership was at the helm during the inception of the SOL in 1995 and, with a highly contested election anticipated, the move to abandon the SOL could prove costly. No other political actors were willing to speak about the decision to shed insight or corroborate Underdue's story. If accurate, the watershed moment Underdue describes would be the decision that sent the education system tipping a different direction in an effort to seek balance with a multitude of cascading effects. Either way, McDonnell's calls for choice and state sovereignty became the public version of reasons for rejection.

### **Higher Education**

Representatives from higher education also played a role in the actions around the CCSSdebate, namely in work following the decision to reject the standards. A task force was



established by Underdue's office to review Virginia's assessment system and several piloted assessment projects. Higher education personnel led the task force, along with other practitioners and leaders. An interview with one of the leaders of the task force, Dr. Flynn, revealed the group was charged with looking at the SOL and CCSS for comparison; however, the committee was also told they would not be going CC. The timeline of the work suggests Virginia leaders' ultimate decision to reject the CCSS happened after the task force was convened.

Flynn expressed some initial lamenting at the decision not to at least consider or learn from the CCSS. Flynn was motivated by the notion of excellence, in standards, assessment, and quality of instruction, and she also acknowledged the complexity of efficiency behind the decision-making process.

I mean, I think there probably are places in the Virginia standards that they are as equal if not better than some of the Common Core. I think there are places also in the Virginia standards that really still are ... are really measuring sort of low-level skills. I spend a lot of time out in classrooms, and I see some of that transferring into what's happening in schools. I think it's a little of both. I understand the rationale not to because then that means you have to think about, you know, school divisions and redoing pacing guides, and some of that's going to happen automatically with the revisions of SOL, but it's not going to be a radical revision as what would have been required if they'd have moved to the Common Core.

The outcome of the commissioned task force was a white paper written by two leading professors. The white paper never addressed the CCSS, nor does it detail the comparison work that was done to weigh the two sets of standards. Instead, the white paper details Virginia's performance in the national context and outlines four recommendations for improving and

aligning the assessment system in the Commonwealth. The task force and subsequent white paper served as the springboard for work that has occurred in Virginia since declining participation in the CCSS. Namely, this task force was the origin of the Virginia SOL Innovation Committee, a diverse group of representatives who discuss and make recommendations to streamline and transform the assessment and accountability process in Virginia, seeking a balance of excellence and efficiency to enact a meaningful accountability system on a large scale.

Analysis of discourse among all three groups, the VDOE/BOE, political figures, and higher education, reveal differing motivations around the CCSS decision. Excellence, choice, efficiency, and political factors all played a role in what the various groups were seeking. The balance of these values and their interplay reveal hidden relationships made evident through a complexity theory lens. The stakeholders and their differing levels of power, along with the shifting of values, led to a consensus on rejecting the CCSS, in spite of the road each took to arrive at that conclusion.

### **Symbiotic Values**

Stakeholders are driven or motivated by various values they seek to actualize through events related to a situation or context, in this case the debate around the CCSS. Competing values often serve as strange attractors to shift the system toward a dominant value (Fowler, 2013; Shoup & Studer, 2010). Stakeholder groups used discourse, power, and influence to sway the debate, hoping to shift the system to align with that group's underlying competing value. The interplay of these values revealed some unique relationships. For example, values sometimes worked at odds and brought about conflict. However, dissimilar values also were able to work in tandem helping different groups achieve the same end goal. These two relationships are known

as the symbiosis of values. In the findings, symbiosis refers to the relationship or interaction between two or more sets of values or beliefs.

### **Value Conflicts**

The case study revealed several examples of values conflicting with each other. Sometimes a conflict was the product of seeking a similar end goal, and other times a conflict was a result of an inherent tension between two belief systems. In each case, the various stakeholder groups desired differing outcomes or a more robust consideration regarding adoption of the CCSS. Ultimately, the decision was swayed due to political factors and contextual reality in an election year.

### ***Excellence vs. Excellence***

Decisive actions and discourse around the CCSS debate revealed a relationship at odds. The most overt example of a clash between stakeholder groups involved individuals who were ultimately seeking actualization of the same value. The dispute involved VDOE stakeholders and a political figure, namely Mr. Underdue. Both groups referenced their tension and frustration with the other in interviews, but a deep analysis revealed each was seeking a level of excellence. The downfall occurred in the way each metacognitively defined their driving goal and the use of power. The VDOE representatives sought a level of excellence and believed their existing SOL far superior to the CCSS. They questioned the integrity of the process used to develop the CCSS and valued the ten years of effort behind their existing system. Smithley also expressed personal frustration with Underdue and the process used to re-review the SOL in relation to the CC, a task undertaken for a second time at Underdue's direction.

He commissioned a group and there were somehow, I didn't know anything about it, but somehow, Pat Wright was still superintendent, somehow it had gotten down to our school

board, the state school board found out about it, and there were several meetings. And then, the state school board said wait a minute, where are the content experts from DOE? So, Dan Michaels and I had to go to these meetings. It was being run out of UVA. There were, there were a number of people who, both math and English content experts, who I don't know how they were appointed by these legislators, but there were people from other divisions, etc. and I was part of that. And so, we were looking at Common Core Standards and we were looking at our standards. I mean, we had already done this...And I can remember Dan saying, we were in a meeting over at the Patrick Henry building, which is where the governor is...and it was, I remember him saying, 'I, I didn't write these standards.' And I said, 'Well, I did. I did write them, so I am personally involved. So, if you have questions about them'. We had the assistant superintendent of assessment. We had, it was a big push, and the state Board of Education and DOE pushed back. That was a good thing about that governor leaving.

Underdue entered the debate from a very different perspective. As a former principal, his perspective of the VDOE was a flawed and heavily bureaucratic system with no propensity for change. Underdue was determined to bring about disruption and welcomed the challenge to debate with Wright about the merits of the current system. Underdue also referenced the near decision to adopt the CCSS in Virginia while offering no rationale for making this selection over remaining with the SOL. Instead, it seemed like Underdue wanted change because he was seeking a level of excellence the current system, in his mind, did not allow. In his interview, Underdue later expressed that remaining with the SOL proved the right decision. His reasons for this rationale were two-fold. First, Underdue believed this because the decision kept Virginia out

of political trouble based on the uproar that happened in other states. Second, Underdue also admitted a near equality in the two sets of standards.

It's all hindsight 20-20. It all worked out for the best because the Standards of Learning, as it relates to the Common Core standards, if you really do a cross comparison, they are almost the same. Okay? But we didn't get caught up into the, sort of, Tea Party blow-back that came on the Common Core. So, that's one good reason, one positive that's come from us not doing what was right at the time, it's that we didn't get caught up in the blow-back.

Even while admitting the two sets of standards were nearly equivalent, Underdue still remained staunchly committed to the idea that adopting the CCSS was the right decision at the time. At the root, Underdue's core frustrations emanated from the bureaucratic way of thinking he perceived pervasive at the VDOE, particularly under Wright's tenure. Underdue referenced the SOL as being Wright's "baby" and knew she would never want to abandon them.

The Department of Education ... I was the, sort of, disruptor that came in and the, sort of, unaccounted for. They didn't anticipate me coming into the fold. Pat, for many years, she had grown up in the department. She is the epitome of a bureaucrat. I say that with a degree of respect, you know? So, she was there. She was instrumental, and she played an integral role in crafting, and developing, and communicating the Standards of Learning as we still know them. You know? Coming up through the ranks as specialist, and then that specialist, and so on and so forth. So, she ... I would liken the SOL as her baby. Hard to do something that's going to cause your baby harm or heartache.

The VDOE representatives, Wright and Smithley, were driven by the same goal as Underdue, the pursuit of excellence. However, the two stakeholder groups viewed excellence in different ways. Wright and Smithley recognized excellence as a process to reach an end goal.

They valued the adoption of high-quality standards, accompanying resources, and teacher development to reach the end goal. Perhaps because Smithley and Wright were at the helm throughout the inception and institution of the SOL, they observed the process from a very different perspective. They could appreciate the years of work it took to achieve a level of teacher comfort and proficiency with the standards, along with the amount of effort built into the infrastructure. Their appraisal of excellence was performance on the assessments used to measure the standards, along with other national assessments (i.e., SAT, ACT) that proved the value of Virginia's SOL structure and the impact it had on learning. At their core, they were *developers*.

On the other hand, Underdue viewed excellence as an immediate by-product. He saw a more direct cause-effect relationship between implementation of standards and subsequent gains in learning. As a former administrator, Underdue operated not as a developer, but as an *evaluator*. This is quite a different hat to wear. While developers and evaluators in education each seek excellence, one earns it through patience and persistence while the other demands it through immediate accountability. Both roles, developers and evaluators, are important in education, yet there is an inherent conflict between the two viewpoints that seemingly yielded a tangible conflict between the stakeholder groups. Neither could appreciate the perspective of the other, nor was there a willingness to learn. The end result was one group expressing staunch opposition to the national standards and another nearly swaying the decision in support of CCSS adoption. Both acted on their convictions, and the outcome in Virginia could have been quite different if not for the power of politics.

### ***Excellence vs. Efficiency***

An additional example of values working at odds to achieve differing goals comes to light in the debate for excellence versus efficiency. This tension surfaced in discussions with VDOE stakeholders and higher education personnel, with both acknowledging the value in seeking higher levels of proficiency and the challenge of working with limited resources. Achieving a level of excellence implies above average achievement, evoking notions such as world-class and high performing. Often in education, we view an abundance of adequate resources, such as time, instructional materials, and personnel, as a necessary factor when striving for excellence. This notion inherently contradicts the value efficiency, which is associated with the concepts of cost-cutting and accountability. In our research, the VDOE and higher education stakeholders were each driven by a desire for excellence through implementation of the highest quality and most rigorous standards; however, unanimous agreement was absent when analyzing which standards met the criteria. Smithley and Wright expressed strong feelings in support of the SOL, while Flynn, representing higher education personnel, voiced hesitation and uncertainty. Flynn believed the CCSS had merit and, in some instances, could bolster the quality of the existing SOL, but she admitted obstacles related to the existing infrastructure in Virginia's schools would make adoption of a new standards-based accountability system a hardship. Thus, the tension between excellence and efficiency surfaced. Flynn reflected on the challenges the state would face in adopting CCSS.

I understand the rationale not to [adopt the CCSS] because then that means you have to think about, you know, school divisions and redoing pacing guides, and some of that's going to happen automatically with the revisions of SOL, but it's not going to be as radical a revision as what would have been required if they'd have moved to the Common Core. Of course, what you also see with Common Core, and interestingly enough is, so

there's a lot of things that's gone on with Common Core, and Virginia to some extent has also tried to move in some of those directions in the sense of computerized adaptive testing...What you see happening though is that many school divisions, or school districts in this instance, don't have the infrastructure to sort of manage and handle the way the assessments are rolled out. You know, they just don't have the technological infrastructure to do computerized adaptive testing. It's a great idea, and computerized adaptive testing gets us lots of data and lots of ways that we can look at that data, but we've got to have the infrastructure in place in order to have those data.

Smithley also acknowledged the challenges schools would face with changes to the accountability system, particularly rural divisions with limited resources. The reality of the Virginia context made efficiency an important focus. Smithley lamented the situation.

Virginia has 132 school divisions, and we have from the Newport News to the Fairfax to the majority of them are our small, one high school divisions where they don't have an elementary English person, a Title I person. They have a Director of Instruction who also is responsible for school buses...So to say, here's what you need to be doing in English, and they're saying, "OK, but I've gotta go order lunches." So, accountability is pretty big if we don't put some money behind it and help them do that.

Once again, each group sought excellence and viewed the pursuit of it in different ways, yet the necessity for an efficient process solidified the decision that remaining loyal to the SOL was the best choice. From the VDOE perspective, excellence outweighed efficiency because they believed in the superiority of the SOL. This debate may have looked different if they believed CCSS the higher-quality option.

### **Values Working in Tandem**



Beyond situations where values worked in pursuit of opposing outcomes, the research study also revealed an example of conflicting values working in tandem to achieve the same end result. In this instance, stakeholders were driven to actualize decisions that supported their ultimate beliefs. For those involved, it was a case of serendipity that ensured both groups reached the same conclusion in spite of their divergent beliefs.

### ***Excellence and Choice***

VDOE and BOE officials provided a wealth of information and data to support the notion that excellence was paramount. The rigorous quality of the existing SOL standards was cited repeatedly, specifically the inclusion of college- and career-ready content, the customization for specific grade levels, the developmental appropriateness of standard expectations, and the bounty of data that supported these conclusions. For state department officials, the decision appeared clear and straightforward. There was no need to invest time or energy into a new, inferior system that lacked the resources and research base to support it.

On the other hand, both of Virginia's former governors who led the state throughout the CCSSdebate period also expressed opposition to adoption of the standards. In both instances, choice, particularly individual states' rights over increased federal intrusion, emerged as a driving theme. The politicians publicly pointed to obtrusive oversight as a predicated factor in reneging the initial support expressed for the CCSS. Furthermore, the inclusion of potential RttT funding as an incentive for adoption of the national standards was viewed as an immediate and overt overstep. The lure of money was synonymous with a tool for manipulation and overshadowed the potential merit of the CCSS. Kaine's frustration was evident in a letter written to Education Secretary Arne Duncan.

The proposed notice would require states to adopt standards that are "identical" to the common core standards as opposed to "aligned"... The proposed notice also makes participating in a consortium to develop and implement common, high-quality assessments aligned to the common standards a selection criterion for RTTT funding... Please reconsider the notice's focus on "common" standards and assessments developed by "consortia" of states as competitive priorities in the RTTT application. "Common" and "consortia" describe strategies and approaches, not content outcomes. When the federal government uses state adoption of "voluntary" standards as a priority condition for receiving substantial funding, the standards are no longer "voluntary."

The defining characteristics of excellence and choice are quite different, yet stakeholders espoused them both as they worked toward the same end goal in the CCSSdebate, rejection of the standards. The competing values emerged among VDOE staff, BOE stakeholders, and political figures respectively, and all used their beliefs to advocate opposition to the national standards. Interestingly, while one might draw typical conclusions about Democrats welcoming federal involvement and Republicans rebuffing these advances, the Virginia case proved that party affiliation was not a primary factor.

### **Power Relationships**

The earlier sections of this chapter outlined a chronological analysis of educational accountability in Virginia, along with a more in-depth understanding of the various stakeholder groups that influenced political decisions. In this section, the focus is on the ways power was wielded to sway and control the political agenda, as experienced through the stakeholders interviewed and derived from the documents analyzed. The intention is to gain an in-depth

understanding of power sources and influences across the accountability context. Thus, the analysis moves from a chronological account to a synthesized viewpoint that examines accountability decision-making and policy across a twenty-year span.

Data identified three broad ways power was enacted across local, statewide, and national contexts. Applying the three-dimensional framework offered a way to analyze how power was exercised in the Virginia case and how competing values were prioritized or diminished based on how power was enacted. Five types of power emerged from within the findings. Most prominently, *bureaucratic power* and *policy-making power* were wielded by nature of position. Position included political or leadership clout and the hierarchical structure that inherently affords power, including access to policy-making power. Power was also exerted through resources controlled by prominent entities, to include funding and expertise. These are known as *expert power* and *reward power*. Finally, this section outlines how *discursive power*, the use of discourse and media, was a powerful mechanism to sway the public agenda. The overall findings revealed how power was brandished in a variety of ways to spur action toward desired outcomes.

## **Power Wielded by Position**

### ***Bureaucratic Power Exercised Through Political Clout***

There are a variety of political entities who maintain a steep level of control in Virginia by the powers vested in them by authority of the Commonwealth. The governor outlines priorities and sets the agenda based on identified goals. In education, gubernatorial success is often defined by the policy-making process and legislative output. Furthermore, the governor develops and proposes a biennial budget for introduction to the General Assembly, with the bill adopted in even-numbered years and amended in odd-numbered years. The governor works in concert with the General Assembly to promote legislation and ensure critical priorities are

funded. Beyond that, the governor has the power to sign executive orders and approve or veto the General Assembly's final version of the budget. From an education standpoint, the governor also maintains a significant level of control over the public system. The BOE consists of nine members, all of whom are appointed by the governor and confirmed by the General Assembly. Members serve a term of four years with no member appointed for more than two consecutive four-year terms. The job of BOE members is to set statewide curriculum standards, establish standards for accreditation, develop regulations for the administration of state programs, and implement and administer federal assistance programs. The governor is able to select members, over the course of several years as terms expire, whose political beliefs align with their own, thus allowing the board to take on conservative, liberal, or bipartisan stances at any point. Finally, the governor's office controls the appointment at two of the highest levels for education. This includes the Secretary of Education, who serves on the governor's cabinet and oversees education from Pre-K through postsecondary in the Commonwealth, and the Superintendent of Public Instruction, who serves as the executive officer of the VDOE.

Another important political entity is the Virginia General Assembly. Power afforded to the General Assembly is guaranteed through the state constitution affording ultimate authority over education. The General Assembly is primarily responsible for establishing public policy through the enactment of legislation. Members are elected to represent constituents; they also engage with lobbyists who represent organizations, associations, or other groups in an attempt to influence legislative action. Much like the governor, the General Assembly has a significant role in budget setting and determining how to prioritize spending, including for public education. The General Assembly receives recommended Standards of Quality (SOQ), minimum standards prescribed by the BOE to adequately staff public schools, and makes budgetary decisions

regarding funding of the SOQ. Likewise, General Assembly members can propose bills and codify legislation that impacts the systemic workings of a school. Examples of recent legislation include the use of local taxes to fund school construction and regulations for how discipline referrals are reported. With regards to education accountability, the Virginia Senate (2000) defines the General Assembly role as being “constitutionally charged to effectuate education policy to help ensure the development of accountability measures that help promote excellence in Virginia” (p. 11). It is clear that a significant level of bureaucratic power is afforded by nature of political roles and responsibilities.

The use of political position to sway the agenda in the educational accountability narrative was a recurring theme. Virginia maintains tight control over educational policy and actions at a local level because of its status as a Dillon’s Rule state, which interprets a local government’s authority as limited only to activities specified by the state government. Decisions about education policy emanate from the General Assembly. Furthermore, the General Assembly has become increasingly more involved in education, shifting precursory roles with the Board of Education. The BOE is now more actively involved in enacting policy mandated from the General Assembly as opposed to enacting its own regulations. Dr. James, a higher education representative, identified this change in education accountability.

Originally, there were a lot of initiatives that were implemented through the State Board of Education. They were regulations. The General Assembly codified them in law. Then, it then kind of transitioned to the General Assembly codified certain things in law that drove the state board decision. It was not, as I recall, just a state board initiative that the General Assembly then put into law, because some of it was actually generated by legislation by the General Assembly that the State Board was required to implement.

That's the way that you standardize what you do, because once it becomes state law, and once it drives what you do. I mean, it used to be that accreditation and how you were accredited, the General Assembly never got involved in that. It was all done by the state board. Now, you find that the General Assembly is actively involved in those kinds of things that lead to accreditation.

Similarly, there are other examples of how political entities wielded *bureaucratic power* profusely in the education debate. The following quotes from interviewees expound this conclusion and, in some cases, highlight the power special interest groups and other power brokers have in influencing public servants. One interviewee spoke of agenda setting and a governor's ability to shift political courses.

A new governor comes every four years with yet another educational platform because education is always an issue that people want addressed. It's interesting that we gear all of our work up and go in one direction, and the next governor comes in, regardless of what the party may or may not be, and says, we need to act this way.

Another interviewee shared how priorities of powerful groups influence politicians to ensure their agendas are represented in the policy-making process.

I find it ironic in Virginia that we continue to raise the standards for public school teachers, and yet to homeschool, we've lowered the standard to a high school degree. It used to be that you at least had to have a college degree to homeschool your child. Now the General Assembly decided all you have to do is have a high school diploma to homeschool your child. It's just like, you're looking for groups of individuals who will support your party, if you can do something to bring them in, so we're going to do this so

we can get the private school parents to support us, we can get the homeschool parents to support us.

The idea of agendas changing to align with political parties arose later in that same interview when speaking of elected officials' power and influence when it comes to establishing standards of learning. In particular, this interviewee was addressing changes to history/social science standards.

There were some individuals who thought, "This too will pass. It'll go away. All we have to have is a Democratic governor, and it'll go away." I think it was pretty evident that the governor, individuals that he appointed to the state board, and for whatever reason, a lot of the Republican leadership in the General Assembly, a lot of the Republican leadership across the Commonwealth, thought for whatever reason this was the best approach to take in K-3. I think most educators who understand learning theory...opposed that move. I think a lot of Democrats opposed that move. I don't know if it was because of politics or because their view of education. I think there was a significant difference of opinion around those kinds of things.

Finally, an interviewee referenced the power afforded to local governments by power of the state constitution.

I haven't checked lately, but the last time I looked, Virginia is maybe the only state in the country where local school boards are created by constitution. They're not created by the state legislature. That's why the effort a couple years ago by the General Assembly to take over schools that were failing, they can't do that.

Political clout is a conduit for bureaucratic power. Power brokers such as executive and legislative branch members exercise power through agenda setting and funding. Furthermore, the

ability to appoint high-ranking officials to serve on and oversee boards, committees, and departments ensures an alignment of beliefs between political actors and the leaders they select. This level of oversight leads to an ongoing turnover of agendas and a revolving push for priorities with the party in power most often winning the battle.

### ***Exercising Power Through Policy***

Power through the enactment of policy levers is another theme revealed by data. Policy-making is a dynamic process involving the interplay of numerous factors. As the last section explored, political actors inherently have more power by nature of their role and the ability to promote and enact policy. In this case, actors initiated policy moves to exert a profound role over shaping the existing accountability climate. Dispositional power was exhibited both overtly and covertly. Data analysis revealed policy was developed in four ways to shape the accountability landscape in Virginia.

First, policy was created with funding attached to entice stakeholders to adopt and enact that policy. The use of conditional power was especially effective when school divisions were dealing with limited money and exacerbated needs during an economic recession. Second, policy revealed political posturing, or the use of speech or action to gain political support. Posturing involved a lack of substance within the policy and a superficial move designed to ignite one's base. Third, policy was developed in earnest to advance change in the interest of bettering public schools. Finally, during this span of time, policy was also instituted in an effort to override existing provisions within the constitution. Taken together, these four ideas reveal how political actors used policy to flex the power of their roles.

**Policy with Funding.** Government leaders use policy efforts to sway agendas and influence actors. The Virginia case was no different. Policy reform was implemented in a



number of ways to achieve the desired results. The first and most egregious use of power flexed through policy came from the federal government with the introduction RttT monies. Policy that promised funding as an additional lever possessed an exponential amount of power. The federal government introduced \$4.35 billion in RttT funding, coinciding with the development of CCSS, and available to states who met four key areas of reform. States had to develop rigorous college and career-ready standards, adopt better data systems to provide transparent information on student progress, outline support for teachers and leaders to become more effective via evaluation, and increase emphasis on interventions for lowest performing schools. States who met the criteria could apply for funding regardless of whether they adopted the CCSS or used existing standards. However, while adoption of the standards only counted for one portion of the scoring process, RttT funding application acceptance and rejection quickly revealed that only those states who adopted the CCSS were awarded funding. This became a rallying cry to demonstrate the tremendous level of federal oversight of the CCSS and for Virginia to stay the course with the SOL. The overt push for federal involvement in schools emboldened an administration that prioritized choice and less national control. Anderson and Helderman (2010) reported on updates in the Commonwealth.

Gov. Robert F. McDonnell pulled Virginia out of President Obama's Race to the Top school reform derby Wednesday, a turnabout after he had pushed hard for the state to get a share of the \$4 billion in federal funding... In the Race to the Top, adoption of common standards counts for 20 points out of a possible 500. Virginia lost points in the first round on several other criteria as well. But Patricia I. Wright, the state superintendent of public instruction, told reporters in a conference call that it was clear that the state would lose points in various ways because of its stance on standards.

**Political Posturing.** Virginia's General Assembly also exercised an overt reach of power as it related to the CCSS. In a politically-motivated move in January 2015, the state Senate voted to prohibit adoption of the CCSS without prior approval of the General Assembly. The codification of this legislation would prohibit the BOE from adopting new standards without explicit prior approval of the General Assembly. This policy move, which was five years after Virginia had already committed allegiance to the SOL, passed the Republican-controlled Senate with a 24-16 vote before moving to the Republican-controlled House of Delegates and passing with a 77-22 vote. However, then-Democratic Governor Terry McAuliffe vetoed the legislation assuring constituents that Virginia fully supported the SOL, calling it unnecessary legislation that would hamper the BOE's work. As one interviewee explained it:

I think the General Assembly probably thought that there would be, at some point, if that's not codified, that there may be a governor who once they get control of the state board might say, "Why don't we just go to the Common Core? Why don't we join the other states?" I think to prevent that from happening, to prevent an appointed body, which the state board is, to prevent an appointed body even though they are created by constitution in Virginia, we want to make sure that that appointed board doesn't take us somewhere that the elected body doesn't want to.

**Policy to Advance Change.** Additionally, policy was enacted as a way to advance positive change in the Commonwealth. In these instances, policy was instituted to build on and strengthen what had already proven effective. As Virginia weighed the merits of the CCSS, state-level legislation and a committee around SOL innovation emerged as a by-product. The committee had discussions about the limitations of multiple-choice SOL testing and the need to reduce the number of standardized tests in favor of more innovative measures of student

performance. According to committee members, the group considered what an engaging curriculum for students would look like and promoted project-based learning or portfolio assessments as a more robust way to assess learning.

However, policy to advance change still came with limitations. In particular, committees and appointed officials are bound by the value stances of the party in charge. The policies espoused and outcomes produced by any commissioned team must align with the viewpoints of political leaders, sometimes at the expense of individual members' beliefs. The governor, as leader of the executive branch, had an acute level of power to control policy, thinking, and the public narrative as he was the one responsible for appointing experts to high ranking positions. Two interviewees who served in appointed roles spoke of this tension related to power and policy.

It was hard for me to, sort of, come to terms with the fact that I was not the true champion that the governor needed me to be, but you know. When the governor hired me I said, "These are the things I believe, and this is where I am. If this is where you are in your vision, then I'm your guy and I will carry the water on this 100% of the time. But these are the things I'm not really comfortable with, and if these are things you're not willing to drop. I'm not going to be able to put my name." Because, you know, for me, it's not just about my own, sort of, reputation. Like I really don't want people to associate me, because it's not how I think. I can stand up for my own thinking 100% of the time, but when I'm a spokesperson for your thinking and we're in conflict, I told him, "I won't say anything against it publicly, but I'm not going to publicly support it either."

Furthermore, Flynn expounded on her time leading the SOL Innovation Committee and how she did not fully support one aspect of the intended outcome, again illustrating the tension between

policy and power. Her experience highlights the tension the quest for efficiency as opposed to excellence.

Their big push was to reduce the number of SOL assessments for kids and obviously that's going to, in particular, happen in the elementary level because there's no Carnegie credits tied to that. I though was pretty vocal about I did not want to. I really didn't want to see that. I understand the amount of testing, but the reality of it is that we know what happens when that subject area, right, goes off of the radar.

Additionally, the turnover in political administrations prove costly to work in action. It can take several years for work to get underway and real change to be affected. Limitations around terms in service make it difficult for any administration to see all projects through to completion. The quotes below from three different interviewees highlight the push to make Virginia's standards more innovative, but also acknowledge the limitations a body has to affect change. These sentiments also show how a change in administration proved competitive and how parties capitalize on the outgoing efforts of each other to absorb credit for positive changes.

Governor McAuliffe gets a lot of credit for reducing the SOL tests from 34 to 29. The reality is, that reduction, that decision had been in the last year, in the McDonnell administration...I mean we had a whole committee, and that committee ended up becoming SOL Innovation Committee. You know the McAuliffe administration, god love them, politicized it and said, "Look at what we've... We've had this committee and they had this recommendation." But the reality is, that work had been going on 18 months prior to the end of the McDonnell administration. We handed off a great, sort of, baton, and the McAuliffe administration was able to get credit for it because the reduction actually transpired during his administration.

Another interviewee put it this way.

So then when Governor McAuliffe came into office, he signed the SOL Innovation Committee bill that created a committee of the permanent structure in the Secretary of Education's office. The SOL Innovation Committee has since put that work on a different level, because it was really moving forward ideas and policies that came from a committee that was created by law.

A stakeholder who was privy to the inner-workings on multiple levels recounted his beliefs and the need for expertise to drive decision-making.

I do think that the SOL Innovation Committee over time has lost some influence, or maybe even some autonomy, with some of the changes that occurred and the way folks are required to be selected. So, I would just hope that as we move forward and continue to innovate, which I think there's still a lot of work to do, we really look towards some of the experts in how we can make a difference.

**Policy to Override a Constitutional Mandate.** Finally, *policy-making power* was also observed when elected officials used the powers vested in them to challenge the state constitution. At one point, educational accountability policy was passed in an attempt to override the existing power provisions afforded by the constitution. The General Assembly was bounded by Article VIII of the state constitution, which outlines the role of education in the Commonwealth. School-level accountability was measured yearly on a scale of full, partial, and does not meet accreditation based on the performance of students and subgroups across various content areas. The idea that states should assume control to takeover schools designated as not meeting accreditation for multiple years was initially codified as law by the General Assembly before successfully being challenged by local school divisions as unconstitutional. This overt

display of power, in spite of knowing the state constitution did not support such broad overreach, revealed lawmakers' distrust in the ability of school divisions to improve achievement for students. Interestingly, it also shows a level of conflict in how lawmakers believe choice should be exercised in schools. Federal oversight with the CCSS was considered an intrusion on the power afforded to states; however, the General Assembly wanted to enact a significantly more intrusive level of control by removing power from local school boards. One interviewee with knowledge of the rollout shared on this experience.

The General Assembly did pass the laws and...the Virginia School Boards Attorney... is probably the attorney on retainer for half the school divisions in Virginia. He went to the General Assembly and said, when they were considering this law that would allow state takeover of school, he said, "You do realize this is unconstitutional, that this is never going to pass constitutional muster. You're basically wasting your time." They approved it anyway, and sure enough, Tidewater, I think Hampton, maybe Newport News, but some school divisions down there sued, and it went to state court. The lower state court said, "This is clearly unconstitutional. You can't just do it." They rescinded the law, pulled it off the books, and it was an absolute waste of time for eight to ten months.

As the findings in this section reveal, *bureaucratic* and *policy-making power* were evident when policy was instituted in four primary ways: with funding attached to sway adoption, through political posturing to advance unnecessary legislation, in earnest to advance change, and through an improper means to override constitutional rights of localities. In each of these examples, priorities fully advanced through the policymaking process at the behest of political figures and power was enacted through policy. These moves firmly shaped the accountability landscape in Virginia both up to and around the time of the CCSS debate.

## **Power Exerted Through Expertise, Reward, and Resources**

Material resources, such as money, time, and energy, are all associated with the first dimension of power. Power exerted through the acquisition and leverage of these material resources was another emergent theme. Funding is one of the most powerful forms of persuasion and it proved true in the Virginia case. This is known as *reward power*. The use of funding was explored in the previous section as it connected to policy. In this section, funding, and its impacts on stakeholder decision-making in the Virginia case, is uncovered. Furthermore, *expert power* also emerged as a prominent type of power in this case. Power exerted through expertise surfaced when examining how leading organizations and institutions maintained a tight grip on the market for supplemental educational materials. Much like the examination of values, there was evidence of power multiplying in strength when factors like expertise and resources worked in concert. Ultimately, Virginia's investment into existing resources and an engrained system of accountability for over a decade proved to be a driving factor behind decision making.

### ***Funding with Strings was a Tipping Point***

Over the years, Virginia invested a significant amount of material resources into development and refinement of the SOL. The belief that Virginia's standards were as good as or better than the CCSS meant delving into whether the economic impact of adopting new standards was worthwhile. Efficiency is driven by limited resources, and the timing for adopting the CCSS aligned with a major recession. The Great Recession refers to the period of economic downturn from 2007-2009 following the collapse of the housing market. Many states, Virginia included, made dramatic cuts to school budgets, forcing public educators out of jobs and limiting available programs for students. As a result, states made dramatic policy changes in pursuit of available federal money through the RttT grant. However, as soon as Virginia was eliminated from

contention for RttT funding, the Commonwealth fully committed to remaining with the SOL. This sentiment was echoed in the VDOE's 2010 press release in which the department was responding to the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation Report, *The State of State Standards – and the Common Core – in 2010*. The report was written by researchers at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute to compare states' existing English language arts and mathematics standards in relation to the CCSS. Based on set criteria, the authors asserted the CCSS were superior to those used in thirty-nine states in math and thirty-seven states in English. The authors also found the CCSS superior for thirty-three states in both math and English. Eleven states were issued ratings of “too close to call” for their English and math standards, meaning the quality and rigor of the standards were in the same league. Though the findings did not overwhelmingly find the CCSS superior for states across the nation, 46 states still proceeded with adoption of the standards. Similarly, 46 states and the District of Columbia submitted comprehensive reform plans to compete in the RttT competition. With this knowledge, it is safe to infer that funding had a significant impact on decision-making.

With regards to the Virginia case, the Fordham report issued Virginia “too close to call” and “inferior” remarks when making comparisons with English and mathematics standards respectively. However, the VDOE promptly published a rebuttal to address how researchers omitted provided curricula materials from the review that should have been included. The VDOE stance argued the SOL were superior to the CCSS when considering the additional materials that were neglected.

The Fordham report acknowledges that “standards are the foundation upon which almost everything else rests — or should rest.” *At present, there are no resources, materials or*



*assessments aligned with the Common Core...* Abandoning the SOL for the Common Core through word-for-word adoption would leave classroom teachers with a set of broad learning objectives but without aligned materials — such as the curriculum frameworks, scope and sequence guides and other SOL-based resources now available — to flesh out the standards and show how the required content can be taught during the course of a year or semester. Virginia educators know from experience how critical these supporting materials are to making standards-based reform work in the classroom.

Analysis of the Virginia case revealed material resources were a primary consideration when debating the decision to adopt the CCSS. The majority of our nation's 50 states were early adopters of the standards and it is impossible to ignore the promise of much-needed funding as an influence. Beyond that, time spent creating, developing, and training educators on existing curricula resources was weighed against the decision to adopt new standards and compete for grant funding. In both instances, the power of material resources proved consequential.

### ***Power Multiplied***

**Expertise and Material Resources.** A number of sources of power emerged when examining the data findings, including power by bureaucracy, political sway, and material resources. This section transitions to a discussion on expertise; however, it also identifies the layering of power factors that created a relationship in which power was multiplied. When any singular source of power is applied, there is a level of influence. This influence could be envisioned on a scale with some factors exerting more and some exerting less power. However, when power sources are layered, the result is an exponential increase in influence, which will be discussed as *power multiplied*. A prime example of power multiplied was the layering of expertise and material resources. Expertise refers to an expert level of skill or knowledge in a

particular field. In the education realm, this includes textbook and other educational materials publishers who develop resources purchased and instituted across the nation. This high level of control is assured as publishers employ expert practitioners who develop research-based resources. Thus, individual states are at the mercy of the publishers to develop aligned resources based on their standards. As the nation shifted toward a CCSS focus, textbook publishers, testing providers, and other resource developers immediately saw the need and payoff in creating materials aligned to the CCSS and responded. By doing so, publishers opened themselves to a market flooded with states and school divisions who were scrambling to keep up with the newly adopted standards. The states who were not onboard with the CCSS were an afterthought. Virginia encountered problems when dealing with limited material resources to support the existing SOL. As a result, it became difficult to find customized resources that were in true alignment with the SOL. Smithley spoke of this issue.

And, if looking at the text exemplars listed for Common Core, if you then pull any textbook, you will see that the text exemplars have now become what's in every textbook...When we go through our textbook adoption, they will say, "Well this is made for Virginia standards." But all they've done is taken the Common Core sticker off. So, the Common Core was a really big deal for many, many educational companies.

This is a problem that persists to this day. It is plausible to question whether the decision to remain aligned with the SOL hindered student access to aligned and appropriate textbook materials and to question the level of work teachers and school divisions had to employ to bridge alignment gaps.

**Authority and Time.** Another example of power multiplied is the overlap of authority and time. Analysis revealed power was exercised by authority figures through access to

knowledge and the use of time and energy, another material resource. Actors can wield a level of power over another group by demanding a less efficient use of time or withholding important information and this is especially true when the relationship is imbalanced with one party having more power by nature of role. In this case, state-level government authorities required the same task, the review and comparison of the SOL and CCSS, to be completed twice. By demanding this level of work, it devalued the effort and energy put into the initial process and gave the appearance of completing a task for show.

Smithley spoke of the efforts the VDOE employed to compare the existing Virginia SOL with the draft CCSS, standard by standard, in their initial inquiry and comparative work.

However, following this process, Smithley then spoke of joining the group commissioned by the Governor's office to review the standards again before moving forward with work on SOL innovation. Smithley shared her frustration at having to redo the same work in what she believed was a battle to keep government leaders from adopting the CCSS. Interestingly, Finley, who was a leader within the SOL Innovation Committee, shared that adopting the CCSS was never a viable option the team was considering as she was told outright that Virginia would not be a Common Core state. Instead, their work shifted toward assessment reform. The disconnect between level of knowledge among all members of the team indicated higher-level authority figures were withholding important information.

### **Power Through Discourse**

*Discursive power* was the final theme revealed when analyzing the research data. In its simplest form, discourse refers to written or spoken communication. For the purposes of this research study, discursive power is the way feedback was gathered or excluded and the use of specific language in communication to exert influence and authority over the public narrative. A

power imbalance was evident when feedback was limited based on whose voice was sought and the sincerity in acting upon the feedback. Discursive power was manifested when powerful actors shaped language to dictate the public narrative.

Analysis of this case revealed a number of power players who used discourse to sway the accountability agenda on a state and national level. Discourse was largely controlled by elected officials and high ranking leaders within the Commonwealth of Virginia. Officials had authority over the content of information publicized and how and when it was released, with the only real hindrance to any message being the time needed for work to occur. For example, as was shared in the previous section, the notion of an incoming political administration capitalizing on, expanding, and laying claim to the work of the outgoing administration transpired as an observation. Thus, timing needed to complete work in developing a product appears to be a regulator to the discursive power assumed by those in charge.

When specifically examining the Common Core adoption era, voices of the elite shaped the narrative. Groups such as the National Governor's Association, Achieve, Inc., and CCSSO publicly joined forces in the push for common and more rigorous standards and published a report, *Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education*, maintaining the need for reform. Leaders within renowned education organizations, such as the Association for Supervision for Curriculum Development and the National Education Association, publicly jumped onboard to offer support for the CCSS initiative. Furthermore, governors and chief school officers in 51 states and territories also voiced commitment to the initiative. The highly publicized support from so many powerful and prominent voices had an immediate influence on the public narrative. The adage "power in numbers" illustrates what was

happening on the national landscape. In many instances, organizations worked in concert to support agendas for mutual gain or in the interest of student learning.

Specific observations around accountability within the context of this study uncovered two themes for how discursive power was wielded. The first theme related to the role of feedback in the discourse process. Complexity theory argues feedback is a perpetual and necessary component for the survival of complex systems. Feedback loops are a means to both influence and sustain systemic evolution. As such, leaders committed to helping a new system evolve, such as in the era of reformed standards, must remain committed to the process of gathering and acting on feedback in a recursive cycle as opposed to viewing it as white noise. However, a recurring theme involved feedback being used in inconsequential ways. Across time, participants described moments where feedback was solicited and, afterwards, it felt as though that feedback was sought largely as an obligatory step in the process as opposed to it being an opportunity to solicit ideas and refine plans. The second theme unearthed related to discursive power involves language. Specifically, it was observed how word choice that was centered on competing values was used to ignite emotion and shape the narrative.

### ***Feedback Beyond an Obligatory Process***

*Discursive power* was evident in a variety of ways, including the limitation of feedback and the use of purposefully shaped language to control a narrative. The use of discursive power is entrenched in time when examining the twenty-year period of accountability in Virginia. This occurred when leaders captured feedback related to initiatives with no evidence of that feedback shaping future iterations of work. This level of disregard resulted in skepticism from participating stakeholders who were involved in the feedback process across all contexts.

Ultimately, unrealistic or suspicious timing proved the solicited feedback had no significant role in informing decisions or work products and eroded trust between actors.

Feedback loops are an integral component of any dynamic system. The notion of disregarding feedback arose in multiple interviews when uncovering Virginia's response to accountability measures and metrics. As such, stakeholders questioned the legitimacy of the process. Dr. Flynn referenced the early days of accountability when Virginia instituted a requirement for successful completion of the Literacy Passport Test as a requirement for earning a high school diploma. This was Virginia's first response to ensuring higher standards and a degree of proficiency among all graduates. The belief was that teachers would accelerate their efforts to ensure students were successful since high school graduation hinged on demonstrating proficiency. The Literacy Passport Test then phased into the earliest iteration of the Literacy SOL. As the new standards rolled out, establishing appropriate cut scores for proficiency was an essential component. Dr. Flynn shared that a team was comprised to set standards, review data, and make cut score recommendations to the Board. According to Flynn, however, the conservative BOE ignored the committee's recommendations and established their own cut scores. This early example illustrates a long history with feedback serving as a facade while actors advance their own agendas.

The factors behind actors' unresponsiveness to feedback remain a mystery. The lack of action based on input could be caused by differences of opinion, a staunch belief the agency in charge knows what is best, or the ease of staying the course once a decision and early details have been made. It is impossible to fully know because there are no public documents addressing captured feedback and according responses. Regardless of reasoning, perception shaped reality

and education leaders continued to question the sincerity of feedback requests as further examination of the Virginia case revealed.

In a different instance, another higher education leader, Dr. James, spoke of the BOE's lack of interest in feedback to improve Virginia's standards. James jumped ahead in history to a time when the state was revising History/Social Science SOL as part of the seven-year adoption cycle. James spoke to the concerns that he and many other educators possessed when considering the revisions. Once again, in James' opinion, the feedback was largely ignored. James offered his account.

It was interesting, the SOLs came out, and the state board held public hearings as they are required to do whenever you change standards. They held public hearings. School divisions had an opportunity to provide input. They put together practice assessments, they brought teachers from across the state in to look at those test items and whether or not they were valid, reliable test items, and were they actually measuring what you wanted them to measure, were they at the appropriate grade level...In those public hearings, the school board said, "We need to have a presence at those hearings." I went to one of those public hearings. When I got there an hour ahead of time, I was number 52 on the list. Of the 51 people who spoke before me, there were only two that supported the revised SOLs. The other 49 opposed it. My understanding is that occurred in every other public hearing in the state. The state board approved the revised SOLs in spite of the opposition.

Similarly, Smithley echoed complaints about feedback around the development of the CCSS, in particular the creation of a draft of standards without any meaningful input or writing

from the members invited to serve on the work team. Smithley questioned the unrealistic timing when the draft CCSS were written.

Our first assignment happened in November and it was to respond to the question “*What are the obstacles and pitfalls you have found in writing state standards?*” And so I answered it and in my presentation we talked about some of the pitfalls...It was a very short time later, maybe the first of December, the first draft came out. How’d the first draft come out when we gave you the pitfalls?

Knowing that a draft of CCSS was released prior to any work group members providing input on the standards implied the draft CCSS happened at the hand of others. Powerful organizations were able to push their agendas in the development of the CCSS. One example is Achieve, Inc., co-author of the report *Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education*. The report was released in December 2008 and is listed on the development process timeline found on the Common Core website. According to Smithley, the first draft of the English CCSS looked very similar to Achieve’s American Diploma Project English Language Arts standards. Once again, this move revealed the nature of feedback and evokes wonderings of the role of input in development of the CCSS.

Additionally, the Common Core website touted how feedback informed their development process in two ways. First, the site highlighted the important role teachers played as members of work groups and through involvement of national associations. Second, the website highlighted how they received 10,000 comments during two public comment periods. However, these feedback examples raise questions. The Common Core website defined the important role of teachers through the regular feedback they were invited to provide on work teams, which we now know was limited at best based on Smithley’s experiences. Additionally, there was never



any synthesis of major findings or implications from the public comment period. Instead, the site simply said the comments helped shape the final version of the CCSS, which leaves the reader questioning how and in what ways the standards were shaped. Leaders who sought feedback under the guise of wanting varied viewpoints and stakeholder participation limited the buy-in of all by ignoring provided feedback and/or gathering limited and inconsequential input with no plans for inclusion into work products.

### ***The Language of Values Controlled the Narrative***

Discursive power became evident in the way language was shaped over time in Virginia. Government leaders and other organizations, both of whom possess a high degree of power, chose their words carefully to promote the values of choice and liberty through their discourse. The Virginia case shows how language was carefully shaped to garner support for and then ignite momentum against the Common Core movement. Ultimately, language promoting freedom from federal intrusion became the dominant narrative. This observation aligns with Fowler's (2013) arguments of traditionalistic political cultures existing in southern states, characterized by the opposition of interventions in favor of the status quo.

As Virginia engaged with other states and explored the potential of joining the Common Core movement, language at the highest levels, including the Governor's office, was positive and reaffirming in support of the standards, which were believed to be part of a state-led initiative assuming voluntary adoption. The ability to maintain autonomy and choice proved important. In his May 2009 press release, then-Governor Kaine asserted, "This process respects state sovereignty and our federal system while recognizing that America's future prosperity hinges on the ability of our public schools to produce young men and women who can hold their own with their brightest peers in the developed and developing worlds." However, support later soured

with both outgoing-Governor Kaine and incoming-Governor McDonnell expressing opposition. When McDonnell took office, he argued against a “federal bureaucracy monitoring whether or not we are having the right programs” in Virginia schools, ensuring he painted the Common Core movement in a negative light, even though federal oversight of programming was not part of the standards. Additionally, media coverage also evoked tones of persuasion with values such as choice and efficiency emanating from publications. The first is from a Virginia Pilot editorial (2011) describing the rationale when the state decided to reject the CCSS.

That decision, officials in the state's education department have insisted, was motivated as much by concerns about federal solutions for state issues as it was a reluctance to scrap a system that's been developed and tuned for more than a decade.

Further, the Washington Post (2010) captured then-Governor McDonnell’s words around the “unacceptable” and intrusive nature of the Common Core movement.

So once again, a federal mandate to adopt a federal common core standard is just not something I can accept, nor can most of the education leaders in Virginia, nor can most of the legislators.

The next quotes originate from the Home Educators Association of Virginia, a member-supported, statewide, non-profit homeschool association who works with legislators and the Department of Education to promote and protect home education. The quotes use language such as “taking control away”, “power grab”, and “controlling the agenda” to incite strong emotion that promotes choice within the constituency.

Despite the fact that the Common Core educational standards for mathematics and English are controversial, the most significant change on the horizon is the shift in power and authority—the federal government is taking control away from the states and centralizing

educational decisions at the federal level. This power grab removes decision making from states, local school boards, and ultimately from parents. It's about controlling the agenda, and the agenda is more than reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Without state or national debate and without state or congressional approval, this unprecedented move by the federal government is set to develop a national educational program. Control of mathematics and English education has now been removed from most communities and state boards of education. In addition, by 2014, federal testing will be in place to provide state accountability.

Word choice and rhetoric were used to espouse viewpoints and ignite strong emotion. In this particular study, leaders used language denouncing federal oversight and promoting state sovereignty in the interest of maintaining choice. This type of language aligned with the traditionalistic political culture prominent in the south. Political actors used the language of the values they espoused to sway public opinion. Moreover, language was crafted carefully to shift the narrative after Virginia opted to shift stances on the CCSS.

### **Chapter 4 Summary**

This chapter laid out the findings related to values around landmark accountability decisions and the ways in which stakeholders attempted to influence the course of decision-making in four key ways. First, environmental context was provided to shed insight into the timeframe when this study was conducted using the lens of complexity theory. The seeds for national change had been sown more than 25 years ago when former President George H.W. Bush argued the need for educational reform. NCLB was landmark accountability legislation that influenced how states and school divisions collected and reported student test performance.

NCLB proved challenging as all states were measuring proficiency with different standards and assessments. In response, the national conversation pivoted toward the necessity for common and more rigorous standards. The introduction of \$4.35 billion dollars in RttT grant funding proved compelling to states in the midst of The Great Recession. Furthermore, leadership within Virginia changed during this time with an outgoing Democratic governor being replaced by an incoming Republican administration. Leadership within the VDOE, however, remained consistent with the same state Superintendent for Public Instruction remaining at the helm across administrations.

Second, the chapter analyzed key stakeholder groups and the primary values they espoused. The first group was the VDOE, a group comprised of educators and administrators whose job is to lead and facilitate the development and implementation of a quality public education system that meets the needs of students. VDOE stakeholder interviews and press releases revealed strong tones of excellence driving their decision-making, along with undertones of efficiency in pursuit of excellence. The second group analyzed included government officials, such as the governor, secretary of education, and members of the General Assembly. Findings revealed choice was the motivator propelling these individuals. Finally, higher education officials who had insight into state-level work were the final group explored. The values of excellence, choice, and efficiency were striking.

Following an analysis of stakeholder groups, the chapter transitioned to a synthesis of findings related to values. In this section, the symbiotic relationship of values was introduced. The study revealed times when values worked at odds to bring about conflict, such as when VDOE and government officials were both espousing excellence but defining it differently. In this relationship, the emergence of developers, or those who see excellence as a process, and

evaluators, or those who see excellence as an immediate by-product of a change, was observed. Additionally, values conflicts were also observed between higher education and VDOE officials in the pursuit of excellence with a secondary theme of efficiency. Conversely, differing values were identified as working in tandem to achieve the same end goal. In this relationship, the VDOE sought excellence while government officials sought choice, but both were aligned in their stand to reject the CCSS. This portion of the findings revealed the symbiosis of values and the impact on decision-making.

Finally, the chapter concluded with a discussion on power and the way it was wielded to influence decision-making. The analysis revealed five main ways power was exercised. First, *bureaucratic power* and *policy-making power* afforded by political clout were at play. Government leaders possessed a high degree of power vested by authority of the state constitution, and they exercised that power through the policymaking process. In this case, policies were developed with funding attached, as a means of political posturing, to advance positive change, or to override existing constitutional mandates. Additionally, *reward* and *expert power* was exerted was through available funding, aligned resources, and high levels of expertise. This portion of the findings identified how funding with strings attached became a tipping point and how power was multiplied when sources of power overlapped. This included expertise and material resources working together and authority and time working in tandem. Lastly, the use of *discourse* as a means to shape the narrative was explored. Feedback solicited as an obligatory process without the intention to use that feedback to inform decisions was a noted frustration. This contrast gave the public perception of capturing buy-in from a broad audience but left stakeholders frustrated at the process. Beyond that, political and prominent leaders had access to a larger media platform by nature of their role. It was noted how the language of

competing values was chosen and woven carefully into discourse to incite emotion and sway public opinion.

Taken together, the findings shed light on the values various stakeholders espoused related to monumental educational accountability decisions. Furthermore, it was evident how power brokers swayed decision-making in favor of the values they promoted. Power was not evenly distributed in all relationships and it was particularly imbalanced when one actor had significantly more inherent power over another by nature of their role. This relationship was highlighted in examination of the Virginia case.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

This study set out to identify the values that motivated policy decisions around landmark accountability decisions in Virginia, along with the ways stakeholders attempted to influence the course of decision-making. Analysis of the data revealed two primary competing values that were espoused through policy, authority, and/or discourse, choice and excellence, with a secondary, underlying competing value of efficiency bolstering decision-making. Furthermore, educational stakeholders utilized several sources of power to sway viewpoints. This chapter will make connections across the findings to weave together the concepts of culture, values, power, and stakeholders.

#### **Political Culture**

Research on the three types of political culture surfaced in the 1960s with Elazar's work on traditionalistic, moralistic, and individualistic political orientations (Elazar, 2003; Morgan & Watson, 1991). Fowler (2013) asserts political culture as a geographic identity with Virginia aligning with the traditionalist culture predominant in the south. In traditionalistic political cultures, government leaders are driven to protect the status quo and resist change (Morgan & Watson, 1991). This theory helped make sense of state government leaders' response to the CCSS initiative. The potential to support a common core of standards that promoted excellence across the nation was embraced until extreme sources of power pushed the CCSS into the territory of near-mandatory adoption to be considered for additional resources. At this point, the CCSS became a threat to precedence and the existing system within Virginia. This is not to argue the CCSS were superior to the SOL and should have been adopted; instead, it is an

acknowledgement that maintaining loyalty to the SOL perpetuated existing systemic structures to maintain the status quo.

### **The Inequality of Power**

Power is the social influence one actor has over another to affect actions or behavior (Muth, 1984). Fowler (2013) defined power using two contrasting notions, symmetrical, or equal degrees of power, or asymmetrical, where one actor has greater resources. The findings from this study prove access to resources is only part of the power equation. Instead, the political context within Virginia created an environment in which certain types of power and values thrived.

Five types of power were most prominent within the findings. Bureaucratic power refers to the hierarchical structure that naturally affords certain individuals and groups a level of vested power by authority of their role. Policy-making power offered a way to control the agenda – from promoting identified priorities to promoting and passing legislation in support of various interests. Expert power relates to expertise, or having a high level of skill in a specific area. Another type of power that was exercised is reward power, or the use of funding to sway decision-making. Finally, discursive power was used to control narratives. All of these sources of power were exercised in the CCSS debate within Virginia (see Figure 3); however, not all sources of power had equitable impact. Instead, role and access to power sources showed the impact key stakeholders had on the decision-making.



### Figure 3

*Sources of Power that Thrived in the Political Context*



*Figure 3.* Graphic represents the sources of power exercised in the CCSSdebate in Virginia.

The inequality of power refers to the prominence and influence of some sources of power over others with specific types being limited by access. Six key stakeholders will be discussed in this section, along with their access to the various types of power. First, the executive branch is comprised of the governor, the individual with a high degree of vested power. The governor's office largely promoted the value of choice in education, specifically state autonomy over standards and a resistance of federal oversight. The executive branch had a high degree of power when considering several sources, to include bureaucratic, policy-making, discursive, and reward power; however, it is important to note reward power was not exercised at the state-level in this case.

Similarly, the legislative branch/General Assembly had high levels of access to the same power types. By nature of their roles, they have a significant degree of policy-making and bureaucratic power. Likewise, discursive power is also high as lawmakers publicly interact with constituents, have access to media platforms, and commission/post research studies and whitepapers to inform decisions. Finally, the legislative branch controls funding and the level of reward power associated with policies. Much like the governor's office, reward was not exercised at the state level but was used to sway the debate on a national level.

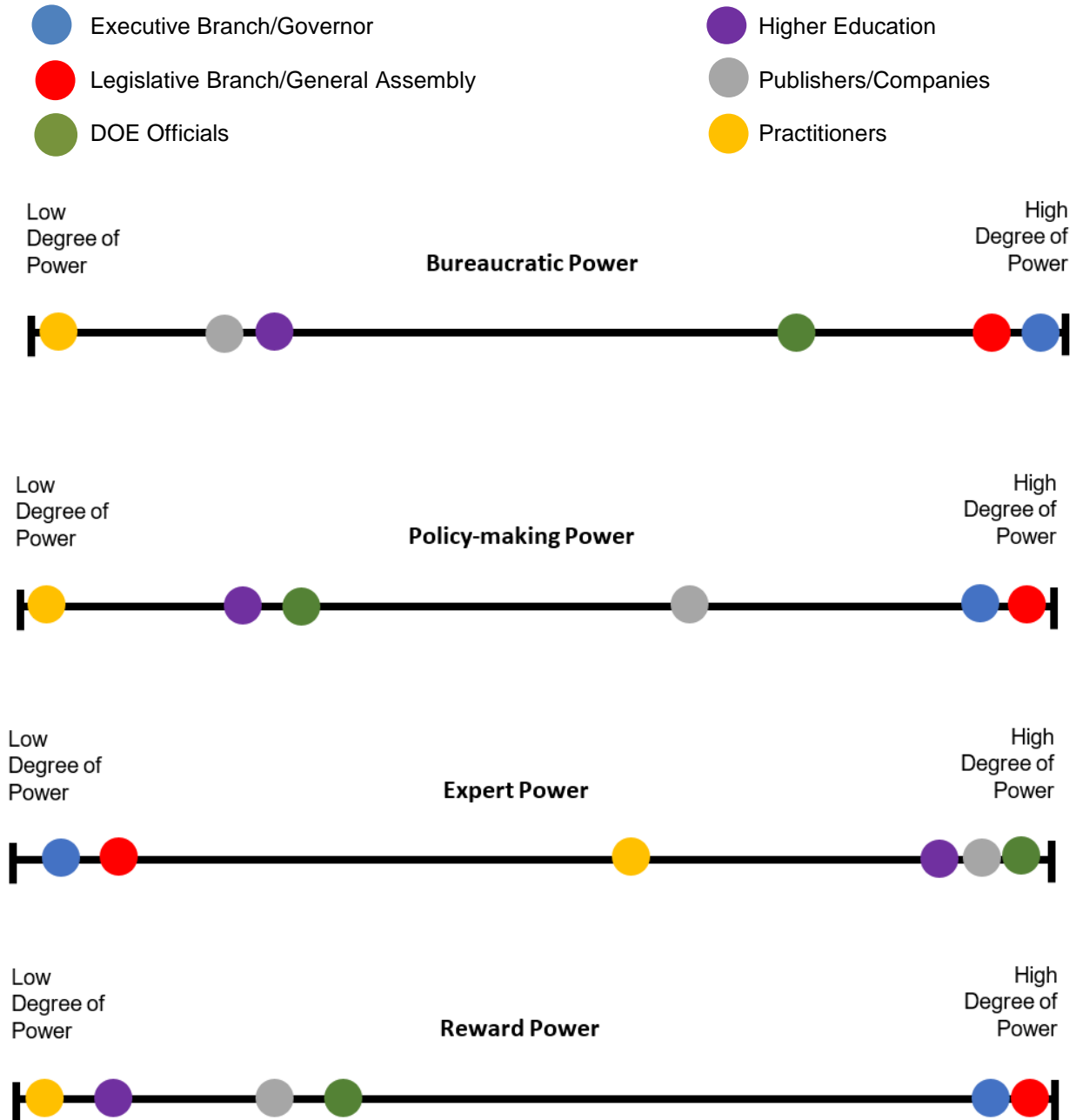
The next stakeholder group includes Department of Education officials. This includes state level superintendents and the employees that fall under this role. Members of VDOE maintain a level of bureaucratic power over school divisions as they establish standards, expectations, and guidelines. However, this level of power is checked by the bureaucratic authority of elected officials. As such, VDOE members are tasked with enacting mandates and decisions passed as policy by legislators. In contrast with elected officials, however, is the idea of expert power. VDOE officials have a high level of expertise within the area they serve. Reward power is minimal with access to grants being the largest way they control funding to schools. Finally, the VDOE has a relatively high level of discursive power with regular communications and memos shared with the public. Once again, this is not as high as the power afforded elected officials who have access to a broader audience.

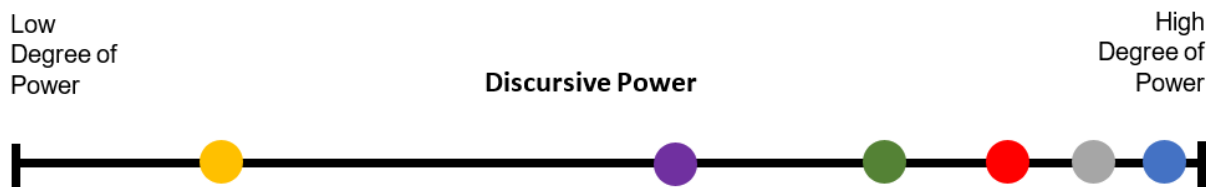
Higher education personnel were another group interviewed for this study. This group has a limited level of power related to bureaucracy and policy-making. Instead, they may be called on to report on their area of expertise to legislators, lead work committees, or share input on a topic to inform the policy-making process. Thus, higher education personnel possess a high degree of expert power and a moderate degree of discursive power.

The fifth stakeholder group includes textbook or educational materials publishers and other prominent companies. These entities proved powerful on the national landscape when influencing the CCSS debate. They possess moderate levels of policy-making power simply for the influence they have in promoting policy through the use of resources to align with their stances. Likewise, they have high levels of expert and discursive power, as evidenced by their ability to infiltrate the market and conversations on a larger level. Bureaucratic and reward power are somewhat limited for these groups.

Finally, the last stakeholder group is one previously unmentioned to this point and that is solely because of the lack of influence they had on the accountability debate. Practitioners had very little power afforded to them when considering the five power sources. While practitioners generally have a moderate to high level of expertise, the limited degree of discursive power they possess mitigated this power source.

The following graphic (Figure 4) offers a visual to illustrate the concept of degree of power by stakeholder group. Each type of power is imagined on a sliding scale from high to low degree of power. Stakeholder groups are placed on that continuum based on the degree of power they possess in a given area. The figure illustrates how power is multiplied for certain groups who possess higher degrees of power across various sources, especially elected officials. These are the individuals who had the most influence on decision-making within Virginia.

**Figure 4***Stakeholder Groups' Degrees of Power by Type*



*Figure 4. Stakeholder groups' degrees of power by type*

### **Values Determined by Access to Power**

The competing values of several prominent stakeholders became central to the CCSS debate. VDOE officials were driven by a pursuit for excellence. They viewed the existing SOL as superior, especially given the immediate revisions that were happening to make the standards more college and career-aligned. Further, an underlying theme of efficiency also arose when considering the argument regarding the existing work, resources, and training already available to make the SOL accessible to teachers and school divisions. Higher education officials held these same values of excellence and efficiency in high esteem, though they questioned whether the SOL were superior in entirety. On the other hand, elected officials most notably espoused the value of choice within our Commonwealth and schools, and this became a prominent public narrative to support the decision to remain loyal to the existing SOL.

An examination of the power applied based on the value espoused by various stakeholder groups reveals an interesting story about how power multiplies and which types of power were most influential in the debate. The CCSS decision was rife with political undertones. In fact, there has been a longstanding debate about the role of the federal government in state-level education systems. Thus, the cause to bring national standards to the Commonwealth proved highly controversial. In Virginia, the most influential forms of power exercised were bureaucratic, policy-making, and discourse. The trifecta of these three sources of power allowed government

stakeholders to promote and enact their agenda of maintaining state sovereignty without issue. Conversely, though education is a matter of scientifically-based practices and pedagogies, the groups with the most expertise had lesser power. Folks such as VDOE and higher education personnel used their expert knowledge to help sway the debate. VDOE officials rallied the same cause of rejecting the CCSS, while the higher education personnel who participated in this interview questioned whether we could glean takeaways from the CCSS. In the end, the decision to reject and promote the necessity of choice was paramount. It is safe to assume choice is the value that beat excellence and efficiency for multiple reasons. First, available discourse from executive and legislative bodies revealed choice to be a prominent determiner behind Virginia's decision. Second, the General Assembly wanted to assure Virginia would never go Common Core without lawmakers' express approval and passed legislation to ensure this is the case. Though that legislation was vetoed by the Democratic governor at the time, both houses of General Assembly voted in support of the bill showing the commitment to maintaining a level of control was strong.

Figure 5 captures an overview of the types of power wielded in relation to the values espoused by various power brokers.

## Figure 5

### *Power Exercised in Relation to Values*

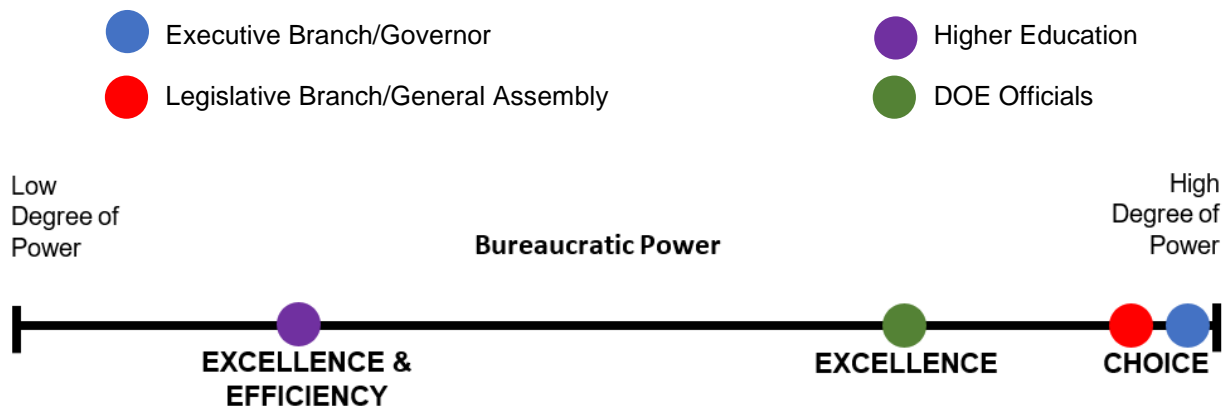
<b>Excellence</b>	<b>Efficiency</b>	<b>Choice</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expert</li> <li>• Discursive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expert</li> <li>• Reward</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bureaucratic</li> <li>• Policy-making</li> <li>• Discursive</li> </ul>

*Figure 5.* Power wielded varied based on stakeholder group. Reward became a driving factor for efficiency when Virginia was denied RttT grand funding.

The discussion illuminated the effectiveness actors possessed in influencing decision-making when power sources overlapped in support of a competing value. This study focused on three key power players in the commonwealth who had some level of influence in the CCSS debate – elected officials, education department personnel, and higher education. Focusing on only these groups, an overlay of values and power using the same sliding scale introduced in Figure 4 illustrates the degrees of power each stakeholder had and the views they espoused. When looking at Figure 6 below, it is evident that choice and efficiency were the two values that had a significant presence on the side of the scale representing high power. Elected officials embraced choice and used the power sources they had access to when promoting this value. However, the value of efficiency also appeared prominently with regards to reward and expert power. The need for efficiency was paramount when Virginia was removed from contention for RttT grant funding. Moreover, content experts at the VDOE long professed the superiority of the SOL and the need to stay the course. Significantly, choice, with an underlying theme of efficiency, became the prominent competing value in all discourse around the rejection of the CCSS.

**Figure 6**

*Overlay of Values and Power by Stakeholder Groups*



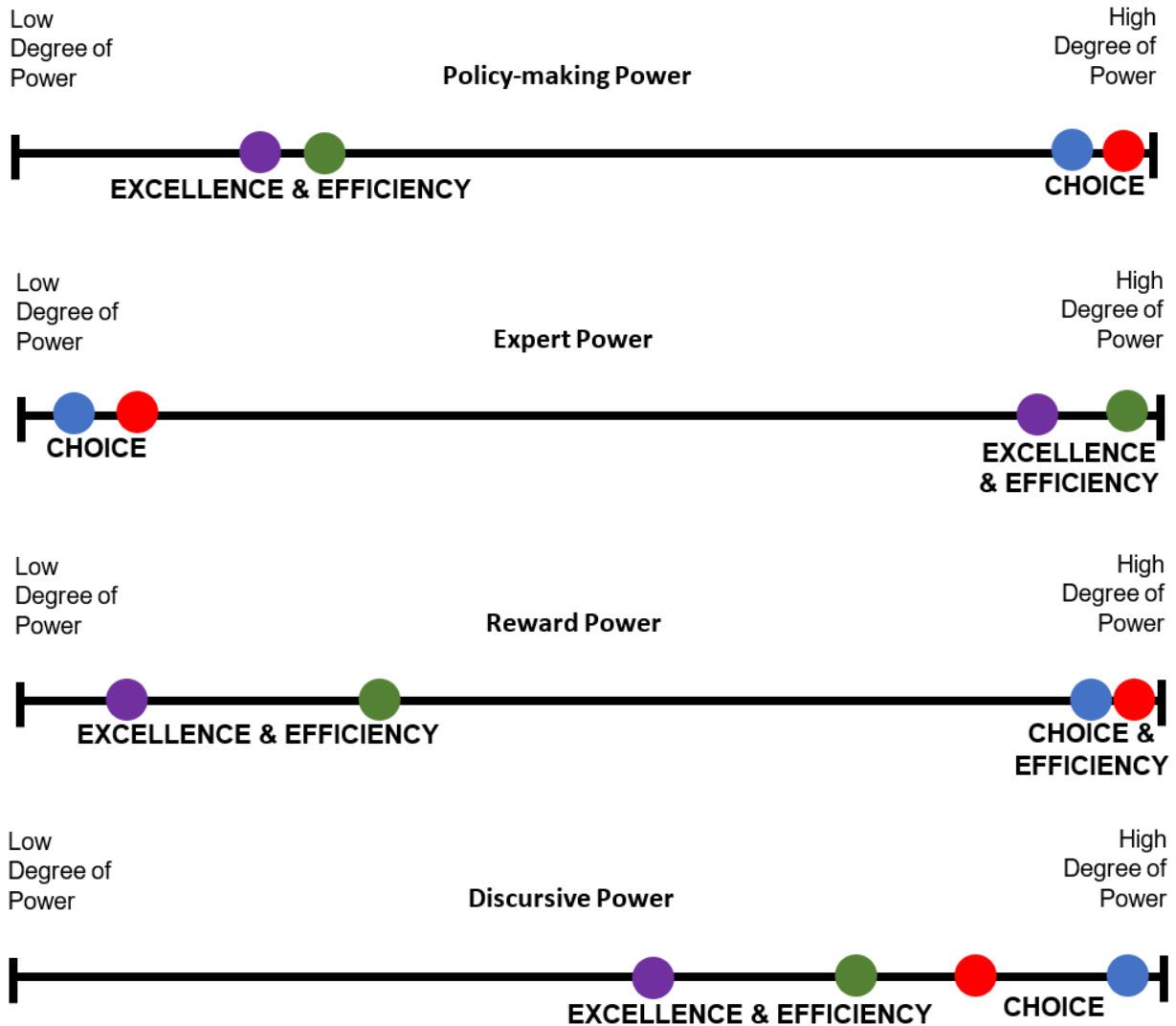


Figure 6. Overlay of values and power by stakeholder groups

### Power Neutralized

When examining Virginia's accountability debate, there are several groups who fought passionately against power brokers, yet they were neutralized. In the end, some championed the same cause and some did not. For example, VDOE and elected officials both argued against new standards; meanwhile, higher education personnel saw value in exploring how our existing SOL could be improved. In all instances, "less powerful" groups, shared frustrations with the process in place to share their expertise and stances related to the issue at hand. Furthermore, some of



these individuals had high levels of power, such as expert or bureaucratic, but their voices or opinions were offset in the debate. This case study showed expertise to be secondary in favor of power vested by nature of authority. Similarly, discursive power by itself was not strong enough to overcome the influence of the other four sources of power. Instead, discourse added a layer of strength to a given power source and allowed powerful brokers to promote their message rather than simply to attract buy-in.

Power was neutralized in several ways in this study. The most effective neutralizer of power was through policy-making. Proposing and passing legislation ensures regulations and requirements that all must follow. Legislators maintain control of the policy-making process and propose legislation to align with their and their constituents' values. Other stakeholders have a role influencing the policy agenda, but ultimate control of the policy process remains with elected officials. Minimizing or silencing discourse was another way power was neutralized. Failure to capture or act on feedback effectively silences or minimizes the voices of the less powerful. For example, discourse on the CCSS debate never opened to an audience larger than the key stakeholders including elected and state-level officials.

### **Conclusions**

The findings of this study led to three main conclusions regarding power, values, and decision-making within the realm of complexity theory. First, there is greater inertia toward consensus when multiple power sources overlap with varied values in pursuit of a common decision. This study illustrated the symbiotic nature of values and the exponential impact of power when it is layered. Effective systems thrive on constant shifts to maintain a level of stability, and the direction any system pivots is informed by competing values sought. Stakeholders' values may be at odds, but when they intersect, it bolsters the argument and gives

additional merit to inform the decision-making process. Thus, the greater the overlap of power and values, the greater the likelihood of decision-making aligning with the consensus.

Second, power within the policy context is derived from a number of sources, but all types of power are not created equally. Within the political realm, the combination of bureaucratic and policy-making powers were the most significant sources of power. Political actors establish agendas, pass legislation, and make funding decisions. These acts alone imply additional levels of power vested to officials, such as reward and discourse, through the ability to control budgets and promote their viewpoints. Elected officials maintain a high level of control over the public narrative because their clout offers access to a wider media platform. To insinuate that politicians are powerful actors is not a new concept; however, to specifically outline the high levels of varied power sources they possess and the ways they enact power sheds light on the role.

Finally, contextual factors exist that promote and help us predict change within the accountability environment at the state level. Systematic shifts do not happen without warning; the seeds for transformation bubble long before an organization confronts the act of changing. The interplay of trends in federal and state governments provide insight into shifts to expect. A system that has experienced stagnancy for a period of time should expect change on the horizon. Discourse is a critical revelatory component for predicting change. An examination of discourse among power brokers at all levels can uncover insight on the competing values prioritized and thus the potential impending shifts to expect. One must be a careful consumer of media to access balanced sources and explore varied voices in the quest to be well-informed.

### **Implications for Research**

This case study utilized a qualitative research design exploring the phenomenon of power and values and how they influenced accountability decisions in Virginia. The study builds on the wealth of previous literature about states' responses to accountability mandates and adds to the body of knowledge related to the complex motivations behind decision-making, an area where there was a scarcity of research. Complexity theory offered an underutilized lens to help understand past decision-making and predict future courses of action. While this research is set in a historical context, the framework offers a viable lens for examining current day trends in education.

Since the time of this study, the educational landscape has shifted significantly. A global pandemic brought the US education system to its knees, forcing a complete overhaul of what teaching and learning looked like. The impacts of that pandemic and its effects on education are still felt in present time. Within Virginia and nationwide, bureaucratic mandates, such as the closure of schools, distance learning, mask mandates, and funding to address learning loss, are compounded by pedagogical and systemic changes, such as the necessity to address social and emotional learning and the prolific use of one-to-one technology in blended learning environments. Beyond the pandemic, societal uprisings gave way to advocacy for important social justice issues. The nation witnessed the murder of George Floyd and subsequent unprecedented support for movements, such as Black Lives Matter and anti-racist practices. Within Virginia, the move to embrace equity became foundational at the Department of Education. Equity initiatives were embedded into practice, legislation codified equity training and policy, and movement was made to integrate equity in teacher evaluation. State code was passed requiring the Department of Education to develop and make available policies local

school boards could adopt around the rights and protections for transgender students. Most recently, debate ensued around critical race theory, parents' rights in education, and Governor Youngkin's day one executive order calling for the end to "inherently divisive practices," which quickly stalled momentum around equity. These issues led to fierce debates and many local school board meetings that attracted statewide and national attention for the levels of fury, profanity, disrespect, and blatant disregard for protocol that parents and other participants demonstrated. In each of these instances, we saw the educational system shift toward varying competing values from order/safety to individual freedom to equity. Each of these movements offers an opportune context to apply the framework of this research study to identify influential power brokers, examine the values they espouse and the types of power they wielded, and unpack how those power players influenced the course of decision-making. Moreover, a study across time could analyze and identify trends in the competing values to better anticipate and predict future shifts.

Furthermore, this research study was limited to the commonwealth of Virginia and its decision-making around landmark accountability initiatives up to the Common Core era. The study is limited in that it focused specifically on one state. There were three other states that also rejected the CCSS in favor of their states' existing standards: Alaska, Nebraska, and Texas. It would be interesting research to examine the motivations behind these states' decision-making to determine if there was alignment in beliefs and values. A cross-state comparison would be another case to draw on in understanding motivations and states' reactions to federal involvement. Similarly, there are a number of states who adopted the CCSS and then subsequently withdrew from the curriculum. It would be enlightening to conduct research on the values that motivated these states to change course and retract from using the national

curriculum. In all instances, a research study of this magnitude would shed light on how power was enacted and whether the prominent public narrative aligned with the values that ultimately drove decision-making.

### **Implications for Practice**

Practitioners often feel a schism between the everyday nature of their work and the bureaucratic formalities prolific in the political world. In fact, the world of politics can feel so disconnected that educators view policy-making as something done to them rather than a process they can influence. This study illuminated the most powerful sources of power and it is clear policy-makers possess a great deal of control; however, hope is not lost for practitioners. This section identifies three implications for practice that seek to bridge the imaginary divide that exists between practitioner and policy-maker and offer a way to influence and anticipate political decision-making.

First, it is incumbent on practitioners and other stakeholders to stay abreast of current and potential upcoming trends in the larger education landscape. Remain informed by reading current literature, accessing news on a state and national level, attending local board and organization meetings, and reviewing legislation updates. Official press releases and reports commissioned by the governor shed insight into the issues being debated and considered. Minutes from legislative sessions also reveal the experts who are brought in to testify to lawmakers and the stances these folks promote. All of these sources serve as an entry point in understanding the initiatives and values power brokers are advancing. However, remaining informed is only one component of the battle. Beyond that, practitioners need to advocate their stances, regardless of the viewpoint they support.

The second implication for practice relates to the first in that stakeholders who possess less power need to find and exercise their voice in favor of the issues they support. Political actors may possess power by authority of their role, but citizens should not be discouraged from speaking their viewpoints. The most practical way to lend credence to voice is by joining an organization that aligns with your viewpoint, giving weight to the *strength in numbers* analogy. Individuals on their own possess an insignificant amount of power, but many formalized organizations and groups have significant influence. This includes local education associations who actively gather member input, lobby for specific causes, and put their support behind political candidates who espouse their views. Similarly, civil rights organizations, faith-based groups, and other formalized, like-minded committees offer a way to take the causes of education on a larger and more influential scale.

Finally, there are opportunities for partnerships between higher education institutions and school divisions to better anticipate and respond to impending changes. Research institutions are on the cusp of developments and trends in the field of education. Public education leaders could benefit from deeper conversations with higher education experts. Utilizing structures, such as a consortium of leaders from higher and public education meeting regionally or virtual meetings for those divisions without institutions of higher education nearby, offers opportunities to close the chasm that often exists between research and practice. Furthermore, this gives leaders at all levels an opportunity to process the messaging, policies, responses, and trends emerging locally and nationally.

## Summary

This research study used interviews and extensive document analysis to develop greater understanding for the complex decisions that are made regarding educational accountability in Virginia. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors and policy conditions led the Commonwealth of Virginia to decide not to adopt the CCSS?
  - a. What values motivated policy decisions around landmark accountability decisions in Virginia over a twenty-year span?
  - b. Given the motivations to engage in the accountability debate in Virginia, how and in what ways did educational stakeholders attempt to influence the course of decision-making, and to what degree of success?
2. How did stakeholder values, motivations, and influence lead to rejection of the CCSS?

The study centered on a significant event during that twenty-year timeframe, the decision to reject the CCSS. The findings revealed five broad sources of power that stakeholders flexed and showed how the overlap of power and values ignited momentum when deciding a course of action. While the study added to the body of knowledge around this topic, there is still more to learn, know, and uncover. The framework of this study offers an ideal lens for continued discovery to fill the gap between politics and practice.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix A**

#### **Interview Questions**

1. Walk me through what you think are the major defining periods of accountability.
2. Which of those eras were most interesting in terms of the debate around accountability, and why?
3. Who were the major stakeholders in those instances?
4. What were they trying to achieve? What were their goals?
  - a. What do you think the various groups were trying to accomplish, what were their ends?
  - b. What was driving their motivation? To accomplish what through accountability policy?
5. What do you think the intended goals of accountability during these eras says about what we wanted out of education versus what we got (i.e., teachers not thinking on their own)?
6. Focus in on one era and really analyze it.
7. Whom else might I interview who has a good perspective on all this?

## Appendix B

**Table 1: Analysis Framework: Discourse Surrounding Virginia Accountability Movements**

	<b>Discourse Evidence</b> actual data segments	<b>Competing Value</b> efficiency, excellence, equality, choice	<b>Power Relationship</b> Underlying motivator	<b>Further Analysis</b> Are there any underlying values?
Discourse 1				
Discourse 2				
Discourse 3				

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### SELECT PRESENTATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS

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AERA Annual Meeting Presentation <i>Taking the Long View of Virginia's Decisions on Common Core Standards: A Lesson in Values, Power, and Complexity</i>	April 2018
UCEA Annual Conference Presentation <i>Values, Power, and Complexity Theory: Policy Lessons Learned from Virginia's Decisions on Common Core Standards</i>	November 2017
AERA Annual Meeting Presentation <i>In Search of Excellence or Political Posturing: Understanding Virginia's Policy Decisions on Common Core Standards</i>	April 2017

Co-authored book chapter:  
 Brooks, J. S., & Brooks, M. C. (Eds.). (2015). Urban educational leadership for social justice: International perspectives. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Co-authored peer reviewed journal article:  
 Clayton, J., Crum, K.S., & Rhett, A. (2010). Segregation and poverty: Impacts on reading achievement and leadership implications. *International Journal of Urban Educational Leadership*, 4(1).