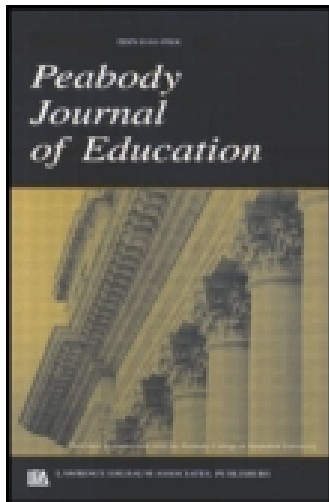


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## Regional Governance in Education: A Case Study of the Metro Area Learning Community in Omaha, Nebraska

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This article examines the first regional governance reform in public education, created in the Omaha, Nebraska metropolitan area in 2007. The legislation creating this regional reform, which is called the Learning Community, established a regional governing body, the Learning Community Coordinating Council, consisting of an elected 21-member board. The board oversees a tax-sharing plan that redistributes general revenue, an interdistrict diversity transfer program, and programming aimed at enhancing early childhood and after-school opportunities for low-income students. In this article, we examine the implementation of the Learning Community, evaluating the extent to which the regional governing body has been able to advance the regional goals with which it has been charged. This article also illustrates how, as a result of the regional governance reforms, school districts within the Omaha metropolitan area are reevaluating the very definition of “local community.”

One of the defining features of American political geography is the relatively large number of autonomous governmental units, such as municipalities, townships, and local school districts within metropolitan areas (Judd & Swanstrom, 2010; Vogel & Harrigan, 2007). Although such geopolitical fragmentation<sup>1</sup> is prevalent in all major U.S. metropolitan areas, it is particularly notable in the older industrialized cities of the Northeast and Midwest (Sellers, 2005).

Metropolitan areas in the United States were not always so divided into multiple, autonomous jurisdictions. The phenomenon of fragmentation emerged during the mid-20th century, when the growing number of predominately White and middle-class suburbs were granted powers of incorporation, with attendant taxing and revenue authority, by state legislatures (Dreier, Mollenkopf, & Swanstrom, 2004; Jackson, 1985). As result, suburbs and suburban school systems became independent political units that were largely able to “detach” themselves from the growing urban problems nearby.

Metropolitan areas with high levels of fragmentation tend to have political units (i.e., school districts, municipalities) that are not only more numerous but relatively smaller in size. Some

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<sup>1</sup>Fragmentation is defined by Bischoff (2008) as the “proliferation of autonomous jurisdictions” (p. 182).

argue that there are benefits to such configurations: not only do smaller jurisdictions help to create and solidify community identity, but their small size means that they can more efficiently meet the preferences of individuals living within their borders (Briffault, 1996; Ford, 2001). Yet others point out that geopolitical fragmentation also comes with serious social and political costs, both contributing to fiscal disparities between locales and exacerbating racial and economic segregation (Holme & Finnigan, 2013; Orfield & Luce, 2010).

Over the past several decades, reformers hoping to address the negative costs associated with fragmentation have proposed adopting regional governance reforms designed to increase intergovernmental cooperation among local communities within metropolitan areas. Such reforms have usually entailed the creation of a regional governance structure, which is given the power to coordinate across jurisdictions on particular issues (land use, transportation, and other issues that to date have not involved education). By addressing the “local boundary problem” (Briffault, 1996), such regional reforms are aimed at overcoming the economic and social costs associated with fragmentation.

This article examines the first regional governance reform in public education, which was created in the Omaha, Nebraska metropolitan area in 2007. The legislation creating this regional reform, called the Learning Community, established a regional governing body, the Learning Community Coordinating Council, consisting of an elected 21-member board. The board oversees a tax-sharing plan that redistributes general revenue, an interdistrict diversity transfer program, and programming aimed at enhancing early childhood and after-school opportunities for low-income students. In this article, we examine the implementation of the Learning Community, evaluating the extent to which the regional governing body has been able to advance the regional goals with which it has been charged. This article also illustrates how, as a result of the regional governance reforms, school districts within the Omaha metropolitan area are reevaluating the very definition of “local community.”

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: IMPLEMENTATION OF REGIONAL REFORM

Prior to the Learning Community, the few regional governance reforms that had been implemented in the United States had only addressed noneducational public policy issues (i.e., housing, waste disposal, and transportation) (Basolo & Hastings, 2003; Baum, 2004). These regional reforms (the most notable of which are in the Portland, Oregon metro and the Twin Cities, Minnesota metro areas) were designed to address some of the social and service-delivery costs of fragmentation by creating greater cross-jurisdictional cooperation. Each of these reforms was the result of state legislation, which authorized the creation of a regional governance council with varying degrees of authority and voting rights for participating jurisdictions (Vogel & Harrigan, 2007). For example, the Twin Cities’ metropolitan council, which consists of 17 members appointed by the Minnesota governor, was authorized by the Minnesota legislature and charged with overseeing regional planning in the area with respect to airports, waste, and low-income housing (Vogel & Harrigan, 2007).

Research on the implementation of these regional reforms has highlighted a number of features that are critical to the effectiveness of such efforts. As we shall illustrate, although many of these

features apply to the Learning Community, there are some aspects that we find are unique to the Learning Community's "educational regionalism."

### Goals and Mandates

One factor found to be central to regional reform implementation is the overall goal of the reform (Foster & Barnes, 2012; Weir, Rongerude, & Ansell, 2009). Regional efforts designed to cope with service-delivery issues (i.e., transit or waste disposal) tend to be easier to implement, and meet less resistance from localities, than reforms focused on addressing inequities in access and resources across boundary lines (i.e., access to tax resources) because they are less controversial (Basolo & Hastings, 2003; Provo, 2009; Vogel & Harrigan, 2007).

The implementation of regional reforms—particularly political support for ongoing regional efforts—is also shaped by the balance within the regional governing body between regional goals and local community concerns. An overly strong regional agenda, can as Powell (2000) writes, "dilute the political power and cultural identity of minority communities" (p. 242). At the same time, when regionalism "... is not balanced, it runs the risk of being too respectful of local autonomy or becoming too fragmented to function" (Powell, 2000, p. 242).

### Allocation of Power

Another factor shaping the implementation of regional reforms is the degree of authority given to the regional governing body vis-à-vis localities. Of specific concern is the degree to which a regional governing body is able to push localities to come in line with a regional agenda. For example, although one of the better-known regional governing structures, the Portland Metro, coordinates planning in the region, it does not have the power to actually force localities to comply with Metro policies (Vogel & Harrigan, 2007). Research indicates that compliance is often tied to the amount of control a governing body is given over resources, which can help encourage—or even force—cooperation by localities with regional equity goals (Foster & Barnes, 2012; Griffith, 2005; Weir et al., 2009). Another, similar, division-of-power issue is the degree to which states grant some of their traditional authorities to a regional governing body (Griffith, 2005).

### Structure of Governing Body

Research has also suggested that the structure of the regional governing body affects implementation (Orfield & Luce, 2010). Key here is the type of representation given to different localities: some regional governing bodies are structured so that representation is proportionate to overall population (thus giving more populous urban cores more votes on a council than less populous suburban locales). Other regional governing bodies, however, are structured to give all localities a single vote, regardless of size, which can seriously disadvantage cities (Orfield & Luce, 2010).

Another key issue in governance is whether governing board members are elected or appointed. Some argue that elected members tend to be more accountable to the local public than those

appointed by governors or mayors (Orfield, 2002). Others argue that appointed members may have a more regional perspective given that they are not beholden to their local constituencies (Griffith, 2005).

### Community Stakeholders

Research also shows that it is difficult for regional initiatives to succeed without the involvement and support of local stakeholders (i.e., community groups, businesses, universities, etc.). Such involvement is, as Weir (2000) found, critical for ongoing political support of the efforts pursued (Pastor, Benner & Matsuoka, 2009; Weir, 2000). Involvement of community groups is particularly important if a regional effort is to address the issues of concern to urban minority communities, which are often the most negatively affected by fragmentation (Pastor et al., 2009).

### Local Context

The local context of the metropolitan area also shapes implementation. Several dimensions of the local context have been found to “matter” in regional reform efforts. First is the overall level of fragmentation within a metropolitan area: the greater number of jurisdictions (municipalities, school districts) in a metro area, the greater the challenges in implementing regional reform. As Pastor et al. (2009) note: “In regions with multiple local governments, it is harder to develop political or policy strategies that build from city to city within the region because of the greater number of policy targets” (p. 146).

A second aspect of local context is the racial composition of the metropolitan area. As Pastor et al. (2009) have found, metropolitan areas with larger non-White populations tend to have stronger constituencies in favor of regionalism. The history of race relations within metropolitan areas also shapes implementation, as Pastor et al. (2009) write: “In some places, a history of racial tension presents a barrier to finding common ground; in other places, racial distractions seem to be blurring, creating new opportunities” (p. 151).

A third factor of local context is the prior history of regional collaboration within the metropolitan area. As Foster and Barnes (2012) note: “Regions with experience addressing a regional goal—even if they have failed in the past—can draw insights and knowledge—from prior efforts” (p. 277).

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

As stated, the purpose of this study was to examine the Learning Community’s governance structure, the Learning Community Coordinating Council (LCCC), and evaluate the degree to which the LCCC has been able to advance the regional goals with which it has been charged. Particularly, we were interested in learning whether the LCCC has been able to balance regional and local goals, maintain political support, and allow for an inclusive representation of individuals within the 21-member governing body. In order to examine these three aspects of the LCCC, we

utilized qualitative case study research (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995), drawing on structured and in-depth interviews to obtain rich and descriptive data that not only reveal the complexities of the LCCC but how people in a cross-section of roles within the Learning Community have made meaning of its effectiveness.

### Participants and Data Collection

Prior to conducting our formal interviews, we met with a group of nine local stakeholders in the Omaha metropolitan area to elicit input on our study. We selected the stakeholders based on their involvement with the LCCC and/or their role in the community at large (i.e., governance council members and business and community leaders). We invited the stakeholders to participate in two focus group–like discussions to understand some of the major issues that we should be aware of. We also discussed how we could structure our work so that it might be of use to both the governance council and community members.

After meeting with the local stakeholders, we refined our interview questions and data collection plans according to the input received in order to ensure that our work was reflective of the needs and concerns raised. We then conducted 31 interviews with individuals from a variety of roles in the Learning Community, including four state officials and legislators, ten Learning Community Coordinating Council members (identifying at least one council member from each of the six geographic subdistricts within the Learning Community), three Learning Community administrators, all of the superintendents of the eleven school districts in the Learning Community, and three school-level administrators (two focus school administrators, and one choice school administrator). Individuals in governance and policy roles (legislators and governing board members) were selected intentionally to capture a diversity of representation in terms of both role and geography. We therefore sought to interview individuals known to have strong opinions on particular issues. Each interviewee was asked to participate in a single interview. Interviews lasted anywhere from 45 to 90 minutes, with most lasting approximately one hour. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed as soon after the interview as possible.

### Data Analysis

All interviews were coded into emergent themes. During coding, we paid particular attention to respondents' comments regarding the governance structure of the LCCC, the decision-making process, and the influence of internal (LCCC board members) and external (urban and suburban districts) interests. Interview data were triangulated using multiple sources of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994), including LCCC meeting minutes, court rulings, legislative transcripts, news accounts, and published reports. Our analysis of the data was iterative, allowing us to be reflexive in the conclusions we drew from the data (Mile & Huberman, 1994). We reviewed our findings to ensure that our interpretations of the data were consistent with the majority of the data and that we did not draw overreaching conclusions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

Prior to the creation of the Learning Community, the Omaha metropolitan area's urban core district, Omaha Public Schools (OPS), was facing a number of problems that vexed other urban districts across the nation: a discriminatory finance system, a shrinking share of middle-class families, and a state interdistrict school choice law that allowed White and middle-class students to flee to suburban schools even without relocating residentially (Holme, Diem, & Mansfield, 2009). However, the city of Omaha was in relatively better financial condition than the school system, because the city had the ability by state law to annex suburban territory as the suburbs grew. This annexation power allowed the city to capture both residential and retail tax dollars that would have otherwise been paid to a suburban jurisdiction.

Although state law also gave the OPS district the power to expand its boundaries whenever the city annexed land, for reasons that remain unclear, the OPS board had "elected" not to utilize this right since the 1960s (Holme et al., 2009). Although there is no written record on the reasons for OPS' decision not to annex and expand along with the city, many speculate that it was the result of political pressure from suburbs (Holme et al., 2009).

Although OPS' statutory right to expand its boundaries to the Omaha city limits was nearly forgotten after decades of nonuse, this statute came to the attention of OPS administrators in the spring of 2005, when the OPS superintendent was notified of an effort in the legislature to delete this provision from state law. This effort to eliminate OPS' right to annex was, not coincidentally, made at the same time the city of Omaha was in annexation proceedings to take over the land of yet another suburb in the area.

Both the superintendent and members of the school board were infuriated by this move on the part of the legislature, because the legislature had been unresponsive to their plea for greater resources. Thus, in a defiant move, the school board voted in June of 2005 to utilize the long-forgotten statute and expand its boundaries to match the Omaha city boundaries, therefore annexing all of the suburban schools within the Omaha city limits. This "One City, One School District" effort, as it became known, meant that OPS would take over 25 schools in two adjoining suburban school districts.

The outcry from the suburbs was immediate and intense, and the state legislature and its education committee instantly became the locus for a solution. After a great deal of debate and negotiation, the legislature enacted two statutes (LB 641 in May of 2007, and LB 1154 in April of 2008) that created the present-day Learning Community law, which requires that a Learning Community be created within "each city of the metropolitan class" (greater than 300,000 residents) in the state.<sup>2</sup> The legislation freezes school boundaries in place as they existed on March 1, 2006 (for the Omaha metropolitan area specifically), thereby putting to rest the "One City, One School District" OPS initiative.<sup>3</sup>

The Omaha metro-area Learning Community was officially established in January of 2009. It is governed by the Learning Community Coordinating Council (LCCC), which is a 21-member governing board. The LCCC is comprised of 12 elected members across Douglas and Sarpy Counties (the Omaha metropolitan area). The counties are divided by the election commission into six electoral subdistricts (or subcouncils) based on population. Residents of each subdistrict elect

<sup>2</sup>LB 1154, Section 16.

<sup>3</sup>LB 1154, Section 20.



two LCCC representatives during the general election through limited voting, a process designed to increase the representation of minority populations (see Figure 1). (Because subdistricts are drawn up based on population, large school districts such as OPS have territory in more than one of the six subdistricts.) Candidates for the elected LCCC board positions are not required to be educators or school board members.

After the general election of the 12 members, an additional six LCCC members are voted in via a caucus of the school board members in each of the six subcouncils, to ensure that local school boards have representation on the council. An additional three nonvoting members are appointed to the LCCC by the school boards of school districts that fail to win a representation through either the voting or caucus processes.

Each of the six electoral subdistricts, under the current structure, has three representatives. Those three representatives form the “achievement subcouncil” for their areas and are in charge of approving their districts’ plans for addressing the needs of English Language Learners (ELLs) and low-income students (“ELL plans” and “poverty plans”). The 11 area superintendents serve in an advisory role to the LCCC through the “Superintendents Advisory Council.”

One of the major aspects of the state legislation is a tax-base sharing plan designed to increase school finance equity between school districts in the metro area. The legislation grants the LCCC authority to set a common levy on property across the 11 school districts, which is then redistributed back to the districts based on the state funding formula. Districts have some discretion to set a levy over and above the levy set by the LC to maintain some of the advantages of local property tax wealth.

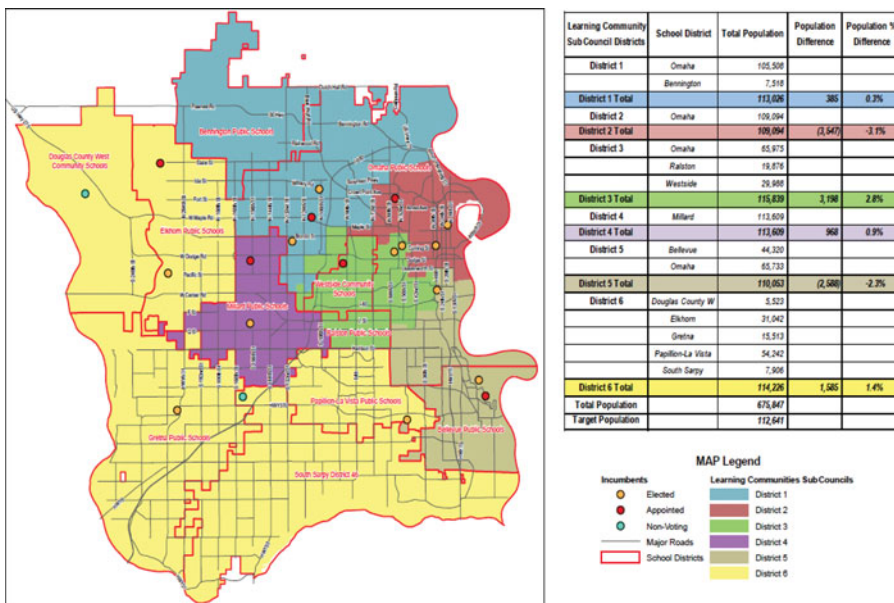


FIGURE 1 Learning Community subcouncils Source: Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties (2011).

The LCCC receives an annual appropriation from the state (of approximately \$500,000) for operating and staffing costs. The LCCC oversees two major programs. One program is the choice-based interdistrict desegregation (transfer) program, aimed at increasing the diversity in schools throughout the metro and deconcentrating poverty in high-poverty districts and schools (see Table 1). The goal of the desegregation program is to achieve an equal distribution of low-income students in all buildings in all 11 districts, so that all schools have the same proportion of low-income students as the metro-wide average. At the time the LC began, about 35% of students in the metro area were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL); currently the proportion of students in poverty is 42% (Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, 2011). Students who contribute to the diversity of the building get free transportation (both FRL-eligible and non-FRL-eligible when applicable) and funding for transportation is reimbursed to districts by the state. Although the LCCC creates the applications and sets policy for the program, the districts handle actual admissions for the program. It is important to note that there are no specific goals or benchmarks that the LCCC must meet vis-à-vis diversity, and no consequences are in place for failing to make progress on diversity.

The Learning Community is also required to establish Elementary Learning Centers (ELCs), which are centers that are intended to provide social and academic support services to children and parents outside of school hours (i.e., parental reading skills, English classes for families, or health centers.) The LCCC is required to establish “at least one” ELC for every 25 high-poverty elementary schools (“in which at least 35% of the students attending the school who reside in the attendance area of such school qualify for free or reduced price lunch.”<sup>4</sup>) Currently two of the six subdistricts qualify for an ELC and one of the districts has already established an ELC; the other is in the process of planning one. The LCCC has also made the decision to distribute some of the ELC funding across all six subdistricts.

## FINDINGS

During our data collection, it became apparent that the Learning Community governance structure exemplified what Powell (2000) terms “federated regionalism.” Federated regionalism is a “two-tier” form of regionalism, in which a regional governance council coordinates activity related to regional goals and interests, while localities are given discretion in local matters (Powell, 2000). Federated regionalism, as Powell notes, is “. . . based on two premises: first, many important problems within the inner cities and older suburbs can only be dealt with adequately at a regional level; and second, some issues, or some aspects of issues, are of a local nature and thus are more effectively handled by a local government” (p. 223).

The Learning Community is pathbreaking in that it is the first attempt at federated regionalism in education. Although school districts (and their representatives) work together for regional goals in terms of integration and resource-sharing, local school districts retain control over their core functions (curriculum, hiring, budgeting, student enrollment). What is interesting about the LC is that the governing body (the Learning Community Coordinating Council) *itself* also embodies a federated regionalist design: although the larger council votes on metro-wide issues,

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<sup>4</sup>LB 1154, Section 23 (1).

TABLE 1  
Demographics of School Districts in Learning Community

Agency Name—Most Recent Year (District)	Enrollment 2009/10	2010/11 FRL	2010/11 ELL	Amer Indian/Ak		Asian/Pacific Isl. Students [2009–10]	Black Students [2009–10]	Hispanic Students [2009–10]	White Students [2009–10]
				Native Students [2009–10]					
Omaha Public Schools	48,692	69.3%	14.9%	1.4%		2.6%	30.7%	26.8%	38.5%
Elkhorn Public Schools	5,307	9.1%	1.1%	0.2%		2.7%	1.8%	3.4%	91.9%
Douglas Co West Community Schools	676	39.5%	2.0%	1.2%		1.2%	3.8%	6.8%	87.0%
Westside Community Schools	6,043	26.1%	2.8%	0.9%		4.0%	8.3%	4.6%	82.2%
Bennington Public Schools	1,209	10.2%	1.1%	0.4%		2.3%	2.3%	2.4%	92.6%
Ralston Public Schools	3,154	46.5%	7.9%	0.8%		2.9%	7.1%	21.7%	67.6%
Millard Public Schools	22,647	16.1%	1.6%	0.4%		4.5%	3.2%	4.3%	87.6%
Bellevue Public Schools	9,739	31.1%	2.0%	0.9%		3.5%	10.0%	8.7%	76.9%
Papillion-La Vista Public Schools	9,797	21.6%	1.7%	0.7%		2.7%	5.4%	5.6%	85.5%
South Saryy Dist 46	1,055	17.9%	0.0%	0.8%		0.6%	1.3%	1.9%	95.5%
Gretna Public Schools	2,921	9.0%	0.1%	0.3%		1.0%	0.9%	1.3%	96.4%

Note. South Saryy District 46 is now Springfield Platteview Community Schools.

the subcouncil structure allows some decisions to be made that are reflective of the specific local needs of those areas.

In the discussion that follows, we examine some of the key tensions stemming from such a federated regionalist design. We illustrate that although the Learning Community governance council has evolved into a relatively effective body in terms of internal governance, the council also suffers from a problem of legitimacy within the broader community. Our data illustrate that these tensions have created a number of political barriers for the work of the governance council that threaten to undermine long-term goals.

### Internal Governance and Collaboration

In our interviews, we found that the members of the Learning Community Coordinating Council perceive the 21-member board to be an effective governance body. Most governance council members that we interviewed praised the task force and committee structures established by the original LCCC members in early 2009, when the LCCC was first established. Each LCCC member is currently assigned to one of two “task forces” to address the LC’s two legislative mandates: the Diversity Task Force (consisting of 11 members); and the Elementary Learning Center Task Force (consisting of 10 members). The LCCC also has several standing committees to facilitate the operation of the LC, including the Executive Committee, Administration and Personnel, Budget and Finance, and Legislation and Policy. Each task force has representation from at least one council member from each subcouncil.

Much of the work of the LCCC gets done within these smaller committees, which makes the work at the larger LCCC level more manageable from the perception of LCCC members. According to one LCCC member, the subcommittees can best be described as “business groups” who work to get “the issues out on the table and as time has gone on, it seems to be fairly successful in identifying and resolving issues at the working committee level before they come to the full board.”

As stated previously, there is also a legislative mandate that each of the six electoral districts—from which LC members are elected—make up a “subcouncil” consisting of the three voting members from that district. Each subcouncil is different geographically and demographically, and faces vastly different obstacles. Overall, the consensus among the LCCC members is that the subcouncils have helped to elicit input from each geographic community, and also have helped to educate members of the large council who may be unfamiliar with those communities about major issues and concerns in those local neighborhoods. A LCCC member describes the inherent differences of the communities within the subcouncils and the need to be flexible in allocating resources, depending on who is being served:

This is a segregated city, like it or not, it’s not as segregated as it was 40 years ago when I moved here, but it still is, to a degree. And so when you have newly arrived immigrants in south Omaha . . . compared to the institutional poverty of north Omaha, . . . compared to the newness and the movement of other . . . zones of the city, [the subcouncil structure] gives you, instead of a cookie cutter mentality that, “oh, I thought of this out here before and you ought to do that down in [another subcouncil].” It doesn’t always work that way. So we’re doing in [our subcouncil] what we know and think will work in [our subcouncil], with the kids we have and the number of poverty kids, and English language learner kids, and mobility kids, all of those three categories that we are charged

with primarily, and our percentages are so small compared to north Omaha or south Omaha, so [the other subcouncil members] . . . get a chance to deal with their zones and their ways. . . .

Decisions made at the subcouncil level regarding the allocation of funds have also, some note, helped the LC politically in their relationships with school districts. For example, initially—per the state legislation—just two subcouncils were provided Elementary Learning Center funding to create and implement the ELCs. However, the ELC Task Force members voted to distribute a significant share of the funding to the other four subcouncils in order to provide services for low-income children in those areas of the city, and to give all 11 school districts a share (however small) of the funds. This had the effect, according to people we interviewed, of helping to involve, and win the support of, superintendents in those districts for at least that aspect of the legislation.

Although the governance council is large, according to several council members, one of the strengths of the council has been its size, in that everyone across the metro area is involved in the conversation. As one LCCC governance board member stated:

I think it's really important when you have such a large overall board, it's helpful, you know . . . if you don't have buy-in, if there are things that . . . the majority of people can't buy into, it's helpful to know that early, and it's helpful to get a lot of voices involved in all decision making, you know, a diversity of voices involved in decision making, and I think that's been our strength. . . . I can't say that we've had 100 percent buy-in on everything, but at least every voice has been heard.

Thus, the unique LCCC governance structure has created an opportunity for cross-metropolitan conversations between council members on important issues, an opportunity for which many council members we interviewed expressed appreciation. However, as we discuss later, the perceptions of efficiency as an organization are not widely shared outside of the council membership.

## Regional Reform: Governance Tensions and Political Struggles

Although the LCCC board members view the council as an effective governing body, there have been significant tensions in the community over the balance of power between the LCCC and local districts. Such tensions, which are inherent within federated regional structures such as the LC, have created barriers to implementation, as we illustrate next.

### *Role Clarity, Power, and Authority*

One of the core tensions within regionalist structures, as stated previously, is the need for “balance” between regional authority and local autonomy (powell, 2000). The Learning Community has embodied just such tensions regarding the extent of the LCCC's power and authority.

Part of the reason for this conflict was the original legislation, which contained few details regarding the extent of authority the LCCC was to be granted. It is likely that some of the ambiguity within the legislation about the authority of the LCCC was intentional, because greater specificity may have hindered its passage. However, without legislative guidance or prior models, LCCC governance council members were somewhat unsure how to craft their roles or structure. As one of the original LCCC board members said to us: “Imagine being elected to something that

nothing is in place . . . this had . . . this was something that was all brand new, had no structure, everything had to be invented.”

The lack of clarity about role and power created a great deal of confusion among elected governance council members and generated tension between governance council members and local school district officials (both superintendents and school board members) who were fearful of over-reach. One LCCC official recalled an early meeting between candidates for the LCCC and the school board members of the 11 school districts. At the meeting, the candidates for the LCCC made broad claims about the authority they believed they were to have over local districts. This person recalled of that meeting:

There were things said by candidates, some of whom were elected, some of whom were not, that were very much a misinterpretation of the intent of the legislation, basically comments that they would be in charge now, comments that they . . . you know, that they had a higher level of authority than they truly were going to have . . . that stuck with some of these school districts.

A state official recalled that the first LCCC members to be elected were generally very enthusiastic about the ability of the LCCC to generate broad-scale change, and in their enthusiasm, may have alienated local school boards who were protective of their decision-making power. Referring to the LCCC governance board members, this official reflected:

You have a lot of good people who want to go in there and educate and eliminate the achievement gap, and they're not clear what their role is, and as a result of that sometimes they may or may not . . . but they may overstep where they ought to be going and then right away you have 11 school boards saying, you are in our territory now.

This same official noted:

And there were naysayers on the outside that were just waiting to pounce . . . We were creating a brand-new political structure, and I think the Learning Community Coordinating Council itself struggled a bit with, what are we supposed to be doing, what's our role, they . . . some, bless their hearts, may have been a bit overzealous, but their hearts were in the right place.

Suburban superintendents, for their part, told us that their school board members believed the LCCC members had an inflated sense of their own power. A superintendent of one district observed of this dynamic: “ I think there's some power struggle [in which the LCCC members believe], ‘we got elected by the people, we got this and that, therefore we're really the super board over your 11 boards,’ which as you can imagine, doesn't sit well with those 11 boards.” Another superintendent noted:

When the Learning Community tried to get up on its feet and get rolling, I think you had . . . the expectations and roles that people were to play were not very clear, and I think there was a lot of animosity built up. There was, in some cases, I think people felt like the . . . people from the Learning Community were telling districts, “Well, you have to do this, this, and this because we say so.” And districts were saying, “Yeah, but we're responsible for these kids, and this is what we want to do.” So you had some of that kind of thing going on.

Many suburban superintendents that we interviewed complained that the governance structure was inefficient. One suburban superintendent argued that the LCCC is “. . . too big, it's too cumbersome, you have an 18-member voting board, the second-largest governing body in the state of Nebraska outside the unicameral. . . . It just doesn't make sense; it's not functional.”

The legislation not only created confusion about authority of the LCCC; the legislation also created additional tensions between the LCCC and member districts as a result of the many deadlines it imposed upon the LCCC. The LCCC, as stated earlier, had little staff and infrastructure, yet the LC was legislatively mandated to establish programs and structures within relatively tight (legislated) deadlines. This prompted the LCCC members to make some demands on school districts for data and information, which required school district staff to spend time and energy responding to those requests. These data requests, when overlaid on prior political tensions from the creation of the LC, caused some rifts and resentment between the LCCC and districts. The tension between the LC staff and school districts was exacerbated by the fact that the first executive director of the Learning Community was not an educator. This caused credibility problems with school district staff who felt that the executive director didn't understand the time involved in responding to those requests. As one superintendent noted of the tension between the executive director and the school districts:

I think some of it was the original executive director didn't come from a background in education, and I don't think she really understood how systems work, and when you start kind of giving mandates without really having an understanding of how those things have impacted people, I think there was some credibility lost. And I don't want to sound like I'm throwing rocks at her, I guess I just did but, again, I think it was one of those . . . I don't . . . I think the roles were so poorly defined that they were under pressure, we've got to get this stuff done, and I think they were trying to do those things, and I think a lot of us were saying: "Are you sure you have to do that?" [and] "I don't know why you're doing that."

An LC official also reflected on the ways in which the rapid implementation deadlines may have created some communication problems with districts:

Where I think we could have done better is in communicating. If we had had the luxury of time instead of really feeling like you were building an airplane as you were taxiing down the runway . . . so you're so focused on . . . meeting statutory compliance after statutory compliance . . . and maybe in hindsight maybe it would have been wiser to say, "Hey, wait, hold the phone, we're not gonna meet this date, we're not even gonna try to meet this date, we're gonna slow everything down."

Another related issue was, especially at the start, a lack of communication between the LCCC governing board members and their local districts (both superintendents and school boards). Indeed, as an LC official reflected, there was an assumption made that elected representatives would serve as a liaison between the LCCC and their home communities and school districts, and share pertinent information. This was a mistaken assumption for a number of reasons, according to one LC official we interviewed: most LCCC members serve on a subset of the existing committees and thus do not have a full sense of the work of all of the committees. Furthermore, it was problematic to assume that the information would be directly communicated back to the home districts. As this official reflected of the start-up process of the LC:

I think what got lost in the shuffle is, you know, could we have created a formalized system of inner-communication between the council and the 11 school boards, so you're not wholly reliant on the more informal system of, you know, boy, you wear both hats, you report back to your school board, I'm sure you know everything.

Understanding of the Learning Community's role and structure has developed over time. As structures have been put in place, there has been a greater consensus on the outlines—or limits—of

the power of the Learning Community. However, significant tensions remain as a result of the early challenges, and there is a potential for some additional tensions to emerge that have not yet been an issue. For example, the legislation requires subcouncils to approve school district plans to serve their low-income and ELL students. As one subcouncil member notes, this power has not really been able to be exercised by the subcouncils due to the political dangers of doing so.

You know, the districts will present their plans, and we've asked questions, and so forth, and depending on the council member, they may or may not want to go there. So, there's still that line of authority, in terms of the districts having their purview and Learning Community having somewhat of a limited purview. That line's always a little bit sensitive.

### *Struggle for Political Legitimacy*

Although the tensions regarding the extent of the LCCC authority have significantly hindered implementation, these tensions were compounded by larger debates over the very legitimacy of the Learning Community's existence. Indeed, the political coalition that endorsed (however reluctantly) the creation of the Learning Community has been fragile, and some would argue, unraveling, as suburban districts have continued to oppose—even endeavor to undo—many of its core provisions.

*Ongoing suburban resistance.* The most political opposition to the LC has come from suburban superintendents and school boards, many of whom openly opposed the Learning Community from its inception, despite initially consenting to the structure as a means of preserving boundaries. One superintendent spoke frankly of his district's opposition: "Philosophically we don't like the Learning Community anyway, and we won't make any bones about it. The school board's given me a goal to either change it . . . get rid of the governance structure or get rid of the whole thing because it's not working." Another suburban school board, known for its opposition to the LC, passed a 12-point resolution detailing its complaints with the core features of the Learning Community legislation.

One of the key complaints by suburban districts relates to the governance structure, which many believe unfairly excludes superintendents and school board members. Many suburban districts have pressured members of the state legislature to replace the current governance structure with school board members and/or superintendents. The 12-point resolution passed by the suburban school board, for example, states that it:

. . . supports legislation that replaces the current governance structure of the Learning Community with locally elected school boards and superintendents working together. Rationale: Locally elected school boards are in the best position to make decisions on tax levies, elementary learning centers, diversity plans, focus schools, and open enrollment.

This one-school-district, one-vote structure was proposed at the inception of the Learning Community, but it was rejected by legislators because it would violate the one-person/one-vote requirements of state and federal voting law. This requirement is particularly important given that the LCCC has taxing authority. As a result, these proposals have gotten little traction in the state legislature.



In some suburban school districts, opposition to the LC has become a political litmus test for candidates running for school board, because board candidates find it difficult to get elected unless they openly state their opposition to the LC. Several of the resistant suburban districts have even appointed governing council members to the LCCC who are vocal opponents of LC programs and features. We interviewed one such governance council member, who is also a member of his home (suburban) district's school board. In the interview, he described his doubts about the need for the Learning Community:

But at the end of the day, what are we spending time and money trying to achieve? That's my biggest question. Because from my perspective, I see nothing in this, nothing in this that will ever, ever really improve student achievement and get to the underlying issues that exist across the city . . . when it comes to student achievement and how we reach those students that need to improve. And money's not the answer to it.

Although the hostile governance council members are vocal in their opposition to decisions made by the LC, we have noted in several observations of LCCC meetings that such members tended to vote with the majority on issues when a vote is ultimately called. This leads us to conclude that much of the opposition is of a symbolic nature.

*Stakeholder exclusion and communication.* Perhaps the most significant ongoing political challenge vis-à-vis the Learning Community's implementation, and overall political support, has been the exclusion of superintendents from governance. As it currently stands, superintendents have no formal decision-making power on the LCCC council and no voting power. They serve on the "Superintendents Advisory Council," a purely advisory council to the larger governing board. This exclusion was largely intentional, given the animosity between the 11 superintendents at the time the legislation was created. As one former district administrator reflected at the time the legislation was created: "There was still, I think, in the legislature, the feeling that the school district administrations were not going to address the problems."

Legislators have set forth several proposals, at the behest of suburban districts, to hand over the governance structure of the Learning Community to superintendents, but thus far such efforts have failed to win enough support to pass. One state official notes that he is skeptical of the superintendents' efforts to involve themselves in governance given their prior animosities and what he sees as their inability to set aside their own district's interest for the sake of the region. He reflected:

I'm not convinced that we have the wrong governance structure, I'm not thoroughly convinced we have absolutely the right governance structure, but to go back to where we were, I don't think accomplishes anything. Just to erase this structure and have 11 superintendents say, 'Oh, we'll take care of it.' You didn't take care of it before, there's no reason . . . and I'm speaking for myself . . . I have no reason to believe that now . . . do I think that they might give it a better shot, yeah, for a while, for a while, but it won't be lasting.

Although the exclusion of superintendents from decision making was meant to facilitate the implementation of the LC's programs, this exclusion has come at a significant political cost in terms of public relations, as superintendents have both subtly and overtly taken steps to undermine LC programs. For example, some school districts have been accused of intentionally driving up transportation costs for open enrollment (costs that are reimbursed to districts by the state) by

hiring taxis to transport students, charges the districts vigorously deny. The media have picked up on the issue of high transportation costs, and the reporting has caused very negative publicity for the LC. As a state official noted, these cost issues have become contentious in a recession.

. . . You have a declining revenue picture, you've got people who are legitimately concerned about the money side of it, and then you also have those, again, who are looking for every crack to make this thing weaken, who . . . [say] 'Look, look, look, we told you so, it's gonna cost too much money,' and, you know, all of that comes together. And I've suggested to superintendents, 'If you want to come up with a different model, go ahead, just keep in mind what we're trying to achieve here.'

Another way in which some superintendents—and their boards—have quietly opposed the Learning Community is by refusing to share data to the LCCC for evaluation purposes. Many of these districts have cited FERPA (the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) as the rationale for withholding data, but others view it as a strategy of resistance. One LC observer noted:

Data collection has been the other issue, getting the data we need to see if we're doing our job, identifying troubled students and issues of where we can go in and help. School districts that like us don't give us data that we need, and school districts that don't like us don't give us any data because I believe that they honestly want us to fail, so if they don't give us the data, we can't get done what we need, and so we're not necessary.

One LC official noted that the reluctance to share data on the part of several suburban districts stemmed from past animosity:

I think frankly some of that reluctance was just hesitancy probably to work with the Learning Community, it's pretty well documented and, to some extent, continues. And, you know, that's just a product of the tremendous tension that was there for 2005 on. . . . There's some tensions and some lingering feelings from that point in time, there's no doubt about that.

As a group, given their exclusion from decision-making power and due to past animosities, superintendents have had very little input in the first several years of the Learning Community's existence. Another reason for their lack of input was the timing and location of the first Superintendents Advisory Council (SAC) meetings, which were originally held immediately preceding the 21-member public LCCC meetings. Such a setup put superintendents in a highly visible setting with little time to formulate input on decisions being considered by the LCCC.

A decision was later made to move the SAC meetings to a different day and location, which helped to take the meetings out of the spotlight, and to give the superintendents more time and space to discuss issues. As a result of this decision, one observer notes, the SAC is “. . . having much more productive conversations.” An illustration of this new cooperative spirit was a decision to join together in a plan to address truancy across the 11 districts along with the state's attorney's office. However, as one LCCC official notes, the superintendents will not weigh in on LCCC issues unless they reach a unanimous decision, which can hinder input:

[The superintendents] will not opine on anything unless it's unanimous, which means that they don't opine on everything that we would like them to because it's difficult to get unanimity on every issue. So, it would be nice if they did not feel that that was important, just because sometimes you just need guidance and you need to know, you know, maybe we can't please everybody, but if we can still do the best we can for most people, that would be a good thing to know.

Several superintendents we interviewed expressed optimism about the superintendent meetings, noting progress in terms of relationships. As one superintendent noted: “. . . From the beginning you have, I want to say, strange bedfellows ‘cause that’s really kind of what it is. People that had fought for a long time, people who don’t really have a lot in common, and now we’re all working together. The working together that it has spurned is the positive.” Another superintendent similarly noted that implementation takes time:

Until it becomes more of the standard, as opposed to this new thing, you’re still going to have boards of education, administration, resistant to getting along. Now, I would tell you that the 11 superintendents do get along, be that a shotgun marriage or not, you know, when you sit in rooms like this, and we’ve had . . . it’s hard to get angry at that guy or that gal across from you, which you’ve resented for 15–20 years because of something, you work it out. I would tell you there’s some awfully good people in leadership positions in this metro area that, you know, regardless if they were put into this by legislation or not, still want the best for kids. And it’s going to take time to get there.

*Resistance against redistribution.* Another significant tension within the Learning Community has been over redistribution of resources via the common levy, and of students via the integration plan. Indeed, as previous literature on regionalism illustrated (i.e., Vogel & Harrigan, 2007), the most difficult reforms to implement are those dealing with access, and the Learning Community is no different.

As stated previously, the common levy was designed to shift revenue from property-wealthy to property-poor districts. However, the levy worked somewhat unexpectedly in 2010 and 2011 due both to changes in the state funding formula and the economic recession. As a result of the interaction of these factors, some suburban districts projected to be “losers” under the levy gained funding and some of the projected “winners” lost funding. However, we found in our interviews that district resistance to the Learning Community has not been (to date) directly related to the amount of funding lost or gained under the common levy. Indeed, one of the most vocal opponents of the Learning Community is a suburban superintendent of a district that (unexpectedly) gained several million dollars, for several years in a row. By contrast, the superintendent of the central city school district, which lost money both years, is still supportive of the common levy structure because he projects that, over the long run, it will benefit the district. As a suburban superintendent observed of the unexpected outcomes from the levy this year:

I think the common levy . . . the common levy is supposed to shift resources from the suburban areas to the metropolitan areas. It hasn’t done so. In fact, it’s taken away from Omaha, and it’s shifted it to some of the other suburban areas. It was built on a growth model that didn’t grow, and yet OPS is still adamant they want to keep it because they think eventually it will.

Rural farmers in a property-wealthy farming area filed a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the common levy, and the LC executive committee made a decision in a closed (“executive”) session to use the LC lawyers (and thus LC funds) to fight the suit. At one full-council meeting, two LCCC board members who represented resistant suburbs challenged the decision to use LC resources to “protect” the levy. One of the two board members charged that the executive committee violated open meeting laws in making this decision, and asserted that a whole-council vote should have been taken on this issue. The tension over this issue was ultimately resolved in a nonpublic “executive session.” The common levy challenge was ultimately appealed to, and

decided by, the Nebraska State Supreme Court, which unanimously ruled in favor of letting the common levy stand.

There has also been tension within the LCCC regarding the diversity choice program. Although the program is technically in compliance with the law, there has not to date been a strong push for integration by the governance council members. Many LC members we interviewed were skeptical of the value of school-level diversity as a policy goal, and wondered whether the goal should instead be to improve the quality of neighborhood schools. One of the two African Americans on the board has been, in fact, openly hostile to integration, which as one observer notes let the others “off the hook” in supporting integration policies (even though integration is based on socioeconomic status, not race).

This weak support for integration on the part of the LCCC is arguably also related to the ambiguity of the legislation, which lacked any timelines, targets, or sanctions for failure to make progress on integration. Thus although the legislative goal is to achieve even distribution of poverty across all schools in the metro area, there are no consequences for the LC or for member districts for failure to do so.

*Pressure to demonstrate results.* The political support for the Learning Community hinges increasingly on the ability to demonstrate that LC programs have improved outcomes for students. As one state official notes of the perceived sentiments of the state legislature:

We’ll give this thing a chance, and . . . it’s like, our guns are loaded, but not cocked at this point, . . . and we’ll give it a chance to make it work. And I really believe that every year we . . . the Learning Community is alive, there is a better chance of it being more formalized, becoming more of an educational way of life, so to speak. I think some of the school districts are beginning to realize that their life hasn’t changed all that much after all. And we’ll see. There is some impatience on the part of [the legislature] that this isn’t working but we’ll give it another year, we’ll give it another two years. . . .

The LC officials are themselves very aware of this pressure. As one LC member observed, “I think [the legislature and community] want to know what difference it’s making, in terms of student achievement, or I think at least what’s being done to address that.” The major newspaper did conduct a survey about opinions on the LC, and one LCCC member noted that a majority of respondents were in favor of giving the LC more time to show results: “. . . The *Omaha World-Herald* came out with their survey which, you know, I think spoke well of giving us more time; two-thirds of the respondents to their survey were willing to give us more time to demonstrate value, so I think that was positive.” Yet the ability to show results will hinge on implementation of programming, which is still in its early stages.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The federated regionalist structure of the Learning Community has created both opportunities and challenges for regional equity across the 11 school districts in the Omaha metropolitan area. The ongoing political conflicts have resulted in the pursuit of relatively uncontroversial policies by the LCCC, such as the distribution of early learning funding. Issues of social equity, particularly integration, have been more difficult to address and have had less political support.

A key reason for this difficulty, as our data has shown, is that the political conflict that led to the creation of the Learning Community has continued, to some extent, throughout implementation (Malen, 2006). Efforts to resolve this early conflict through the creation of the Learning Community Coordinating Council—and circumventing the superintendents who were the source of much of the pre-LC conflict—were somewhat effective in terms of program implementation. Politically, however, such efforts were not as successful, because the suburban superintendents and their boards have been actively working to undermine the political support for the LC within their communities. Thus, although the governance council has effectively carried out many of its legislative mandates, the lack of political support is an ongoing threat.

This case study offers some key lessons for research and policy on regionalism. To explicate these insights, we revisit the key dimensions found to “matter” in the research literature, and discuss the ways in which our findings informed each.

### Goal and Mandates

This case study illustrated the clear importance of strong goals and clear mandates in the implementation of regional reform. The weak goals on integration in particular—designed in part to ensure passage of the legislation—have meant little real progress on that measure, and have arguably led to low political support for integration overall. The common levy’s provisions were clearer and as a result have survived legal challenge. Yet the political support for the levy is still weak.

### Allocation of Power

This case study affirmed the importance of attending to the balance of power in establishing regional reform. The lack of clear lines of authority within the legislation created a great deal of anxiety and confusion on the part of school districts and a lack of role clarity at the outset. This lack of clarity also created a political problem for the LC as suburban districts feared over-reach by a “super-board” that they felt usurped their authority.

### Governance

The structure of the governing body mattered a great deal in implementation: representation on the LCCC was elected and proportionate to the population, which meant that there was a relatively balanced representation across the metropolitan area. The LCCC itself set up internal structures of governance that were also relatively effective in facilitating the work of the council. Yet although the superintendents were intentionally excluded from decision making to ensure that the work of the LCC was not derailed by lingering animosities among superintendents, this lack of input came with some political costs. Although it is not clear that their inclusion in decision making alone would have reduced the opposition to the LC, such inclusion may have helped pave the way for more genuine collaboration.

## Community Stakeholders

Implementation was indeed, per the prior research literature on regionalism, shaped in important ways by the engagement, or lack thereof, of external community stakeholders. The coalition that enabled the enactment of the LC (including local media, legislators, community groups, and educators) has not actively mobilized to sustain support, and some of the coalition has actually turned against the LC. A lack of clear communication by the LCCC has created an opening for the LC to become a political symbol: an easy target and symbol of redistributive policies that suburbanites argue should be dismantled.

## Local Context

The local context—in terms of fragmentation, racial composition, and prior history of regional collaboration—also shaped implementation in key ways. The 11 district metro area is moderately fragmented, and the extreme diversity of districts’ demographics, size, and needs did make implementation more challenging. The prior history of regional collaboration within the metropolitan area—particularly the regional superintendents council—may have also helped, because such councils were often referred to as productive precursors to the Learning Community. However, this “prior experience” with cross-district cooperation also went the other way: others argued that the existing structures on cross-metro collaboration in education meant that the LC was not actually needed. Thus, the issue of “local context” is complicated and its effects on implementation are worthy of additional research. The policy context may have been equally important to implementation: one barrier to cooperation could, in theory, be state and federal accountability mandates, which may raise anxiety and stakes for school districts and thus generate greater opposition to redistributive policies. However, Nebraska has historically had “low-stakes” accountability, only recently adopting a statewide testing system, which may have facilitated implementation. Indeed, accountability was not raised in the interviews we conducted.

## Looking to the Future

The implementation experience of the Learning Community may open some new ways of thinking about “new localism” in education (Crowson & Goldring, 2009). Regional reforms such as the Learning Community seek to overcome the inequities that are created by an undue focus on (or undue respect for) the local. At the same time, federated regionalist reforms consciously seek to recognize and respect local differences and needs. Regional reforms such as the Learning Community also highlight an emerging effort to understand, and attend to, a notion of “local” that is in fact *regional*, rather than one determined by (what could be viewed as artificial) local district boundaries.

The future of the Learning Community remains, to date, somewhat uncertain. It has endured and survived myriad political and legal challenges. Despite its weaknesses, supporters maintain that this reform will lead to greater equity across the region. As one educator reflects: “The bottom line is, if you can put the structure in place, you at least preserve for the future the opportunity for that kind of legitimate conversation about the good of the entire community to be there. Our

fear is that we go back then to 11 separate segregated racially isolated school districts where that potential doesn't even exist. Here, at least, you have a prayer.”

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