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District Policy and Beginning Teachers: A Lens on Teacher Learning

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This analysis considers the role district policy environments play in the lives of beginning teachers. As part of a larger longitudinal study of teacher learning in the language arts, the authors analyzed the experiences of three first-year teachers in two contrasting school districts. This article assesses the role of policies concerning curriculum, professional development, and mentoring in teachers' opportunities in learning to teach language arts. The ways in which districts were organized had consequences for what these beginning teachers learned about teaching; district structures either encouraged or deflected conversations about teaching English. In addition, the authors found that districts served powerful roles as teacher educators. The tasks the districts assigned the teachers, the resources they provided, the learning environments they created, and the conversations they provoked proved to be consequential in shaping both teachers' concerns and their opportunities for learning about teaching language arts.

Keywords: district policy, mentoring, new teachers

AS NEW TEACHERS enter the classroom, some researchers suggest that they suffer from myopia, focusing primarily on concerns about their own competency as teachers and the immediacy of classroom management (Fuller, 1969; Kagan, 1992). Their vision is fixed, understandably, on the contexts closest at hand. From this perspective, the district looms distantly on the horizon, barely in view once the ink has dried on the new teacher's contract. Yet, data from our longitudinal study of beginning teachers suggest that districts can and do play a key role in focusing and shaping the concerns of new teachers and in providing opportunities for professional learning. New teachers are still in the midst of learning how to teach, and the experiences they have in their early years can affect the trajectory of their future learning (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Directly as well as indirectly, district policies help beginning teachers learn what to worry about and

how to get help. In this sense, such policies help shape what and how beginning teachers learn about teaching.

In the present analysis, we focus on the experiences of three first-year teachers to see what role the policies of two medium-sized, Washington State suburban districts may have played in shaping the concerns they had as new teachers. Both of the districts we studied could be considered reform-active districts in that they are actively attempting to promote changes aimed at the classroom. At the time of our study, both districts also were being influenced by state reforms, including a set of curriculum frameworks and statewide assessments, conducted during Grades 4, 7, and 10, designed to determine whether students are meeting standards. In 2008, an accountability measure will be instituted that will tie high school graduation to passing scores on state assessments. Despite these commonalities, the districts differed

in their policies regarding curriculum, professional development, and mentoring, differences that ultimately affected the experiences of the new teachers we followed.

Our study set out to examine the role that policy environments play in the lives of beginning teachers. For example, how do policies at the district level affect first-year teachers' instructional and curricular decisions and classroom practice? What role do district policies play in shaping the learning opportunities of beginning teachers? The questions driving this study located it at the intersection of two distinct literatures: that on beginning teachers and that on the relationship between policy and practice. These literatures generally involve different units of analysis (the classroom teacher vs. the policy environment) and different theoretical lenses. Increasingly, however, studies of policy and practice are looking at the interplay between the policy environment and classrooms (e.g., Cohen, 1990; D'Amico & Stein, 2002; *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Volume 12, Number 3, 1990; Jennings, 1996; Spillane & Jennings, 1997).

Literature on beginning teachers documents the challenges they face as they embark upon their professional careers (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Veenman, 1984; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). New teachers struggle with constructing approaches to classroom management, images of themselves as teachers, ideas about students, and ways of teaching specific subject matter (cf. Borko & Putnam, 1996). Beginning teachers also struggle with their knowledge of the subjects they teach and their ability to take that knowledge and represent it in ways that are comprehensible to students (e.g., Borko & Putnam, 1996; McDiarmid, Ball, & Anderson, 1989; Wilson, Shulman, & Richert, 1987). In addition to discovering what it means to teach their subject matter, beginning teachers face other difficulties as they enter the classroom. Fuller (1969) concluded that new teachers are initially concerned about issues related to themselves and their own adequacy. In particular, these teachers worry about classroom control, their own competence as teachers, and how they might fit into the overall school structure. In an early review of the literature, Veenman (1984) surveyed the problems experienced by new teachers and found concerns about classroom management to be most prevalent.

Most important, beginning teachers are still in the beginning stages of learning to teach; much of what they learn about teaching will depend upon their experiences in classrooms and their opportunities to continue to learn—about subject matter, about students, and about teaching (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). New teachers thus have a different relationship to district policies than do experienced teachers; with regard to beginning teachers, the problem for policymakers is not how to change teachers' practices but rather how to provide the kinds of supports beginning teachers may need as they construct their practice. Because beginning teachers are still in the process of learning to teach, districts may have more opportunity to influence their developing practice through a variety of policies and structures.

Much of this research has focused on individual teachers: their knowledge, beliefs, preparation, worries, and dispositions. Relatively little attention has been focused on the contexts in which these beginning teachers work and how these contexts shape their beliefs, concerns, practice, and opportunities for learning. Teachers work in multiple, embedded contexts—including state, district, school, and departmental contexts—that affect their work (Talbert & McLaughlin, 1993). Because these contexts interact, some researchers have begun to focus less on individual policies and more on the larger policy environment, which includes an assortment of policies initiated in different contexts (Knapp & McLaughlin, 1999). Teachers may experience the impact of these policies as an array more than as distinct, individual policies. Moreover, as policies converge in teachers' working lives, it is possible they will interact with one another in ways that are consequential for teachers' practice, sometimes mutually reinforcing one another and at other times frustrating one another (Knapp, Bamberg, Ferguson, & Hill, 1998). Working within the context of a large number of teaching-related policies introduces enormous challenges, particularly for beginning teachers.

Our study focused particularly on districts' role in this complex policy environment. While studies of educational change have largely ignored districts—often casting them as the problem rather than as a lever for reform—a number of researchers believe that districts can play a pivotal role in facilitating the implementation

of state policies (Knapp & McLaughlin, 1999; Spillane, 1994). Districts can interpret state and district policies for teachers and provide opportunities for teachers to learn about and enact such policies. Fullan (1994) illustrated the importance of two-way interactions in which top-down mandates are coordinated with bottom-up initiatives. The district, he argued, can play an important role in this process of coordination. Other researchers have documented the powerful impact district administrators can have on the way policy is both interpreted and implemented at the local level (Knapp, Shields, & Padilla, 1995; Spillane, 1994). If policy itself is a curriculum that must be learned, opportunities for learning new policies must be a part of the process of policy enactment (Cohen & Barnes, 1993). The school district represents one site where opportunities for learning about new policies might exist. In fact, reformers are paying more attention to the importance of educating district leaders about new policies as part of any reform effort (Nelson, 1999; Spillane & Thompson, 1997).

Also, our study was situated in the context of a specific type of subject matter: the language arts. We believe that subject matter represents a critical variable in looking at the relationship between policy and practice, yet few studies have directly addressed subject matter or explored how it may influence policy enactment (McDiarmid, 1999; Valencia & Wixson, 2000). While many policies regarding teaching are implicitly generic, all policies aimed at classroom teaching are played out in the crucible of specific subject matter areas. The field of language arts represents a messy and complex subject area encompassing a number of distinct disciplines in a marriage of convenience (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1994). Because of historical disagreements over the very definition of subject matter (Applebee, 1974; Elbow, 1990; Scholes, 1998), those attempting to implement policies directed at the language arts may unwittingly find themselves in the midst of an internecine warfare; policies that address which literature should be included in the curriculum or how writing should be taught become part of a pre-existing battle over the very definition of the subject. In understanding the intersection of policy and practice, the subject matters (Price & Ball, 1997; Stodolsky, 1988).

Description of Study

As part of a longitudinal study of teacher learning in the language arts, we followed 10 teachers from their final year of teacher education into their first 3 years of teaching. These teachers all graduated from the same master's-level teacher education program and volunteered to participate in the study. Five taught elementary school, two taught middle school, and three taught high school. Over a period of 4 years, we interviewed these teachers about their teaching. During their year of teacher education, we interviewed them, both individually and in groups, on at least five occasions and observed them teach at least three times during their student teaching experiences. These interviews focused particularly on what they were learning in teacher education regarding the teaching of English, along with the strategies or ideas they found particularly powerful. The interviews following observations focused on their perceptions of the lessons, the sources of their ideas, and the resources used in their teaching. When these teachers entered the workplace, we went with them. We continued to interview them five times a year during their first 2 years of teaching and observed them teaching in their classrooms at least five times a year.

In this article, we focus specifically on three secondary teachers and their first year of teaching in two different districts. We selected these particular teachers because they worked in two districts that were similar demographically but had contrasting policies; one of the districts employed two of our participants, which gave us an opportunity to look at the interaction of district, school, and grade level. In the sections to follow, we provide details regarding data collection and analysis.

Data Collection

Teachers

We observed the teachers at three points throughout the year: near the beginning, in the middle, and near the end. (During the time the teachers were student teaching, our three observations were spread across their student teaching semester rather than across a full year.) Each time we observed, we focused on two different classes the teacher was teaching (e.g., one ninth-grade English class and one creative writing class). Our first observation of the year involved a 1-day visit, whereas the second and third ob-

servations spanned 2 days of instruction for each of the two classes we were following. During observations, we took extensive field notes and collected copies of any curriculum materials or resources the teacher was using.

Before each observation, we spoke with the teacher about what we would be observing, asking questions about what the class had been doing prior to our visit, what the teacher had planned for the days we would be observing, and what the goals were. After the observations, we conducted extensive post-observation interviews with the teachers, during which we asked questions about what we had seen and the teachers' thinking behind what they had done; we also asked questions about the resources we saw the teachers using, where they had acquired these resources, and where their ideas for what they were doing had come from.

In addition to these classroom observations and related interviews, we interviewed the teachers independently. Again, interviews occurred at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. While these interviews also focused on the classroom experiences of the teachers, we stepped back from the classroom to some degree, asking questions about what was happening at the school and district levels, what role the state reform played in their work as teachers, and what they had learned over the course of the year (in the end-of-year interview, for example), as well as questions based on themes or topics we had identified for particular teachers. To further understand the experiences of and professional contexts for these individual teachers, we interviewed people who worked in close proximity to our participants: department chairs, mentor teachers, and school principals. We also conducted group interviews on a yearly basis in which all of the participants were brought together to talk about their experiences. Again, as with the individual interviews, the group interviews ranged in their focus, from more general discussions about how things were going and what the teachers were doing in their classrooms to specific tasks we had designed to elicit their thinking in regard to certain issues.

District and district policies

During their first year of teaching, we extended our investigation to include in-depth study of the district policies teachers encoun-

tered. We selected the two districts described in this article because while both were considered "reform oriented," they represented interesting contrasts in terms of their approaches to reform, curriculum, and professional development. In these districts, we interviewed language arts coordinators, district administrators who oversaw professional development and mentoring programs, and, ultimately, assistant superintendents and superintendents as well. Interviews included a common set of questions regarding views about language arts curriculum and instruction as well as district policies and practices regarding professional development, mentoring, and curriculum (see Table 1 for a complete list of data sources).

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved an iterative process. All of the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. We summarized each interview and each observation for all participants in this study and wrote accompanying detailed analytic memos. We conducted extensive analyses of the individual teachers and then conducted cross-case analyses looking for both commonalities and differences among the teachers with regard to responses to district policies. We coded all of the interview and observation data for beginning teachers, looking for any reference to district policies, particularly policies related to curriculum, professional development, mentoring, and state reform; for example, when one teacher referred to district curriculum frameworks in an interview, we included that as evidence of her awareness of district policy. If teachers mentioned being involved in professional development activities, we attempted to ascertain whether these activities were supported by the district; if so, we included them as evidence of how district policies affected beginning teachers. We also analyzed the data systematically for any references to mentors, either formal or informal, and again attempted to trace any relationships to district policy.

In analyzing the district data we had collected, we first looked at the district as a policy system, trying to understand the various policies districts had in place regarding curriculum, mentoring, and interpretation of state reforms and how these various policies interacted. In addition to analyzing district documents, we analyzed the inter-

TABLE 1
Study Data Sources

Data source	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Interviews with beginning teachers	5 interviews per teacher 1 group interview	5 interviews per teacher 2 group interviews	5 interviews per teacher 2 group interviews	
Interviews with school and district administrators		Interviews with principals, department chairs, mentors	Interviews with superintendent, administrators in charge of curriculum and professional development	
Data on teacher education program	Interviews with faculty, supervisors, and cooperating teachers			
Classroom observations	5 days of observation of student teaching	3 observation cycles Observations of 5–6 days of teaching	3 observation cycles Observations of 5–6 days of teaching	3 observation cycles Observations of 5–6 days of teaching

views conducted with district administrators to ascertain their particular perspectives on district policy and looked across interviews to gain a sense of the coherence of these perspectives within the district. We also analyzed perspectives on language arts instruction across district administrators, principals, mentors, and teachers, looking for both congruence and dissonance among these perspectives.

During our data analysis, we sought to triangulate findings across the multiple data sources for this study. Because the beginning teachers were often unaware of whether policies originated from their school, the district, or the state, we always double checked their perception of the provenance of a particular policy with district interviews and documents. We also checked district descriptions of mentoring policies against the mentoring our teachers reported receiving.

Theoretical Framework

The present study employed a theoretical framework informed by sociocultural theory (Engestrom, 1999; Lave, 1993; Wertsch, 1981).¹ From this perspective, our unit of analysis was neither the individual teachers nor the individ-

ual districts. Rather, we focused on individuals acting in particular settings that had been shaped by historical forces. From this viewpoint, it is impossible to divorce individuals from the contexts in which they work. Sociocultural theory focuses attention on the various tools available in different settings and how people's activity in particular settings is shaped by these tools. For our purposes, these tools included material objects, such as curriculum guides or textbooks, as well as language and concepts used to talk about teaching. A textbook is a tool that can mediate teachers' actions; however, a concept, such as instructional scaffolding, can also serve as a tool.

Using the perspective of sociocultural theory allows for a view of the district as a whole as well as of the experiences of individual teachers. In this sense, our study took advantage of both bottom-up and top-down perspectives, looking up from the classroom and down from the district level to assess the influence of district policies on beginning teachers. Our examination of the district policy environment as a whole illuminated the various policies, both explicit and implicit, these beginning teachers encountered as they

learned to teach English. Our simultaneous look at the individual teachers' perspectives allowed us to explore how the larger policy environment shapes new teachers' understanding of the teaching of language arts.

Sociocultural theory also directed our attention to relationships among the individual, the school, and the larger community or district (Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacasa, & Goldsmith, 1995). Part of our analysis assessed how these different levels were connected to, or disconnected from, individual experiences. We looked for both continuities and discontinuities among the different settings of classroom, school, and district (Engstrom, 1999) that would help us understand the relationship between districts and classrooms. Finally, because activity theory in particular reminds us of the historical dimensions of any given setting, we paid particular attention to the histories of these districts and how these histories informed both current policies and teachers' responses to them.

Rather than providing specific categories for data analysis, this theoretical framework more broadly informed how we both collected and analyzed data. For example, as suggested, our analyses attempted to account for discontinuities as well as continuities among classroom, school, and district practices. We looked at the structures and activities that linked, or failed to link, these different settings. We also attempted to keep the multiple levels of individual, school, and district in view as we collected and analyzed our data.

The Settings and Teachers: A Snapshot

Before we describe the experiences of the teachers, we provide a brief overview of the state context and the main concerns and characteristics of the districts, along with an introduction to the teachers (see Table 2). Like most states, Washington has embraced standards-based reform. Broad curriculum frameworks known as Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) indicate what students should know and be able to do in core subject areas, with specific benchmarks having been developed for reading, writing, communication, and math in Grades 4, 7, and 10. At these grade levels, students take the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), a statewide assessment aligned with the EALRs. School scores on the WASL are published in local newspapers, generating a great deal of attention

and discussion. Although there are no yet sanctions attached to student performance on these tests, the plan is to tie graduation to 10th-grade test performance by 2008. The impending pressure of graduation requirements, together with the high visibility of test results at the earlier grades, has resulted in state standards and assessments being a focus of discussion in many school districts. At the time of this study, the 4th-grade language arts assessment had been in place for several years, and the 7th-grade assessment, although still voluntary, was being administered in most of the districts throughout the state.

Both of the districts examined in this study administered the WASL in language arts. Both also had exhibited a commitment to site-based management in the past decade but were now in the process of moving toward greater centralization. The districts were increasingly taking back areas that in the past had been left to the individual schools, including decisions about mentoring and curriculum. The snapshots of the districts that follow capture a great deal of this flux, both in regard to issues of centralization and in regard to state reforms.²

Prospect Harbor: Frank and Nancy

Prospect Harbor³ served 15,000 students in 16 elementary schools, 8 middle schools, and 6 high schools. At the time of our study, Prospect Harbor was definitely a district in transition. In recent years, the district had become increasingly culturally diverse, and its mission statement explicitly confirmed the district's commitment to meeting the individual learning needs of a diverse student population. A new superintendent had arrived a few years before, and his charismatic personality, combined with the changes he initiated, made him a strongly felt presence in the district. Under the auspices of this new superintendent, and in keeping with the district's move from site-based management to a more centralized form of decision making, Prospect Harbor was in the midst of a major effort to adopt new materials and align the curriculum across schools and grades.

Frank was a middle school teacher in Prospect Harbor. He was hired because he was able to teach both foreign language and language arts; his first-year teaching schedule included these two subjects as well as social studies, an elective in creative writing for the first half of the

TABLE 2
District Contexts

Context	Prospect Harbor	Waterside
Demographics	10,000 students 11 elementary, 2 middle, 2 high schools 75% Caucasian 25% students of color	15,000 students 16 elementary, 8 middle, 2 high schools 71% Caucasian 29% students of color
Policy environment	Curriculum alignment and adoption of new curriculum	Creating district frameworks and addressing state reform
Participants	Nancy: 10th- & 11th-grade language arts Frank: 7th-grade language arts, social studies, foreign language	Allison: 7th-grade language arts

year, and a newspaper class during the second half. Frank’s decision to teach language arts grew out of his own interest in writing. As a student in elementary and high school, he loved writing and wrote long science fiction or fantasy stories. In college, he majored in creative writing and avoided literature classes to the extent he was able. Frank saw language as a powerful tool, and one of his main goals in teaching was to help students learn to understand and appreciate language, its power, and different ways to use it.

With an undergraduate major in English and a minor in psychology, Nancy was hired to teach both of these subjects at a high school in Prospect Harbor. During her first year of teaching, she taught three sections of 10th-grade English (a class that focused primarily on writing), an American literature class, and a psychology class. As a high school student, Nancy had had several teachers who played an important role in developing her positive attitude about learning and about English in particular. As a result, she believed it was essential to establish personal connections and good relationships with her students in order for learning to really happen. Nancy became involved in several extracurricular activities at the school and, in general, showed a great deal of commitment to her students.

Prospect Harbor was in the midst of a new curriculum adoption and alignment process when Frank and Nancy were hired. Consequently, while both teachers entered situations in which they were left almost entirely to their own devices in terms of what to teach, there was a great deal

of talk about both the lack of a curriculum and the impending arrival of mandated curricular resources and guidelines.

Waterside: Allison

Waterside had 10,000 students in 11 elementary schools, 2 middle schools, and 2 high schools. The district’s stated mission was to engage all students in learning the academic and work-life skills needed to achieve their individual potential. At the time of our study, this district was also in transition, motivated in large part by the state reform. The Waterside district was actively trying to help teachers learn how to connect their own curriculum and instruction to the state standards and assessments. The district was also becoming more centralized. For example, a “district assessment team,” created several years earlier, received training in the area of assessment issues in general and the WASL in particular. Team members were then responsible for training others in the district.

Allison was primarily a seventh-grade language arts teacher, although she also taught a section of foreign language. In college, her main interest was writing, and although she started out majoring in journalism she eventually switched to English. Allison’s background and interest in writing fit well with Waterside’s focus on writing. She had good rapport with her students and very much wanted language arts to be fun and interesting for them.

The Waterside district invested tremendous resources in creating its own version of the state standards. This involved teachers from the district working together to rewrite the state stan-

dards and, in the process, make them more specific. All over the district, people worked hard to make sense of what they heard from the state; in particular, they tried to understand what the state-level assessments meant for students, teachers, and classroom practice. Allison's department chair was actively engaged in the process of rewriting the district standards. In spite of the district's shift toward greater centralization, the district continued to leave curricular decisions and implementation in the hands of schools and teachers.

In the next section, we look from the classroom up, analyzing the experiences of these three teachers and the challenges they faced in their first year of teaching. In a later section, we examine what the district offered in terms of policies regarding curriculum, mentoring, and professional development and the types of learning opportunities these policies created. Finally, we bring together the bottom-up and top-down perspectives in an attempt to make sense of how district policies affected the experiences and learning opportunities of these first-year teachers.

Views From the Classroom: What Teachers Experienced

Finding Curriculum

One of the first dilemmas the beginning teachers faced was deciding what to teach and how to structure their curriculum, hardly a trivial task in the language arts. These teachers encountered different resources and different curriculum guidelines. Frank, who taught in a Prospect Harbor middle school, experienced a great deal of anxiety about what he should be teaching in his language arts classes. He commented about his language arts/social studies block:

And the language arts/social studies is very loose. It sort of has some guidelines you need to sort of touch on this kind of stuff, but otherwise it's very nebulous, which is sort of creative freedom from the point of view of a teacher and also very hard from the point of view of a new teacher who doesn't have anything to sort of step into and pick up and use. (April 30, 1998)

Here Frank articulates the dilemma caused by the "looseness" of the curriculum; he saw the potential for creativity, but as a new teacher he felt un-

able to take advantage of this freedom. Instead, he commented, "I've been thrashing around trying to find out what I'm doing all the time. . . . We're not given a lockstep syllabus or curriculum, we aren't given a textbook which we have to teach, nothing of that sort." Frank bemoaned the general lack of tools available for structuring his language arts curriculum.

In seeking curricular guidance, Frank indicated that there were goals for students' writing, "set by the school rather than the district." He also knew of three school-wide events in which his students would participate: Readers Theater, the Night of the Notables, and Fiesta Day. Other than preparing his students for these events, he seemed to have little sense of what he should be teaching. Thus, the school provided a limited number of conceptual tools, in terms of goals for writing, as well as some concrete activities that might inform his practice.

Because Frank had so little guidance in terms of language arts and because he was also responsible for teaching social studies to his students, he allowed social studies to become the driving force behind his language arts/social studies curriculum. In part, his decision reflected the fact that the social studies department was further along than the language arts department in the process of adopting new curriculum materials; in this sense, social studies provided him with more tools to use in his teaching. In addition, Frank liked the social studies textbook being piloted; it provided him with fairly concrete guidance on what to teach and ideas about how to teach as well. Frank was also able to draw on his own international experiences, along with other resources he knew of, in considering the curriculum for his social studies classes. "I like doing the culture stuff and I feel that I seem to be good at putting together the different components, making it more than a text-based curriculum." He was able to find guest speakers from different countries, bring in items from grocery stores that specialized in the foods of the countries his students were studying, and call on the Ethnic Heritage Council for support. Frank found no such comparable resources for language arts. In comparing teaching social studies and foreign languages with teaching language arts, he commented, "Language arts has got to be one of the most difficult subjects to teach" (April 30, 1998).

Because the middle school was organized into teams rather than subject matter departments, Frank did not have colleagues close by with whom to consult about language arts. However, he did teach in a wing of the school that was populated by social studies teachers, providing him with access to more interactions around the social studies curriculum; in this instance, the spatial organization of the school provided him with greater access to resources in social studies.

Teaching in the same district but at a high school, Nancy also experienced frustration as she tried to decide what to teach. She believed that the American literature curriculum presented great challenges because it was “an open-ended curriculum.” She commented further on the difficulties associated with the lack of a specific curriculum:

They say teach American lit, these are the novels we usually teach, go for it, and you have no idea where to start. You have no reference to look back on, especially if you didn't do anything like that in your student teaching experience, so you just feel overwhelmed and not quite sure where to start. It's very frustrating. (October 24, 1997)

Nancy added, “It would have been nice if the English department as a whole had a set curriculum so you knew what you were supposed to be teaching.” Nancy looked for departmental leadership and the assistance of colleagues for guidance in determining what the curriculum should be. Yet, when describing her own goals for literature instruction, Nancy openly acknowledged that her goals were “vague.”

Nancy's three English 10 sections had a series of mandatory “core assignments.” Two teachers in Nancy's department developed these assignments with the intention of building and assessing 10th-grade students' writing abilities. These core assignments included a memory paper, a research paper, and a writer's notebook. While the assignments were built into the English 10 curricular mandates, Nancy found them problematic for several reasons. First, she did not agree with the “formulaic” nature of the assignments and described them as “putting kids in a box.” In addition, despite the clarity in assignments, Nancy found the curriculum, with its focus on specific writing projects, quite frustrating: “The curriculum is based around these projects and that's just what you do. The cur-

riculum does not list goals and objectives for a class; a curriculum just lists projects that you do” (October 24, 1997).

Under the leadership of a new superintendent, the Prospect Harbor School District sought to align curriculum content across all schools. As it pertained to secondary English, such an alignment would mandate the same course content and core texts across the district. Despite her desire for curricular guidance, Nancy had problems with the proposed changes. “They want us to dump Cisneros's *House on Mango Street* for *The Scarlet Letter*” (April 20, 1998). She believed a prescribed curriculum of “dead White guys” would least benefit the minority population at her school; for this reason, she felt that district-wide decisions about texts were not appropriate. Her students, she believed, would not read the prescribed works because “they want to read [about] people they can associate with, they can understand.” In this instance, the history of school-based decision making within this district came into direct conflict with the new curricular policies.

Allison's experience with curriculum in Waterside was markedly different from that of Frank and Nancy in Prospect Harbor. Allison taught seventh grade in the Waterside district, and the language arts curriculum at her school was open-ended as the curricula Frank and Nancy encountered. However, unlike Frank and Nancy, Allison relished the freedom to create her own curriculum. There was a set of textbooks available to her and a range of novels “articulated” for seventh grade by the district, but there was no formal curriculum she needed to teach. Drawing on resources from the school, department members, resource books, and the Internet, Allison developed a number of curriculum units in her first year. She shared these units with other members of her department and also borrowed units from colleagues and elaborated upon them for her own purposes. She remarked:

We have a folder of grammar things, we have a folder for each novel that we teach at seventh and eighth grade, and we're trying to just put all of our stuff together too so that we can have a compilation put together for any new teachers who come in. (April 30, 1999)

There was an atmosphere of collaboration in the department, as well as a desire to provide new teachers with the curricular resources they often

so desperately need. The materials provided to Allison were the practical tools she needed for teaching across the different components of the language arts.

While Allison had a great deal of freedom in terms of curricular choices—a freedom she appreciated—she recognized that it was incumbent upon her to teach toward the district and state curriculum frameworks. She commented on her experience working in the Waterside district and her increased awareness of the importance of the state reforms. “The important stuff though didn’t really come through as much until I started working here because this building really directs everything around the essential learnings; the curriculum is all built around the essential learnings” (April 30, 1999). In fact, one of Allison’s major concerns in developing her own curriculum was meeting the district and state frameworks. The EALRs, which sat in fat binders on a shelf in her classroom, became one of the tools she consulted most frequently to ensure that her curriculum was meeting both district and state goals for students.

Addressing State Reform Efforts

All of these first-year teachers were aware, to some degree, of the state frameworks for student learning. Their first encounter with these documents was during their teacher education program, where they read and discussed them in their coursework. Yet, the degree to which these frameworks figured in their lives varied significantly once they began their first year of teaching.

Allison talked at some length about her role in addressing the EALRs in her classroom. She was acutely aware not only of the state reform efforts but also of her district’s investment in those efforts. While she enjoyed her curricular freedom, she also realized that there were larger goals and objectives that must guide her curriculum: “The curriculum is all built around the essential learnings.” Her sense of the importance of these goals and objectives came from her district rather than from the state. Her district chose to rewrite the state standards for the district, making them more specific and appropriate for the district’s own needs, weaving in references to specific district curricula, and filling in specific benchmarks for each grade. Allison remarked that “everyone is always talking about the [district version of the state standards] now, and

how they look as compared with the state essential learnings” (April 30, 1999).

The district’s focus was not only on the necessary link between teachers’ curriculum and the state standards for student learning, but also on issues of assessment. Allison had in her possession a variety of documents from the state that addressed the relationship between several different policy pieces, including the EALRs (curriculum standards) and samples of the state-level assessments (WASL). Allison was as familiar with the state assessment test as she was with the learning standards. Toward the end of her first year of teaching, Allison described the emphasis on the test and teachers’ work with it:

It seemed like we were just WASLed out, we were constantly talking about the WASL and pulling out our WASL notebooks and doing practice tests in our staff meetings and familiarizing ourselves with the WASL, and it was just WASL WASL WASL for six months. (April 30, 1999)

On the basis of her student teaching experience in Waterside, Nancy also considered herself “quite fluent” with the EALRs. Despite her familiarity with the reforms, Nancy believed that the state frameworks did not affect what she did in the classroom during her first year in the Prospect Harbor district. She believed that Prospect Harbor was at least 2 years behind Waterside in designing a curriculum that addressed the state frameworks. She noted, “I don’t think half the teachers know what they are.” She did, however, believe the EALRs would eventually influence what she does in the classroom simply because of the nature of reform in her district. Nancy rarely referred to either the state frameworks or assessments unless prompted, and there was little evidence that she saw either as an influence on her teaching.

Of the three teachers taking part in our study, Frank was the most vague about what the state reform might mean for his classroom. We happened to interview him during the time that the seventh-grade WASL test was being administered at his school. While his students had indeed taken the test, it was clear that preparing them for it had not been a big priority for Frank. He said that “somewhere along the line” someone had handed him overheads of sample questions, and he had briefly looked at them with his students.

However, he willingly acknowledged that the test and the learning standards were among the furthest things from his mind. When asked about the standards, he replied, “Yeah, I know they’re there. I’ll look at those in the summer. When we get there. Whatever” (April 30, 1998).

Frank believed that his difficult schedule and the lack of a curriculum forced him to make certain sacrifices. Although he knew that it was important for him to become more informed about the WASL, he was unable to summon the time or energy during his first year of teaching. “It’s the sort of thing that if I had the time that I wanted and was a good teacher, I would look it over and professionally assess it as being relevant or accurate and all that, but I haven’t even read the questions. I don’t know what the kids are answering.” Foremost in Frank’s mind were the absence of a curriculum and his search for curriculum materials, rather than the presence of state reform and accompanying standards and assessments.

While Frank himself chose to assign low priority to the WASL, he also indicated that he did not feel any pressure from the school or district to emphasize the WASL or the EALRs. He acknowledged that there was a sense that teachers should “try and keep those test scores up,” but said that “they don’t lean on us or anything like that.” He recollected no workshops, meetings, or structured efforts to familiarize teachers with the state standards and assessment. This lack of explicit focus on the state reform allowed the reform to recede far into the background in Frank’s first year of teaching.

Getting Help

As first-year teachers, there was much that our participants needed to learn and relatively little time in which to learn it. As a result, they became strategic in regard to obtaining help, using the resources available to them to get the help they perceived needing the most.

Allison had access to a number of resources; she had a supportive department and department chair and a designated mentor teacher within the department. As part of Waterside’s mentoring program, Allison and her mentor went to a district-wide meeting at the beginning of the year. At this time, they were introduced to, among other elements, the district curriculum frameworks and the predictable ups and downs of the first

year of teaching. Although Allison and her mentor did not share a common planning period, making it difficult for them to meet on a regular basis, Allison did borrow materials and ideas from her mentor.

For example, her mentor had tried literature circles with her eighth-grade class, a strategy Allison subsequently adapted for her classroom. Allison’s department chair also played an active role in her life. She sent Allison to a number of district workshops, including workshops on the 6 Traits writing assessments,⁴ which Allison used extensively in her classroom. Throughout her first year, Allison spoke frequently of the exchanging of materials that occurred in her department. When Allison had a question or concern about teaching language arts, help was close at hand. The department had strong norms of collegiality (e.g., Little, 1982) and a desire to support its beginning teachers.

Frank, in contrast, often felt lost in seeking the curricular help he desperately wanted. The lack of curriculum or any firm guidelines about what he should be teaching was certainly the most prominent problem he faced. Frank, however, had trouble finding other teachers to whom he could turn for advice about the curriculum. His school was organized into cross-subject grade-level teams rather than subject matter departments, in accordance with the middle school philosophy. As a result, he was more likely to come in contact with other seventh-grade teachers than with other language arts teachers. Other circumstances conspired against Frank as well. For example, because most of the language arts teachers in his school were also new, Frank did not see them as potential resources.

In fact, Frank was eager and willing to have a mentor; however, because the district was in the process of starting a new system for mentoring, Frank had no formal mentor until November. Early on, he lamented the lack of a mentor and talked about the old system for mentoring at his school, which would have allowed him to develop a mentoring relationship with a good language arts teacher in his building. Needless to say, Frank was delighted when the program finally did get up and running, and he developed a good relationship with the mentor assigned to him. He saw her once every few weeks and found her “really easy to talk to, very supportive, laid back. Personality-wise, we click great” (April 30, 1998). He looked to her for help in finding curriculum

resources and as a supportive person with whom he could voice his frustrations. Unfortunately, his mentor teacher was not a language arts teacher. Under the district's new system, she was responsible for mentoring all of the new middle school teachers in the district, across all subject areas. As a result, she was not able to give him the kind of curricular guidance he sought.

As was true of Frank, Nancy was also assigned a grade-level mentor several months into the school year. Her mentor, Henry Tracy, a former math teacher, occasionally visited and observed Nancy and another first-year teacher in her department. He held meetings with the district-wide cohort of new teachers every 3 weeks. These meetings were informal in nature and were often held over drinks. Nancy noted how the mentor did not come to visit her school very often because he believed she and her colleague were "doing fine." While Nancy described him as "supportive," she also acknowledged that conversations with Henry centered on classroom management rather than subject matter issues. For Nancy, the mentoring relationship constituted a safe haven to vent and share her frustrations regarding the politics of teaching. As in Frank's case, her mentor was not necessarily a source of help in regard to the curriculum dilemmas she faced in language arts.

Views From the District: What the District Provided

We now turn to a view from the top and consider what the districts provided in terms of curricular policy and learning opportunities for first-year teachers. These districts varied in terms of formal policies regarding curriculum, responses to state reform, and policies for professional development and mentoring. They also differed in regard to how these policies were enacted and how they were communicated to teachers.

Curriculum Policy

The districts varied in the degree to which they had well-specified curriculum materials for language arts. During the preceding decade, operating under site-based management, both districts had left specific curricular decisions largely to individual schools and departments. However, when Prospect Harbor hired a new superintendent, he was dismayed to discover the lack of curriculum coordination across the district. He

made it one of his first goals to implement a district-wide curriculum for all subjects and grade levels. One of his favorite comments, according to our participants, was "We will tell you what to teach, but not how to teach it." In the past, Prospect Harbor had had a number of curriculum specialists; when site-based management was established, however, most of these positions were eliminated as schools took responsibility for curricular decision making. As part of his focus on curriculum, the superintendent hired many new curriculum specialists whose job it was to talk with teachers and oversee the process of curriculum adoption. In language arts, the superintendent hired a certificated teacher from outside the district. Her job was to assist in the development of a district-wide language arts curriculum for Grades 6 through 12. Not only was she new to the district, but her role represented a dramatic departure from past practices.

Nancy and Frank began teaching in Prospect Harbor in the midst of this transition. There was a great deal of discussion and debate district wide about the current lack of curriculum and the advent of the new curriculum. During Frank's first year of teaching, teachers were piloting a new social studies textbook with the aim of making a district-wide purchase at the end of the year. At both the middle school and the high school level, district language arts committees met with the curriculum specialist to decide on common course titles, course sequences, and required and recommended textbooks and novels to be taught at each grade level.

In contrast, despite its increasingly centralized focus, Waterside, Allison's district, still left specific curricular decisions up to the schools. They focused on developing a specific district version of the state essential learning requirements and benchmarks at each grade level intended to guide teachers' curriculum decisions. There was also a district policy of articulation of texts for language arts: A district committee recommended certain texts for specific grade levels to prevent teachers at different grade levels from assigning texts students had already read. Teachers could submit new texts for articulation at any point. The district had also invested in two elementary and middle school curricular programs: 6 + 1 Traits and First Steps. The 6 + 1 Traits program is an analytic writing system that provides criteria and rubrics for assessing writing and thinking

about instruction.⁵ First Steps provides teachers with a developmental continuum to guide their assessment and instructional decisions about what to teach.⁶ The district also provided teachers with professional development opportunities in both of these programs. Within this set of rather broad frameworks meant to guide their decisions, language arts teachers were able to develop their own classroom curriculum.

*Interpreting Policy:
Addressing State Reform Efforts*

The districts also varied in their response to state reform efforts. The three different administrators we interviewed in Waterside each stated that the district's main priority was the state reform. In describing his job, the K–12 language arts specialist said that, for him, a priority was to take the state “gobbledygook” and put it into “kid-talk” (September 17, 1998). He felt strongly about eliminating the mystery from the reform documents and making the content accessible to everyone in the district. He also noted that one of the primary roles of the previous language arts specialist had been to align the local curriculum frameworks with the state essential learning areas. Finally, he mentioned the fact that certain district positions were devoted to issues related to state reform. For example, in the building where he taught part time, the principal was assigned a 1.2 full-time-equivalent position that he divided among six individuals, all of whom were called “essential learning coordinators”; each of these individuals focused on one particular area of the state reform (e.g., math or science).

The Waterside district's staff development specialist also saw his job as one of helping teachers make sense of the state reform. He indicated that the state reform had changed the focus of staff development and that his job was to create opportunities that would facilitate mastery of the state reform by all teachers. One of his main goals was to bring everything into “better alignment” and to have everything be more focused toward the district's priorities.

There was a striking degree of unanimity among the people we interviewed at both the district and school levels about Waterside's priorities. People working in this district agreed that they saw their job as coming to know, and to helping others understand, the state reform. Waterside was responding to, and in some ways being shaped by,

the state reform. Issues of alignment and assessment came to the forefront, and the district engaged in concerted efforts to help teachers make sense of the state reform and to address the state curriculum frameworks in their classrooms.

For the most part, the administrators in Prospect Harbor talked hypothetically about the state reform and what it might mean for them. Unlike the language arts specialist in Waterside, the Prospect Harbor language arts curriculum developer did not see her job as particularly related to the state reform. As her job title implied, she was hired for the purpose of developing a K–12 language arts curriculum. She did comment, however, in responding to the superintendent's refrain that “we will tell you what to teach, but not how to teach it,” that ensuring a greater connection between classroom practice and the state assessments “might” actually necessitate changing how one teaches. She also stated, though, that at that point they were primarily concentrating on the common curriculum (September 16, 1998). The staff development specialist spoke in similarly tentative terms, saying that, for language arts teachers, the state essential learning areas “might” be helpful in giving them a sense of what language arts is. However, she quickly pointed out that in her district, the state reform had not been at the center of their efforts (September 21, 1998). Just as administrators in Waterside agreed that their central task involved the state reform, Prospect Harbor administrators agreed that the state reforms were not the primary focus of the district's work.

*Providing Help: Professional Development
and Mentoring Policies*

Waterside had a long-standing commitment to professional development; a letter appearing at the beginning of the staff development handbook included the following statement: “Staff development is the single most important key to improving the performance of a school district and to increasing job confidence and satisfaction.” The district approached staff development from several angles. A program manager for assessment and staff development, a district-level administrative position, was responsible for creating and coordinating district-wide opportunities. He saw one of his primary goals as helping teachers master the state reform efforts and incorporate the frameworks into their teaching.

Historically, the professional development opportunities at the district level had been more of the one-shot in-service variety, but, with the state reform and an influx of new teachers, this was beginning to change.

The other facet of staff development in Waterside was the “teacher development center.” Run by a former teacher, the goal of the center was to help teachers in their pursuit of deeper, self-directed professional development goals. Groups of teachers came to the center with requests for support for particular activities, and the director helped them, either by finding appropriate resources or by facilitating opportunities himself. With the help of the teacher development center, a local university, and two other school districts, Waterside was also piloting an intensive mentoring program for new teachers, in addition to the building-based, subject-specific mentoring program in which Allison had participated.

The combination of these two opportunities, as well as others, shows Waterside’s commitment to providing new teachers with a great deal of support. The K–12 language arts specialist echoed this sentiment. He felt there was a general expectation that new teachers would be treated differently from the way many veterans were treated at the beginning of their careers, when they were wished good luck by colleagues who then disappeared into their own classrooms. In particular, he saw the department head as an important figure, a leader rather than an evaluator, there “not to impose but to offer assistance where it is needed.” In Allison’s school, the department chair clearly saw part of her job as mentoring new teachers, and Allison described her as providing numerous resources to new teachers and arranging for them to take part in a number of professional development programs offered by the district.

In Prospect Harbor, attention to professional development had been overshadowed by the district’s emphasis on curriculum alignment and adoption. The staff development specialist’s position was only a half-time position (as opposed to the two full positions devoted to that area in Waterside). Although teachers were expected to buy in to and use the new curriculum materials, initially there was little staff development connected to the curriculum changes. While the district staff development specialist believed that

teacher collaboration was important and that the district needed to commit to collaboration, time for this had not yet appeared on the calendar.⁷ Meanwhile, the staff development specialist was responsible for offering workshops on topics that the teachers indicated they wanted and needed. She made suggestions to both schools and the district about what should be done and tried to respond to teachers’ requests for particular kinds of professional development opportunities.

Prospect Harbor did put a great deal of effort into one aspect of professional development: the mentoring of new teachers. As part of the effort to centralize a decentralized district, the district moved to a district-wide mentoring program after 7 or 8 years of a building-based program. The new program included three full-time mentors (former teachers in the district), known as consulting peer educators. There was one consulting peer educator for all new elementary teachers, one for all new middle school teachers, and one for all new high school teachers. These mentors worked with between 15 and 25 new teachers during the school year across a range of subject areas. They were also responsible for working with teachers who were experiencing difficulties.

Where the Twain Shall Meet: District Policies and New Teachers

Shaping Concerns

Looking up from the classroom, we can see the ways in which these districts shaped the concerns of beginning teachers. Working in a district that directed its attention largely toward state and district standards and assessment, Allison worried about the state assessment. Working in a district and a school that were “living the WASL,” Allison spent more time than any of the other teachers in our study talking about the impact of the state curriculum frameworks and the WASL. Frank, who taught the same grade level, had to be prompted to discuss either one. Coming into a district that was abuzz with talk about the lack of curriculum and the impending required curriculum, Frank and Nancy worried about curriculum. Much of their talk focused on the lack of guidance they received regarding what to teach. In contrast, Allison, who had a similarly unspecified curriculum, relished the opportunity to construct her own curriculum.

Much of the literature on the concerns of beginning teachers has taken a psychological perspective, looking to the individual as the explanatory factor (Berliner, 1986; Fuller, 1969; Kagan, 1992). Our cases, however, suggest a more sociocultural perspective. The contexts in which teachers work, including the district context, can help focus the attention of beginning teachers on certain issues. Districts provide lenses, focusing teachers' attention through direct policies, such as Prospect Harbor's new curriculum policy or Waterside's policy of developing a district version of the state frameworks, and through implicit policies and the kinds of learning opportunities they provide for new teachers. Allison was introduced to issues of state reform at her initial orientation to the district. In fact, she was hired, in large part, because she already knew something about the reforms and the role of assessment in informing instruction. Many of her professional development opportunities were linked, directly or indirectly, to preparing students for the WASL and to incorporating the curriculum frameworks into her teaching. In contrast, Frank and Nancy heard their superintendent's almost single-minded focus on curriculum loud and clear. They were both concerned about the curriculum they currently did not have, and Nancy was concerned about the curriculum that was to come. For all of these teachers, district policies served as a set of lenses through which they began to develop particular views of and concerns about teaching.

While district policies provided a lens to focus teacher concerns, we also need to look at the degree of magnification afforded by the lens to more fully understand the guidance such policies provided to beginning teachers. In most of these instances, the lens provided by the district was relatively weak, focusing primarily on surface issues of language arts instruction. For example, the EALRs did not seem to provide much support for Allison in thinking hard about how best to engage students in authentic reading and writing activities. Rather, she saw the EALRs as more or less commonsensical:

When I read it [EALRs] now, I feel like "duh," you know, it seems so commonsensical, and I wonder if that's just because that's how—these are the things I would think were important to teach anyway or if it's because I've been so inundated with these, that they're so ingrained in

my mind, after hearing them so much, I think, oh, of course I would do that. So I don't know which came first. (April 30, 1999)

According to one of the primary EALRs for language arts, "students will learn to use the writing process," and the framework goes on to list five stages from prewriting through editing. Yet, there is nothing in this description to distinguish among more or less effective ways of engaging students in the writing process. Allison ended up adopting a formulaic unit plan on writing that did indeed lead students through all of the steps of the writing process. Students followed the stages of writing in a lockstep fashion, from brainstorming through final editing. The plan allowed for very little student ownership of the writing, nor did it provide a meaningful context for student writing. Using the EALRs as a lens for looking at writing instruction does not necessarily focus teachers' attention on these issues related to classroom practice. Similarly, the EALRs do not provide conceptual definitions of the various stages of writing, such as prewriting or revising, or how these stages might be recursive rather than linear. The unit plan that Allison adopted provided a worksheet for peer editing, for example, that asked students to count the number of words and sentences in each paragraph; the worksheet barely attended to issues of the audience or the author's purposes for writing. None of the questions directly addressed the content of the papers. Yet, nothing in the state curriculum frameworks would focus Allison's attention on *how* the processes of writing were represented to students. The frameworks were so broad ("students will learn to use the writing process") that they could not necessarily help new teachers understand key issues and dilemmas in the teaching of writing. The unit plan Allison adopted embodied a tension between structure and ownership in the teaching of writing (Grossman et al., 2000) that was all but invisible to her, just as it is invisible in the EALRs.

Similarly, Prospect Harbor's focus on curriculum addressed only what books to teach, not how to teach them. In fact, the superintendent's mantra, "we'll tell you what to teach, but not how to teach it," seems to suggest that a common set of texts would standardize what students will learn, ignoring the enormous range of pedagogical approaches or possible understandings that could be the focus of instruction

with the same novel. What does it mean for student learning that all 11th graders would read *The Scarlet Letter* rather than *The House on Mango Street*? From the perspective of curriculum enactment, *how* either book is taught makes all the difference in what students will actually learn about literature. This lens on the curriculum does not focus on either student tasks or classroom discourse, two concepts identified by Spillane and Jennings (1997) as critical to examining curriculum implementation. The district's decision to focus on core texts, absent a framework for thinking about goals for student understanding in literature and how instruction could support such goals, again provided a weak lens on classroom practice, particularly for novice teachers.

While district policy can serve as a lens to focus new teachers' concerns, teaching them, in effect, what to worry about, the lenses provided in the two study districts focused the attention of new teachers on more superficial aspects of practice. A higher degree of magnification would have been required to help new teachers learn in more depth about the writing process or the teaching of literature. In another one of our cases, for example, one of the beginning teachers was assigned to teach the Pacesetter curriculum, a curriculum designed as a capstone course in language arts for high school seniors. The decision to adopt the Pacesetter curriculum in this teacher's high school provided a stronger lens for looking at the teaching of language arts. Described as an "integrated program of standards, instruction, professional development, and assessments," the Pacesetter curriculum addresses a broader array of issues, including what to teach, how to teach it, and why one would even teach such a curriculum in the first place. Unlike the 6 Traits (for writing) or First Steps curricula adopted by the two districts we studied, which specify little about instruction and leave instructional decision making almost entirely up to teachers' discretion, Pacesetter includes ample professional development opportunities that focus very specifically on its curriculum. Pacesetter focuses teachers' attention on more specific aspects of teaching—curriculum, instruction, assessment, and the purposes of teaching language arts—and provides greater depth in regard to learning opportunities (Ball & Cohen, 1996).

Channels for Subject-Specific Learning

These districts also differed in important ways in the extent to which they provided opportunities for first-year teachers to learn about issues directly related to the language arts. While Allison had ample opportunities to obtain the curricular and instructional help she wanted for teaching language arts, Frank, with greater need, had much less opportunity. The difference in learning opportunities reflects structures within these districts that channeled or thwarted subject-specific conversations about teaching and learning. By focusing on the district as an activity system, we are able to look at how districts are organized to support certain conversations while thwarting others.

In Waterside, everyone we interviewed had a relatively consistent version of what good language arts instruction involved. The language arts coordinator (a former department chair himself) saw his job as working closely with department chairs in the schools, providing information about district activities and gathering information about teachers' concerns and needs. Mentoring, in this district, was both subject and site specific. Allison had a mentor in her subject matter at her school site. This mentor provided Allison with curriculum resources and a ready ear. When Allison struggled with teaching prepositional phrases or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, she knew just where to go. The department chair of Allison's school, in turn, played an important role in both contributing to the district's work on standards for language arts and serving as a bridge between the district and the school. Because she had worked on the district curriculum frameworks for language arts, she served as a school-based resource for questions about district standards. She also provided informal mentoring for Allison and made sure that she attended workshops in the teaching of writing. The department as a whole was supportive, strongly encouraged the sharing of materials and ideas around teaching language arts.

Frank's situation provides a stark contrast. After eliminating curriculum specialists in support of site-based management, Prospect Harbor tried to resurrect the role of language arts curriculum developer. The first person they hired had difficulty working with classroom teachers and lasted only a year in this role. She did not see

the district as having a consistent philosophy on language arts; in fact, she felt that there was a generational split in the district regarding visions of language arts. For example, some older teachers believed strongly in the separation of writing and literature instruction, while younger teachers believed in the integration of language arts instruction. While department chairs might have been informal leaders in their schools, the district did not intentionally designate chairs to serve as instructional leaders, nor did it connect the chairs explicitly to curricular reform efforts. Mentoring was a generic rather than a subject-specific function in this district. Frank was assigned a mentor according to grade level rather than subject matter. While his mentor attempted to provide help and support, the curricular help Frank so desperately needed for teaching language arts was beyond her scope. Although she tried to connect him with people who might have language arts units he could borrow, she ultimately felt she could not give him the kind of support he needed. Because Frank's middle school was organized into cross-subject-matter teams, rather than by department, Frank did not share Allison's ready access to colleagues in language arts. Even the school's physical structure worked against him, as he taught on a hall populated primarily by social studies teachers. By the end of his first year of teaching, Frank was ready to abandon language arts for social studies, even though his college major had been in creative writing.

The cases of these first-year teachers indicate that their access to resources for teaching language arts was dependent, in large part, on both school and district structures that channeled opportunities for learning to teach language arts. Waterside had a cohesive policy environment around the language arts; administrators were generally in agreement about a broad vision for the language arts, and professional development opportunities generally focused on frameworks for the teaching of reading and writing that were consistent with this larger vision. Curriculum specialists were teachers located in schools. From this context, they had an immediate sense of the needs of classroom teachers, as well as the kinds of resources available. The curriculum specialist in language arts, a former department chair himself, met regularly with the department chairs, providing another channel for information to flow both ways. Finally, at Allison's school, the depart-

ment chair was seen as an instructional leader. She participated directly in the district's efforts to rewrite the state standards for the district, bringing this knowledge and experience back to her department. She also played a central role in having all first-year teachers take part in professional development opportunities in the language arts, ensuring a common language for talking about teaching the language arts among members of the department.

The channels in Prospect Harbor were less clearly organized around subject matter. In part because of the district's strong history of site-based management, curriculum specialists were only recently being hired once again. During Frank and Nancy's first year of teaching, the language arts curriculum developer did not have a strong connection to the schools or to the district,⁸ and, in fact, her primary task was to work with teachers to adopt a common curriculum. The middle school in which Frank worked did not even seem to have a functioning language arts department through which he might have received support. Even at the high school level, Nancy's department chair felt that her position was a nominal one. The district did not invest in department chairs as instructional leaders, and chairs were only loosely connected to district activities, creating another disconnection between district and school sites around issues of subject matter. Finally, the structure of generic mentoring did not support a subject-specific conversation about teaching and learning the language arts. As both Nancy's and Frank's experiences illustrate, the emphasis of the mentoring program was more on issues of classroom management and general support than on curriculum and instruction. Although this picture of generic professional development in Prospect Harbor is markedly different from that in Waterside, the situation may be more the norm than the exception. In fact, even when the amount of money allocated to professional development increases significantly, there is some indication that neither the supply nor the demand for content-specific professional development seems to grow (McDiarmid, 1999).

Channels in Waterside flowed along subject-specific routes, from district through language arts coordinator and then to department chairs and teachers. Just as importantly, these channels flowed both ways; the department chair and lan-

guage arts coordinator were able to communicate subject-specific concerns of teachers back to the district. In contrast, in Prospect Harbor, channels did not flow along subject-specific routes, and opportunities for subject-specific conversations were continually deflected. Few intermediate structures such as department chairs or subject-matter specialists were in place to promote the flow of such a conversation. The channel that did exist flowed only one way—downstream—from the central office to the schools.

Such channels for learning to teach subject matter may matter more to beginning teachers than to more experienced teachers. New teachers are in the process of constructing their practice and are searching for materials and resources to help them teach. More experienced teachers have developed a set of tools and practices for teaching their subject matter; in fact, these developed repertoires can be a challenge to reformers who seek to change practice. In addition, experienced teachers may have other resources they can turn to for help when necessary, including subject-matter networks, professional organizations, and colleagues. With fewer resources and networks, new teachers may be more dependent upon the opportunities provided by the school and the district.

The District as Teacher Educator

The role of districts in focusing teachers' concerns may be particularly powerful in the case of beginning teachers. These teachers, unlike many of those studied in policy research (Cohen, 1990; Peterson, 1990; Spillane & Jennings, 1997; Wiemers, 1990; Wilson, 1990), are not experienced teachers trying to reconstruct their practice; they are still very much in the beginning stages of constructing their understandings and practice. The policy problem differs, in this respect, from the problems involved in attempting to change the knowledge, beliefs, or practices of very experienced teachers. Beginning teachers may be more open to curricular and instructional guidance provided by districts. In addition, they are still in the process of developing their ideas about teaching, which may make both their beliefs and their practices more malleable.

From this perspective, districts can serve a powerful role as teacher educators, even if first-year teachers are only dimly aware of formal district policies. The tasks they assign to new

teachers, the resources they provide, the learning environments they create, the assessments they design, and the conversations they provoke have consequences for what first-year teachers come to learn about teaching the language arts and about teaching more generally. For example, one of the primary tasks set for teachers in Waterside was to become familiar with state and district curriculum frameworks. Much of teachers' professional development time was devoted to understanding and using these frameworks. Both through her own engagement in these efforts and the sustained involvement of her department chair, Allison developed a clear understanding of the district frameworks and incorporated them into her classroom curriculum. Prospect Harbor did not engage teachers in such a task. Instead, it engaged teachers in discussions of a common curriculum, which both heightened these beginning teachers' concerns about the lack of existing curriculum and suggested that "curriculum" meant a common set of texts or textbooks. In both of these instances, the tasks assigned by the districts taught teachers a way to look at and talk about teaching and directed their attention to particular facets of teaching.

The structures districts create also have consequences for the nature of teachers' conversations about teaching and learning. The differences in the mentoring programs in Waterside and Prospect Harbor, for example, led to quite different conversations between these beginning teachers and their mentors. While Allison and her mentor reported a conversation deeply grounded in subject matter, Frank and Nancy and their mentors reported a much more generic conversation that skirted issues of curriculum and instruction in the language arts. The nature of such conversations in turn affected these teachers' opportunities to learn about teaching the language arts. Similarly, the role of curriculum specialist was structured differently in the two study districts. In one instance, the role was closely aligned with the schools, enabling the flow of subject-specific conversation; in the other instance, the curriculum specialist was only loosely connected to the schools. Our analysis suggests that district structures, intentional or otherwise, can either support or deflect opportunities for continued learning within a subject matter, while the strength of the lenses provided by curriculum policies, in particular, helps

determine the depth and breadth of what teachers learn about teaching language arts.

First-year teachers are still very much in the process of learning to teach (Feiman-Nemser, 2001); what they learn in their early years of teaching—about subject matter, about teaching, and about students—will matter to their future career trajectories. Yet, when we think about the relationship between district policies and classroom practice, we often fail to distinguish the distinctive needs and responsiveness of beginning teachers. A better understanding of the particular needs and concerns of beginning teachers, as well as an appreciation of how district policies and structures may shape these concerns and either meet or fail to meet their needs, can contribute to the development of more intentional policies and structures designed to support beginning teachers.

Notes

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¹See Grossman, Smagorinsky, and Valencia (1999) for a full description of the theoretical framework of the larger study.

²These snapshots focus on the 1997–1998 school year. Several of these districts underwent substantive changes in the following year or two, changes that we have not attempted to portray in this article.

³All names of both districts and individuals are pseudonyms.

⁴6 Traits was developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Although initially developed as an analytic scoring system for writing, it has been expanded to include strategies for instruction (see <http://www.nwrel.org>).

⁵6 + 1 Traits is an expanded version of 6 Traits (see Footnote 4). To the original 6 analytic traits of writing, it adds presentation (see <http://www.nwrel.org>).

⁶First Steps is a commercially published program (Heinemann). It includes developmental continuums and activities in reading, writing, spelling, and oral language, along with professional development courses.

For more information on First Steps, see <http://www.first-steps.com>.

⁷Several years later, the superintendent is actively trying to find more time in the workday for teachers to work and learn together. This demonstrates again the flux in which these districts are operating. What is true one year is not necessarily true the next. However, we have bounded our analysis to our participants' first year of teaching, the 1997–1998 school year.

⁸This situation has changed since the year of this study. New curriculum developers were hired who have strong relationships with teachers and schools. However, the department chairs still do not play a significant role in district reforms.

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