

AMPLIFYING TEACHER VOICE IN EDUCATION POLICY DISCUSSIONS:
THE CASE OF NORTH CAROLINA

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my grandmother, Dorothy Buie, who has been the wind beneath my wings for my entire life. Without her love and unwavering support, I would not have been able to reach any of my goals. Mother Dot, I love and appreciate you!

I am grateful to God for assigning me this rich work of advocating for students and teachers across North Carolina. This process has totally reaffirmed my commitment and dedication to my life's work.

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ABSTRACT

AMPLIFYING TEACHER VOICE IN EDUCATION POLICY DISCUSSIONS

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This disquisition examines teachers' beliefs in their ability to advocate for the profession as well as to see if the platform, *Tar Heel Teachers at Home*, can be extended to serve as a vehicle for teachers to dialogue with state policymakers. *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* is a North Carolina interview series that is hosted by a panel of educators. Most of the decision makers who have appeared on the show have been individuals with local authority such as system superintendents and school board members. General Assembly members have represented less than 7% of featured guests on the program since it was launched in 2019. Since 2010, North Carolina's educational landscape has been significantly impacted by laws that were initiated by the General Assembly. Career status protections have been abolished, compensation for advanced degrees have been terminated, the cap on the number of charter schools has been lifted, and the private school voucher program has been expanded (Parmenter, 2019). These wholesale changes to public education affect collective teacher perception of the profession. The General Assembly was a principal impetus for this improvement initiative because of its educational influence in the state. Through the close examination of this problem, all featured guests on *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* were NC House of Representatives &

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NC Senators. Participants were invited to interact with the General Assembly across multiple technology avenues. Teacher voice is not totally absent from educational policy discussions. However, there is a need to amplify teacher voice because increased decisions are being made at the school, district, and state levels that could impact students in a more positive way if teacher voice was included and taken into consideration. The purpose of this improvement initiative was to increase teacher voice throughout the state to improve school climate, positively impact student achievement, and reduce teacher turnover. Research shows that there are major benefits for schools in these three areas when teachers are included in the decision-making process (Kahlenburg and Potter, 2018).'

The Disquisition

The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED, n.d.) was established to redesign the Doctorate in Education (EdD) and prepare educational leaders to address complex problems within their professional context. As experts in their professional setting, scholar-practitioners “blend practical wisdom with professional skills and knowledge to name, frame, and solve problems of practice” (CPED, n.d.) Scholar-practitioners complete a disquisition or dissertation in practice, instead of the traditional dissertation. Western Carolina University is a leading member of the CPED, and the University fully embraces the six guiding principles of CPED including a commitment to tackling problems of practice that are framed around equity, ethics, and social justice (CPED, n.d.).

The scholar-practitioner is uniquely positioned to serve as both a researcher and practitioner throughout the design and implementation of an improvement initiative because of institutional knowledge of the research setting as well as the role that he or she holds within the organization. After identifying a problem of practice, the scholar-practitioner pinpoints root causes and begins examining the problem in a historical and larger context. The scholar-practitioner collaborates with a design team to implement an intervention within their professional environment. This framework is intentionally designed to produce leaders who are experts on their research topic along with being positioned to continue addressing problems of practice as they arise (Lomotey, 2018).

Introduction

In 2015, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction partnered with the North Carolina Association of Educators and the Hope Street Group to launch the North Carolina Teacher Voice Network. The Hope Street Group, a national nonprofit organization, had successfully initiated similar programs in other states including Kentucky and Hawaii before selecting North Carolina. In each state, the organization worked to create intentional structures to build trust between teachers and policymakers. North Carolina was a prime target for expansion due to the high-profile education policy changes, which some advocates have called a war on public education (Strauss, 2015). At the time of the launch, Dr. June Atkinson, who served as the North Carolina State Superintendent from 2004 until 2016, outlined how the partnership would help show the correlation between lessons learned in the classroom and decisions made at the state level.

Oftentimes, there are unintended consequences when policymakers pass laws impacting classrooms without soliciting feedback and suggestions from school personnel (Good, 2019). Educators who have specialized training and intimate knowledge of the inner workings of school systems have more to offer than policymakers who are many layers removed (Bartell, 2001). The North Carolina Teacher Voice Network was created to help minimize the disconnect between policy initiation and school implementation by deliberately connecting teachers with policymakers.

Over the course of four years, the North Carolina Teacher Voice Network selected a diverse cohort of classroom teachers from all corners of the state who could positively inform decisions made by policymakers. The fellows shared stories from their own classrooms that were related to policy decisions. These anecdotes were conveyed through individual and small group

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interactions with policymakers in addition to being captured in articles published by the teachers. To include the voices of more teachers, the fellows conducted focus groups in addition to distributing surveys. The focus groups and surveys centered on crucial education policy topics such as teacher evaluation, the standard course of study, advanced teaching roles, and professional development. These priorities were developed in partnership with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and the North Carolina State Board of Education with teachers playing a key role in the selection process (Hope Street Group, 2015). The North Carolina Teacher Voice Network collapsed in 2019 due to a shift in priorities for Hope Street Group, the national partner, in addition to cultural and personnel changes at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. The program's conclusion has contributed to significantly reduced structured teacher voice at the state level because the formal and consistent opportunities for educators to engage state policymakers have been eliminated. Limiting opportunities for teachers to engage in education policy discussions is problematic because it reduces teachers' beliefs in their ability to contribute to the profession as respected experts. When teachers are prevented from participating in the policy design process, they feel powerless and dissatisfied with the profession (Good, 2019).

I was involved with the North Carolina Teacher Voice Network, in some capacity, throughout the program's existence. In 2015, I completed the survey in addition to participating in a focus group. I was a full fellow from 2016 until 2018, and I was an active alumnus when the program ended in 2019. I witnessed firsthand how the organization helped educators to dig deeper into policies and laws that impacted the classroom. Teachers were more equipped and organized to advocate for student and school needs because of the comprehensive

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professional development opportunities. The North Carolina Teacher Voice Network intentionally helped to build teacher capacity around policy engagement. A significant amount of time is necessary for teachers to develop capacity (Good, 2019). I also noticed that the North Carolina Teacher Voice Network fellows had greater access to state policymakers, and the policymakers appeared to be open to hearing teacher feedback and were committed to using the acquired knowledge when making crucial decisions. The North Carolina Teacher Voice Network played a crucial role in helping to eliminate standard 6 from the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation System by collecting data that conveyed the concerns of teachers across the state and by continuing to communicate specific recommendations to individuals serving in the state department (Hope Street Group, 2015). The program should have been expanded to empower more teachers, not terminated. Spaces for productive two-way dialogue between teachers and policymakers need to be reestablished in North Carolina to produce better results for students and improved working conditions for teachers across the state. Amplifying teacher voice is necessary.

Defining Teacher Voice

Russell Quaglia and Lisa Lande define teacher voice as the use of the voice of teachers for the benefit of the profession (Quaglia and Lande, 2015). Policymakers can learn from the expertise and knowledge that teachers have as practitioners. Better education policy is produced when teachers have a seat at the table to share relevant insight (Good, 2019). Teacher voice must be sustainable and integrated into all cycles of policymaking from ideation to implementation.

Defining Policy – Discourse, Text, & Practice

The term policy encompasses several associations and definitions (Good, 2019). Scheider and Ingram (1997) establish that “policies are revealed through texts, practices, symbols, and discourses that define and deliver values including goods and services as well as regulations, income, status, and other positively or negatively valued attributes.” A crucial component of this improvement initiative focuses on how *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* can influence discourse around education policy. Policy as discourse is “about what can be said and thought, but also who can speak, when, and where and with what authority” (Ball, 2006). Policy impacts the processes, structures, and outcomes of educational institutions (Schneider & Ingram, 1997).

Teacher Voice & Student Outcomes

School climate and student learning are positively impacted when teachers are involved in policy design (Ingersoll, 1996; Loeb & Strunk, 2007; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Teachers who feel that their voices are valued are more willing to promote the voices of their students. Teachers are three times more likely to encourage students to take on leadership roles when they feel like they have a voice in decision making (QISA & TVAIC, 2015). Educational leaders must provide platforms that increase teacher self-efficacy and collective self-efficacy because failure to do so may have a negative impact on student achievement (Thornton, Zunino, & Beattie, 2020).

Teacher Voice & Teacher Retention

Teachers who are more involved in important decision making are more fulfilled in their work (Good, 2019). Empowered teachers are more connected to their schools, and they feel a

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deeper sense of belonging. Teachers who are permitted to share concerns and honest feedback are four times more likely to have a positive outlook on their future as an educator (QISA & TVAIC, 2015). If teachers perceive themselves as unable to influence issues that impact their work, they become frustrated with their profession. A sense of hopelessness has a negative effect on job satisfaction and impedes a teacher's ability to deliver instruction effectively (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008).

Teachers as Policy Implementors

Teachers are not completely shut out of policymaking. They may have limited involvement as policy designers, but shoulder much of the burden when it comes to successful implementation of education policies (Good, 2019). In a sense, teachers shape policy when functioning as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980). Teachers use discretion when assessing how best to interpret and execute policy (Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992; Lipsky, 1980). Engaging teachers in policy development leads to greater alignment between policy text and policy in action (Good, 2019). When policymakers fail to engage teachers in the decision-making process, educators feel dehumanized and deprofessionalized (Watts, 2020). Low morale and a culture of defeat push North Carolina teachers to take drastic measures to be heard such as organizing statewide walk outs in both 2018 and 2019. I created the educational platform, *Tar Heel Teachers at Home*, to help to fill the void that was caused by the elimination of the NC Teacher Voice Network by providing space and time for teachers to converse with decisionmakers.

Problem of Practice

Thirty years of research shows that teacher participation at various levels of policymaking is low (Conley, 1991; Ingersoll, 2006; Smylie, 1992, Taylor & Bogotch, 1994). This problem of practice aimed to determine if formalized and structured interactions between teachers and General Assembly members would lead to an increase in teacher self-efficacy. The researcher aims to examine teachers' beliefs in their abilities to advocate for the profession, exclusively using technology. *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* is a North Carolina interview series that is hosted by a panel of educators. Episodes of *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* are produced through a video conferencing service so that hosts and guests can communicate remotely. The series is focused on engaging North Carolinians in conversations around education. Most of the decisionmakers who have appeared on the show have been individuals with local authority such as system superintendents and school board members. Members of the General Assembly have represented less than 7% of featured guests on the program since it was launched in 2019. Since 2010, North Carolina's educational landscape has been significantly impacted by laws that were initiated by the General Assembly. Career status protections have been abolished, compensation for advanced degrees have been terminated, the cap on the number of charter schools has been lifted, and the private school voucher program has been expanded (Parmenter, 2019). All of these wholesale changes to public education affect collective teacher perception of the profession as well as their ability to have a positive impact. The General Assembly should be a principal component of this work because of its influence over education in the state. Throughout the close examination of this problem, all featured guests on *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* will be members of the General Assembly (NC House of Representatives & NC Senators). Participants will be invited to interact with the General Assembly across multiple

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technology avenues. Teacher voice is not completely absent from educational policy discussions in North Carolina. However, there is a need to amplify teacher voice because more and more decisions are being made at the local, district, and state levels that could impact students in a more positive way if teacher voice was included and taken into consideration.

Literature Review of the Problem

The literature related to teachers being excluded from educational policy discussions is extensive. Teachers are essential to the implementation of policy, but are often excluded from policy design (Good, 2019). Teachers are expected to execute the policies, but they are not trusted to help create the policies that impact their classrooms. Teachers are frequently policy targets instead of drafters (Good, 2019). The gender gap contributes to the imbalance between teachers and policymakers. Teaching is a female-dominated field, and policymakers are overwhelming men (de Saxe, 2020). Limiting opportunities for teachers to offer input and provide expertise is a part of a broader problem of failing to treat teachers as professionals. Professionals are viewed as specialists who wield influence over their field, and professionals enjoy a great deal of autonomy. The logic behind professional authority is that the experts should have the most influence over the profession because of their proximity & insider's knowledge (Ingersoll and Collins, 2018). There are many mandates from the federal, state, and local levels that dictate how and what teachers teach. By expanding oversight of the profession, decisionmakers are eroding the confidence and trust that should be placed in teachers. The public nature of teaching affects the perception of the profession. Students, parents, and other community members are universally aware that teachers are underpaid and undervalued. The public attitudes toward teaching as a profession continue in a downward spiral. According to the

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50th Annual PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, only 46% of parents would support their child's decision to pursue a teaching career. In 2009, 70% of parents expressed support of teaching as a career. The first PDK poll in 1969 indicated that 75% of parents were in support of their child becoming a teacher ("Teaching: Respect but dwindling appeal", 2018). Soliciting feedback from teachers and implementing policies that are infused with teacher input are inexpensive ways that decisionmakers can show that they respect teacher voice because teachers are valued professionals. Treating teachers as professionals and including their voices in education policy decisions would help the state to recruit and retain highly qualified and engaged teachers.

One of the big concerns around teacher voice in North Carolina is the perception that the feedback is not used in a systematic way, particularly at the state level. Policymakers run the risk of being seen as soliciting teacher voice as a tokenistic practice (Good, 2019). Every two years, North Carolina administers the Teacher Working Conditions Survey. Antidotally, the results may be used at the school or district level. However, the state has not been clear about how the feedback impacts the collective. Symbolically requesting teacher feedback can do more harm than good because teachers will choose not to engage because they believe that their voices do not matter (Good, 2019). Teachers need an outlet where their voices are lifted, and advocacy is seen in real time to help them visualize themselves as policy advocates.

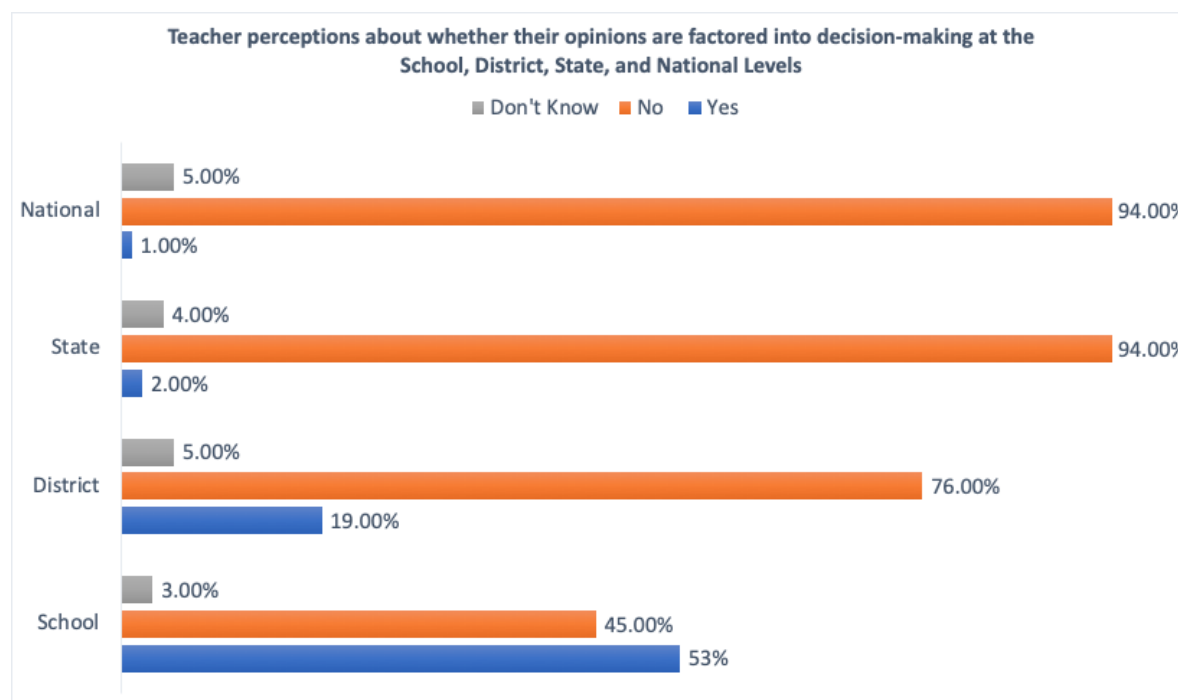
The literature specifically related to teachers' beliefs that their professional perspectives should be considered includes the findings of the Center on Education Policy (CEP). "Listen to Us: Teacher Views and Voices" (2016) examines K-12 teacher perspectives around a plethora of topics including testing, evaluations, and their view of the profession. The survey results

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presented in the report tell us that the political impact on public education has made the work more difficult and less enjoyable (“Listen to Us,” 2016). Nearly half of respondents (46%) reported that external policies at the state and district levels were barriers to job satisfaction and contentment (“Listen to Us,” 2016). Survey respondents conveyed that they should be given opportunities to provide feedback and input on mandates before they are implemented. Teachers’ beliefs in their abilities to influence the profession vary from the school level to the national level. At the school level, 53% of participants stated that their opinions were often taken into consideration before a final decision was made (“Listen to Us,” 2016). Teachers feel more involved at the school level because of the accessibility that they have to colleagues and supervisors, which leads to great collaboration and job satisfaction. At the district level, only 19% of participants believed that their input was considered and valued (“Listen to Us,” 2016). School districts must determine authentic ways to integrate teachers into the decision-making process at the system level in order to reduce the number of teachers who feel disconnected. As it relates to state matters, only 2% of participants expressed that they were able to influence decision makers (“Listen to Us,” 2016). In North Carolina, the frustration that teachers have with statewide policymakers is widespread. For two years, teachers across the state organized walkouts because they felt that was their only opportunity to communicate their concerns to lawmakers. The following figure from the Center of Educational Policy depicts teacher perceptions of whether their opinions are incorporated into decision making at the school, district, state, and national levels.

Figure 1

Teacher Perceptions about whether their opinions are factored into decision-making: Adapted from the 2016 Listen to Us: Teacher Views and Voices Report



There are both financial and non-financial costs when teachers feel powerless and excluded from policy decisions that affect teaching. Frustrated educators will leave the profession, which will cost school systems billions of dollars in recruitment and retention efforts (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). When teachers leave the profession and districts are unable to find suitable replacements, student achievement may be negatively impacted because of the reduction of teacher quality (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Teaching is already a demanding and taxing job due to the day-to-day pressures of the position. Decisionmakers do not need to add to teacher stress by making the work more prescriptive. It is necessary for teachers to feel some type of autonomy and ownership over the profession. If General Assembly members do not incorporate structured

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opportunities to engage teachers, the state may have to invest more money in replacing them. Actively including teachers in decision-making and policy discussions helps to keep teachers engaged and committed to the profession, which reduces the likelihood that teachers will vacate their roles. Based on the statewide walkouts, North Carolina teachers want to be elevated from a “semi-profession” status (Ingersoll and Collins, 2018) to that of a full professional who is included as a shared decisionmaker.

When policymakers exclude teacher voice from key issues that impact classrooms and schools, passionate educators seek other ways to share their professional opinions including running for office. In 2018, 158 teachers across the country ran for their state legislature (Will, 2018). It is wonderful when teachers decide to continue their public service. However, many of the teachers who sought elected office in 2018 only did so out of frustration. Many of the teachers reported that ill-informed mandates caused them to seek a bigger voice in policy (Will, 2018). If the policymakers had been intentional about elevating teacher voices, these educators could have continued serving in their classrooms. When highly educated and invested teachers leave the frontline, it impacts the educational experiences of our children.

A Causal Analysis

Ishikawa’s Fishbone Diagram (1976) was employed to further dissect the various causes of limited teacher voice in North Carolina’s educational policy discussions. The fishbone diagram was utilized by Byrk, Gomez, Grunow, and LeMahieu (2016) as a graphic organizer for understanding the root causes of complex problems of practice. In Figure 2, the larger bones note barriers to elevated teacher voice in North Carolina with supporting reasons embedded within the diagram.

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The design team considered many reasons why teachers do not engage with state policymakers. There are six key hurdles to elevated teacher voice in North Carolina's education policy discussions: fear, time, distance from the state capitol, absence of formal structures, the de-professionalism of the teaching profession, and other political factors. Each of these obstacles has direct relevance to this problem of practice.

Fear

Acts of political advocacy such as walkouts may trigger verbal antagonism toward teachers (Watt, 2020). Teachers are expected to focus on managing the dynamics within the classroom while leaving the outside factors to the "true professionals." Some teachers are hesitant to be seen as politically active because they do not want to alienate those in power or be categorized as someone who is ultra-partisan. They are fearful of engaging with "upper levels" of authority and some teachers feel their job security would be affected by trying to advocate to those in higher levels of authority (Good, 2019). In some communities, teachers could face retaliation if they engaged with policymakers in a way that was viewed as hyper-political.

Teachers need an outlet that allows them to interact with policymakers in a safe environment where the tenets of calm discourse are enforced.

Time

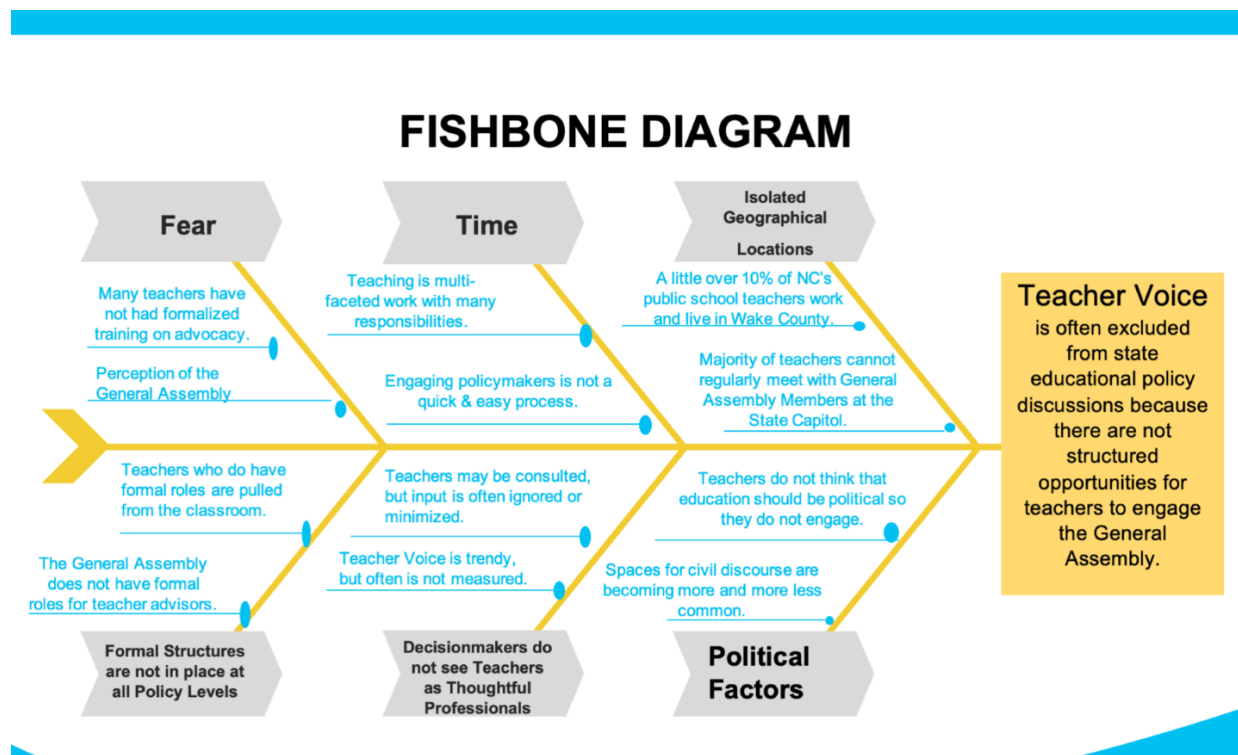
Time is one of the components of teachers' work that is limited (Good, 2019). In a 2014 Gallup poll of K-12 teachers in the United States, 46% of teachers reported elevated levels of stress at their workplace. Teachers are exhausted because of the demands that are placed on their time, and burnout is a crucial factor contributing to teacher attrition (Kaynak, 2020). The

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COVID-19 global pandemic has exasperated this issue because teachers have less time to manage the functions of their work. Teachers want to advocate for the profession, but they need opportunities that are convenient and not too time intensive. Teachers would participate in advocacy work if they had release time to do so (Good, 2019). Teachers need protected time to have extensive conversations with colleagues and other policy actors if they are going to consistently be involved in policy design (Good, 2019).

Figure 2

Fishbone Causal Analysis: Contributing Factors Preventing Teacher Voice in Education Policy



Formal Structures

The power structures related to education policy in North Carolina complicates the matter with some teachers unaware of where to pinpoint their advocacy efforts. There are so many moving components to education policy in the state that it is sometimes hard to dissect the political landscape. Education policy decisions made at the local, state, and federal levels affect the educational experiences of K-12 students in the state. The state's legislative governing body, the General Assembly, passes bills through House and Senate standing and non-standing committees. In addition to the policy committees, each body has an appropriations committee, that determines budgetary needs. Moving to the executive branch, the Governor authors a recommended budget for the General Assembly (which crafts its own and counters the Governor's budget) and signs bills into law. The Governor's office employs individuals who influence education policy in the state: Senior Education Advisor and Teacher Advisor to name a couple positions. In 2017, the Governor signed an executive order to establish the Governor's Teacher Advisory Committee to give his office feedback. The General Assembly does not have any teacher advisors or any formal method to request feedback from teachers. We have an elected state superintendent who manages the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) and establishes state policies along with the State Board of Education that are based on state statutes. NCDPI and the State Board of Education have an Office of Government and Community Affairs to oversee some of the policy issues. The State Board of Education has teacher advisors who are state teachers of the year. However, these individuals are non-voting members (Will, 2018). Local Education Agencies (LEAs) are then tasked with implementing state statutes in the local contexts with system superintendents and local boards of education

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swaying control back and forth. Some LEAs have teacher advisors, and some do not. With so many players on the scene, it is extremely difficult to define who controls public education in North Carolina (Public School Forum of NC, 2018). The structures of education policy must be demystified so that more teachers feel comfortable participating in the process (Good, 2019). There are many ways that teachers can be involved including monitoring legislative activity by attending legislative sessions, speaking out on bills, providing input into the shaping of bills and mobilizing colleagues to take a position on legislation or potential legislation if there is a level of confidence in their abilities to do so.

Teaching As a Deprofessionalized Profession

At the start of the 2010-2011 academic school year, North Carolina implemented professional teaching standards that challenged all teachers to illustrate leadership in their classrooms, in their schools, and in the profession (Von Dohlen & Ladd, 2018). Interacting with policymakers and sharing their professional assessments on a variety of educational policy issues are logical ways that teachers can lead at the state level. North Carolina has been inconsistent when it comes to soliciting and applying teacher feedback. Every other year, teachers across the state are asked to complete the NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey. Unfortunately, the results are not used to make systematic improvements throughout the state.

Political Factors

Navigating the political landscape of educational policy is difficult in North Carolina because of the various players and dynamics. The influence structures are not cut and dried, and each community has its own set of unspoken political rules. The variances prevent some teachers

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from lifting their voices because they do not feel that they know how best to bring about change. Many teachers are intimidated by the unknown because they do not have any formalized experience and training with engaging policymakers. Best practices and tips for engaging policymakers could help teachers to feel more equipped and qualified to advocate for their students, themselves, and the profession.

Distance from the State Capitol

In accordance with rules and guidelines established by the North Carolina General Statutes and the State Constitution, the General Assembly convenes in Raleigh for regular sessions and extra sessions on legislative call. According to the school system's website, Wake County Public Schools has a teaching force comprised of 10,558 individuals. North Carolina's teaching force is 93,461 according to personnel reports released by the Department of Public Instruction. Nearly 11% of the state's teachers work in the county where the General Assembly meets. Distance serves as a barrier for many teachers who may work and live in remote areas of the state such as the Northeast, Southeast, Southwest, or Northwest. State Representatives and State Senators receive an abundance of emails and letters, and it may be difficult for them to keep up with the volume. Face to face interactions and visits typically take precedence over mail deliveries because the visiting individual can immediately convey his or her ideas, needs, or opinions. A letter or email can be put off until later, but it is more difficult to dismiss a constituent who has come to your office. Technology exchanges will help to reduce the distance barrier because the interactions will mirror face to face conversations. Individuals from various parts of the state will be able to lift their voices through the usage of technology.

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Teachers who are more engaged will stay in the profession, which will help to stabilize and improve student achievement in our state.

Teachers in North Carolina's urban hubs are positioned to engage policymakers more frequently because of proximity and location. Policymakers typically visit classrooms in large urban districts at a higher rate than they visit smaller remote districts because they can leverage multiple media outlets and larger social media followings because of the size of the district and community at large. These urban classroom visits serve as photo ops for politicians who want to be perceived a particular way or deliver a soundbite. This approach has a greater impact on a policymaker's public persona and reputation than visiting a rural district with limited local media outlets. North Carolina's most visible and vocal teachers at the state level typically work and live in large districts such as Wake County Public Schools, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Durham Public Schools, and Guilford County Schools. The perspective of teachers in rural, remote, and smaller districts has not been as amplified as much. One of the reasons why teachers from certain communities do not initiate interactions with policymakers is because of their geographical location. The distance from the State Capitol prevents some teachers from having regular face-to-face interactions with policymakers. Amplifying the voices of teachers in rural and isolated communities is a key component of this study as a matter of equity. A teacher's address should not dictate their access to policymakers. A tangible path of engagement between teachers and policymakers can be created across the state with *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* as a structured conduit.

Centering the Voices of Rural Teachers

Over the past few years, teacher activism and advocacy in North Carolina has been categorized as democratic and urban territory due to the high-profile status of some teacher-leaders in the state as well as the organizing prowess of the urban chapters of the North Carolina Association of Educators. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Association of Educators (CMAE), Durham Association of Educators (DAE), and Wake NCAE routinely make headlines for advocacy work and demonstrations. The teacher-leaders who pen blogs and contribute to state and national publications about educational policy issues in North Carolina work in urban settings (Parmenter, 2019). Unfortunately, the perspectives of North Carolina's rural teachers are not highlighted as prominently. This improvement initiative focused on amplifying the voices of teachers working and living in rural communities by increasing their access to state policymakers.

North Carolina's urban-rural divide is often discussed, but most people underestimate the political power of our rural communities. The demographic profile of North Carolina leans heavily rural. Seventy-eight out of 100 counties are classified as rural (NC Rural Center, 2022). Since an overwhelming majority of counties are rural, these communities should have access to more resources to provide more opportunities for their students. In 59 of these rural counties, the largest employer is the local public school system (Public Schools First NC, n.d.). North Carolina's public schools educate 568,000 rural students (Lavalley, 2018). This is approximately 40% of the state's total public-school population as compared to 20% of students nationally (Morton, 2021). North Carolina trails only Texas when it comes to public school enrollment of rural students (Lavalley, 2018). Out of North Carolina's 115 public school units,

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87 are located within rural counties (Public Schools First NC, n.d.). Individually, these rural school systems and communities are small. However, their collective potential to wield political influence that benefits their students and teachers is much more significant and remains untapped.

The opportunities for rural teachers to positively impact educational policies that affect their communities are vast because the challenges are well-documented and extremely urgent. North Carolina is tied with Mississippi as the top priority state when it comes to rural education (Showalter et al., 2019). North Carolina's rural students are below the national median when examining the college readiness indicators (estimated graduation rates, percentage of juniors and seniors who are enrolled in dual enrollment classes, percentage of juniors and seniors passing at least one AP exam, & percentage of juniors and seniors taking the ACT or SAT). The economic conditions of North Carolina's rural communities heavily shape the access that students and schools have to countless opportunities and resources. More than 20% of school-aged children in rural North Carolina live below the poverty line. The [annual? monthly?] per-pupil instructional spending in these rural communities is more than \$1,000 below the national average (Showalter et al., 2019).

Limited access to sufficient resources continues to impact student achievement in these rural communities. In North Carolina, rural students perform lower on standardized testing than urban students with reading being a significant issue (Showalter et al., 2019). This is not a national occurrence. The state's inequitable funding formulas coupled with across-the-board policy implementation practices continue to exasperate the longstanding systemic issues in North Carolina's rural communities. Teachers in these communities should be consulted and invited to participate in education policy design so that state policymakers can hear from experts

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who experience these challenging issues first-hand every day.

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It is a prime time for rural teachers in North Carolina to communicate their thoughts and opinions with state lawmakers. The state is at a crossroads with its landmark Leandro case, which confirmed that there are persistent and substantial inequities in how North Carolina funds its public schools (Public Schools First NC, n.d.). In 1994, five school systems filed the lawsuit because the state was failing to provide all students with a sound basic education.

Four out of the five systems were in rural counties. Little progress has been made since the original lawsuit was filed to provide all students with the constitutional right of a sound basic education. In some rural communities, the opportunity gaps are more pronounced. In 2018, the NC Supreme Court commissioned an independent consultant to develop an action plan to outline specific steps that the state can take to mitigate longstanding inequity issues (WestEd, 2019).

Some of the recommendations would have a strong impact on a rural school systems' abilities to better serve their students such as revising the state funding model to provide equitable resources and building an effective regional system of support for the improvement of low-performing and high-poverty schools (WestEd, 2019). If rural teachers are provided opportunities to elevate their voices to influence the policies and laws related to the Leandro case and WestEd recommendations, the residual effects could benefit their schools and communities for many years to come.

To capture the diverse voices within the rural teacher category, the participant pool for the improvement initiative was representative of the eight North Carolina State Board of Education regions. There are rural systems in each of the eight regions, and some of their challenges are indistinguishable while others are context specific. By selecting participants from each of the NC State Board of Education regions, the researcher aimed to collect sufficient data

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to determine that the improvement initiative could be beneficial for rural teachers across the state regardless of their specific local education agencies. The proposed plan was to select one teacher from each of the following school districts to participate.

- Northeast (Region 1): Halifax County Schools
- Southeast (Region 2): Greene County Schools
- North Central (Region 3): Warren County Schools
- Sandhills (Region 4): Whiteville City Schools
- Piedmont-Triad (Region 5): Caswell County Schools
- Southwest (Region 6): Anson County Schools
- Northwest (Region 7): Ashe County Schools
- Western (Region 8): Polk County Schools

These systems were only because of the geographical location and size. These school districts represent some of the smaller public-school units (PSUs) in their regions with student populations ranging from 1,800 to 3,000. The teachers in these communities are hundreds of miles away from North Carolina's political epicenter. However, teachers serving in rural settings should be afforded just as many opportunities to contribute to policy design and engage with policymakers as teachers in urban communities. The researcher examined if weekly access to state policymakers would cause rural teachers to feel more empowered and willing to advocate for the profession.

Theory of Improvement

A theory of improvement is a set of associated ideas about improving educational outcomes (Byrk et.al, 2016). Amplified teacher voice leads to increased job satisfaction and effectiveness, which positively impacts student achievement. My theory of improvement holds that *providing teachers with regular exposure to educational policy conversations through the interview series, Tar Heel Teachers at Home, will build teachers' capacity and willingness to engage policymakers and influence policy decisions*. Considering preexisting research, the researcher anticipated that the self-efficacy and advocacy rates of teachers across all eight of the North Carolina State Board of Education regions would increase due to a clear route of engagement.

With teacher walk-outs and protests being frequent occurrences in North Carolina prior to the pandemic, it is imperative that state leaders actively work to embed teacher voice in the education policy design process (Watts, 2020). It is evident that teachers have been frustrated with the nearly decade-long tactical strikes against public education (Strauss, 2015). To recruit and retain North Carolina's best and brightest to serve in our classrooms, policymakers must be willing to engage in exhaustive conversations with the individuals who are most responsible for policy implementation. The dialogue between policymakers and teachers must be continuous, and policymakers must pledge to incorporate teacher feedback into policy design.

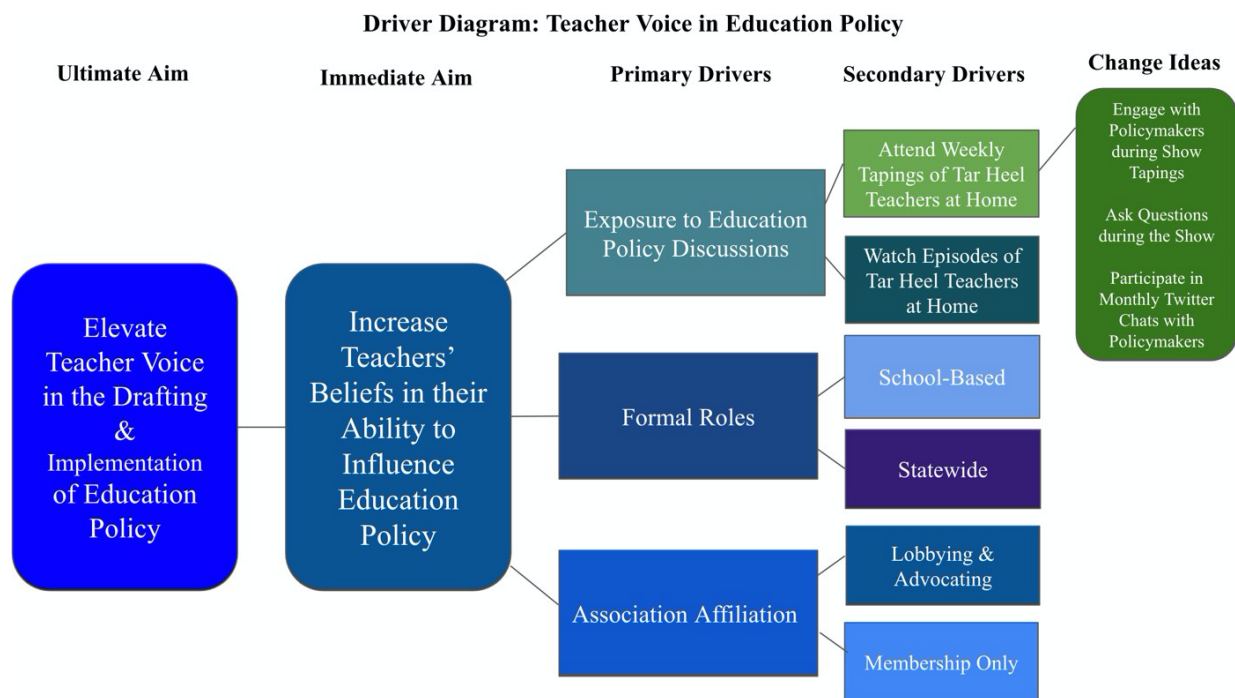
The first step in analyzing this problem of practice included outlining major obstacles to elevated teacher voice in North Carolina through the causal analysis process. Two overarching barriers rose to the surface: distance from the State Capitol where members of the General Assembly convene and legislate as well as the absence of formal training and structures for

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teachers to engage policymakers. Capacity and other limitations of the improvement initiative compelled the researcher and design team to prioritize the change ideas that could immediately address these two specific barriers. However, the design team carefully considered the other root causes when outlining the improvement initiative because it is almost impossible to completely isolate the factors because all the hinderances are so closely intertwined. The driver diagram below (see Figure 3) shows the logical model for improvement (Byrk et al., 2016) with the immediate aim being teachers’ belief in their ability to influence education policy.

Figure 3

Driver Diagram Designed to Elevate Teacher Voice in North Carolina



Through the creation of a driver diagram, the researcher and design team generated various change ideas and organized them into a virtual representation to determine which

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specific improvement initiative should be prioritized. Several other routes to elevated teacher voice avenues were considered, but this improvement initiative was selected because of the equity and access issues that are embedded within the other paths. Some of the other teacher voice platforms that were examined included the formal roles of Teacher Advisor to the Governor and the North Carolina Teacher of the Year serving as an advisor to the North Carolina State Board of Education. These roles offer teachers a large platform to share their opinions with very influential individuals, but these opportunities are limited and only offer some teachers a seat at the table. Additionally, these assignments require teachers to leave the classroom during their advocacy period. Teachers can continue to serve in their classrooms if they engage policymakers through *Tar Heel Teachers at Home*. Advocacy through the North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE) was also explored. While the organization has been recognized for its commitment to championing teachers' needs, it is widely perceived as a partisan organization. Some policymakers are unwilling to engage in conversations with NCAE because of the organization's perceived alignment with the democratic party (Civitas Institute, 2020). *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* does not emphasize any political ideologies, and the platform is open to featuring individuals from diverse backgrounds. Also, teachers must pay membership fees if they want to join NCAE. The organization claims to advocate for North Carolina teachers collectively, but there are certain benefits and rights that are only available to members. For some teachers, the membership fees might be a barrier due to financial hardships. There are no fees associated with *Tar Heel Teachers at Home*; so all teachers across North Carolina can access the information and participate in the programming. These other change ideas may be investigated in further research (Byrk et al., 2016).

Proposed Improvement Initiative

The improvement initiative to amplify teacher voice in North Carolina was weekly consumption of educational policy discussions and analysis through the interview series, *Tar Heel Teachers at Home*. Research participants joined the show's new virtual audience so that they would have access to state representatives and state senators who were serving on education-related committees in the North Carolina General Assembly. The immediate aim of the improvement initiative was to increase teachers' beliefs in their abilities to influence education policy. Therefore, the researcher and design team proposed adding the virtual audience to *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* to ease participants into advocacy. As members of the virtual audience, participants could choose when to engage with policymakers as opposed to being co-hosts who had to engage with state senators and representatives throughout the entire episode.

Overview of *Tar Heel Teachers at Home*

Tar Heel Teachers is an educational platform that works to engage North Carolinians in conversations around education. There are several synergetic components of *Tar Heel Teachers* including a website, a panel talk show, an interview series (*Tar Heel Teachers at Home*), a travel series (*Tar Heel Teachers on the Road*), a micro-series (*Tar Heel Teachers Daily*), a monthly book club (*Tar Heel Teachers Books Club*), and a series of special presentations. *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* was selected as part of the improvement initiative because of the access that could be extended to teachers across the state. How the show leverages technology was also an important factor in the decision.

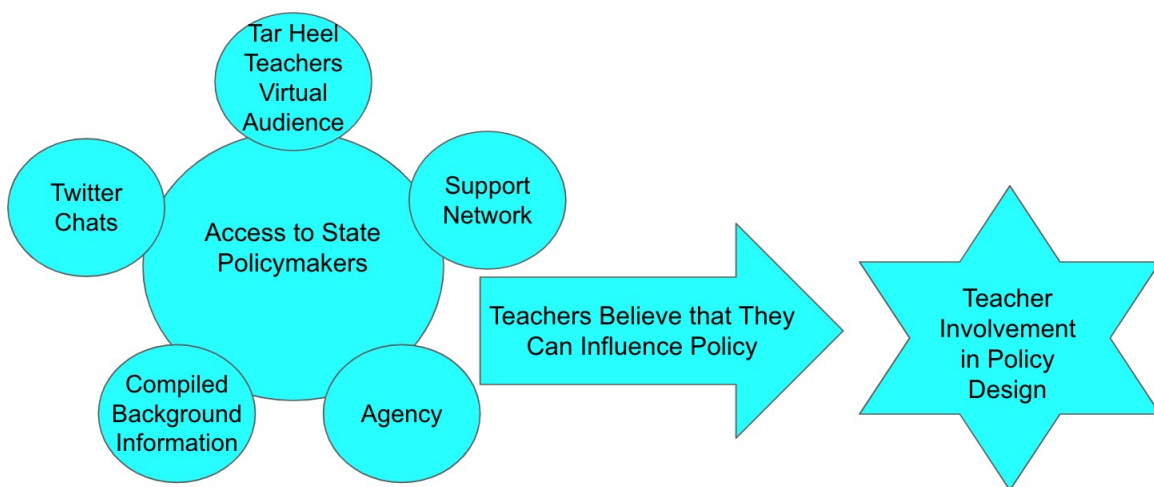
In 2019, *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* premiered as a convenient way to dialogue about what is happening in North Carolina as it relates to public education. This weekly interview

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series is hosted by five educators who are working in different school systems throughout North Carolina. The co-hosts are at different junctures in their careers, which adds to the breadth and depth of the conversation. Each co-host represents a particular subsection of education. Each week's panel includes an elementary school co-host, a middle school co-host, a high school co-host, and a central office co-host. The researcher serves as the moderator of the program. The researcher's on camera role did not affect the improvement initiative because the focus was on the participants' interactions with and perceptions of the state policymakers and the specific educational policies. The show is produced remotely through the Zoom platform so that co-hosts and guests can record from various parts of the state without leaving their homes. The show is distributed through social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, and YouTube. The show is also published on the *Tar Heel Teachers* website.

Figure 4

Components of Original Intervention



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The design team wanted the *Tar Heel Teacher at Home* virtual audience to be a safe supportive network due to the isolating nature of the teaching profession (Good, 2019). Teachers need to feel safe and supported as they address issues with state decisionmakers that impact their schools and districts. As the design team was operationalizing the improvement initiative, they wanted teacher agency to be incorporated. Research shows that teachers need to feel a personal connection to an issue before advocating (Good, 2019). As a virtual audience member, teachers would have the autonomy to bring up issues that were important to them. This improvement initiative was designed with teachers in mind, and additional research was examined to validate the theory of improvement.

Literature Review: Supporting Theory of Improvement

Research outlining the benefits associated with providing teachers with opportunities to influence education policy is extensive, and there is expanding research around how teachers are using and leveraging social media as a form of professional development. This improvement initiative undergirds that there are multiple advantages associated with teachers becoming more engaged in policy design. Policies are strengthened when teachers provide input, and teachers grow professionally when they are provided opportunities to share their experiences and expertise.

The Impact of Teachers as Policy Designers

Including teachers in the development of policy is just as important as building consensus after a policy has been created (National State Teachers of the Year Network, 2015). A teacher's policy role should not be relegated to only providing feedback or closing the implementation

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Gap; they should also be involved in policy design. Organized outlets for policy input allow teachers to provide recommendations that can result in substantial improvements to policy (Good, 2019). Teachers must be offered time and space to advocate substantive issues because it gives them a sense of true professionalism.

Teacher Voice & Improvement Efforts

Russell Quaglia from the Quaglia Institute is one of the leading international researchers as it relates to student, principal, and teacher voice. He created the School Voice Model to frame the importance of amplifying stakeholder perspectives. He also created the Teacher Voice and Aspirations Center (TVAIC) to promote the multilayered benefits of elevating teacher voice at the school, district, and state levels. In 2017, he and Lisa Lande wrote *Teacher Voice: Amplifying Success* as a blueprint for teachers to help them advocate and elevate their voices in a systematic way for the benefit of the profession. *Teacher Voice* is a tool to construct and amplify improvement efforts (Quaglia and Lande, 2017). When teacher voice is truly incorporated in policy design, teachers are fully engaged in the profession and empowered to be solution oriented.

There are eight conditions that make a difference in amplifying teacher voice: belonging, heroes, sense of accomplishment, fun & excitement, curiosity & creativity, spirit of adventure, leadership & responsibility, and confidence to act (Quaglia and Lande, 2017). Teachers must have ownership when it comes to career engagement and retention. Teachers must be an integral part of decision-making, and they must know that their ideas are valued and respected. Once respect is eliminated, teachers will retreat from the profession. This improvement initiative aimed to communicate to teachers that they belong at the decision-making table. Specific

professional development tools and resources are necessary to help enhance teachers' beliefs in their leadership and abilities to enact change, which will improve their willingness to advocate (Good, 2019). Teachers need to see themselves as policy advocates.

Professional Learning Networks

Shrinking professional development budgets have caused educators to turn to digital spaces to continue growing their skillsets (McLeod et al., 2015). One of the key tenets of the improvement initiative was how technology could be used to enhance both teacher voice and professional development, intersecting the functionality and purpose of *Tar Heel Teachers at Home*. By joining the virtual audience and being a part of the *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* community, the participants became members of an online professional learning network (PLN). An online PLN is an asynchronous or synchronous platform that creates space for individuals to collaborate and think critically about a variety of discussion topics and issues that lead to reflection and understanding (Cook et al., 2017). Additionally, the Twitter Chats were designed to be an extension of the online PLN established during the show recordings. Twitter is considered as a 24/7 PLN that has the potential to connect teachers with stakeholders all over the world (Qualia and Lande, 2017). Twitter's format and tweet limitations help teachers to be reflective and is an accessible venue for them to have concise interactions with policymakers (Carpenter, 2015). The platform's design challenges teachers to be intentional about their professional opinions and ideas about education policies, and the length is appealing to busy policymakers who are inundated with information from many sources. The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team envisioned that Twitter would allow teachers across North Carolina to share feedback individually and collectively on education policy without hierarchical

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or bureaucratic barriers and geographical constraints (Carpenter, 2015). The national dialogue about the use of Twitter by governmental officials is continuing to shape and evolve after extensive usage by former President of the United States of America, Donald J. Trump (Masroor, 2019). North Carolina's General Assembly members have not used Twitter to systematically interact with teachers, but the functionality of the platform prompted the North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation to design and schedule Twitter Chats for the participants and special guests.

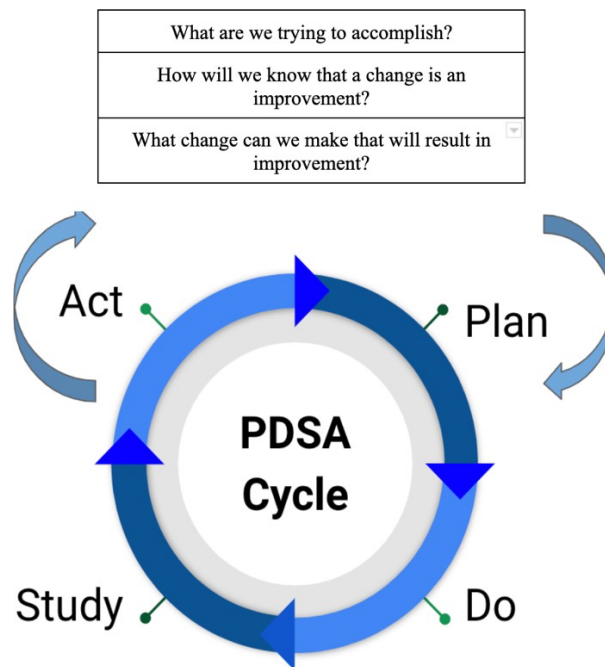
This improvement initiative aimed to add to the research around teacher voice in education policy discussions in addition to teachers' use of technology to interact with policymakers. Various communication platforms including blogs, podcasts, and social media increase opportunities for digital participation in public discourse surrounding public policy (Supovitz et al., 2015). There are three crucial ways that policy is crafted: through text, discourse, and in practice (Good, 2019). *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* was used to include teachers' perspectives in the discourse around education policy. Prior to this improvement initiative, a statewide interview series hosted by a team of teachers and a virtual audience comprised of teachers across the state had not been produced to facilitate conversations between educators and policymakers. Most education-based linear and digital series are hosted by pundits or lobbyists, not teachers. Digital platforms alone do not ensure public engagement (Lomotey and Weiler, 2021). The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team designed the Twitter chats to broaden the discourse to include more teacher voices while also granting teachers opportunities to share how the policy in practice is affecting their students and classrooms.

Improvement Methodology

Improvement Science is a cyclical methodology that is used to gauge if change initiatives bring improvement to organizations. This improvement initiative focused on the relationship between consistent exposure to educational policy discussions and teachers’ beliefs in their ability to influence education policy. Langley et al.’s (2009) Model for Improvement served as the framework for the improvement process. The model is comprised of three essential questions that provide foundational support for the improvement efforts throughout the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PSDA) cycle (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Model for Improvement. From The Improvement Guide: A Practical Approach to Enhancing Organizational Performance 2nd ed.



North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team

The improvement process is collaborative in nature, and the establishment of a design team was crucial to the implementation of this initiative. The design team examining this problem of practice was referred to as the North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team. The team was comprised of individuals who are invested in the elevation of teacher voice as well as a school communications expert. The *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* co-hosts as well as a communications director/public information officer from one of the school systems participating in the improvement initiative made up the North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team. The co-hosts were already invested in activating teacher voice by being a part of the cast. Additionally, they had an insider's perspective as to how the changes to *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* because of the improvement initiative would impact the program. By adding the *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* co-hosts, diverse perspectives of educators were included in the design of the improvement initiative because each co-host is employed by a different school system. The insight that they provided as teacher-leaders who are committed to elevating teacher voice brought a level of credibility and authenticity to the improvement initiative. Communications directors/public information officers are trained to disseminate information to educational stakeholders in an assortment of ways as well as leveraging social media effectively. The communications director helped the North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team to brainstorm many ideas during the planning of the Twitter chats.

Essential Questions

At the start of this intervention, the North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team addressed three essential questions from the improvement model. These questions helped them

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to clarify the specific problem that was being addressed, analyze the difference between change and improvement, and monitor the improvement initiative to ensure that modifications were made when necessary. Overall, these three questions helped the North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team to rely on an improvement process instead of our own ideas (Grunow, 2020).

Question 1: What are we trying to achieve? Through careful analysis and conversations, the team frequently deliberated to determine if the ultimate aim or immediate goals needed to be modified.

Question 2: How will we know that the change is an improvement? Multiple measures were utilized to determine if the changes that were implemented would improve teachers' beliefs in their ability to influence education policy.

Question 3: What change can we make that will result in an improvement? The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team continuously monitored the conditions of participation to determine if adjustments needed to be made to ensure that teachers had access to the show, guests, and an understanding of the educational policies that were raised on *Tar Heel Teachers at Home*.

Improvement Initiative

This improvement initiative was a part of the *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* winter series, and eight special episodes were produced. Members of the General Assembly were featured as special guests, and they were given a platform to discuss a wide variety of topics impacting schools and systems across the state of North Carolina. In Mid-October, the North Carolina

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Teacher Voice Activation Team convened to outline the focus of each episode to ensure that the topics were aligned with the General Assembly's rural priorities and recommendations from the WestEd Report so that the teachers would have authentic opportunities to provide feedback on actual legislative issues. The participants were also selected during this window. In Mid-November, production started on the special politically driven episodes of *Tar Heel Teachers at Home*. Each episode featured one state representative or one state senator. This approach gave members of the General Assembly direct access to teachers, and it also gave teachers insight into education policy discussions at the state level. The topics centered on rural issues and challenges including recommendations related to North Carolina's nearly 30-year-old Leandro case. Eight school districts, one from each of the North Carolina State Board of Education regions, were identified as target areas based on district size and geographical location. One teacher from the selected districts was invited to join the virtual audience of *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* for all eight episodes and represent the perspectives of teachers from the region. The teachers were able to interact with policymakers during the tapings, and there were opportunities for them to ask questions during each show if they wanted to do so. Teachers were also invited to participate in monthly Twitter chats with policymakers to determine if the platform was another viable way for North Carolina teachers and policymakers to discuss key policy issues.

Method for Selecting Teacher Participants

Teachers working in the eight selected public-school units were invited to participate in this improvement initiative as members of the *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* virtual audience. Public notices were shared with each system through internal communications channels. The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team anticipated that multiple teachers would want to

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join the *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* virtual audience, so they designed a review process that was fair and impartial. Some of the deciding factors that the North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team considered included the district's teacher working conditions survey, broadband connectivity, teacher of the year status or other leadership roles, years of experience, and teaching level (elementary, middle, and high school). Several teachers expressed interest but opted out due to the eight-week participation window, which was during the critical period of November-January. It was difficult for the researcher to secure participants from each of the selected school systems. COVID-19 and the specific implementation timeline impacted the researcher's ability to secure steady participants. Additionally, the researcher reviewed each system's teacher working conditions survey. Due to the nature of the improvement initiative, the researcher closely examined each district's teacher working condition survey results (see Table 1) related to teachers feeling comfortable raising issues and concerns.

Excluding Anson County Schools, each district that reported at least 70% of its teachers were comfortable raising issues and concerns had one individual who was willing to participate in the improvement initiative. Only one district (Halifax County Schools) with less than 70% of its teachers feeling empowered to raise issues and concerns had a teacher participate in the improvement initiative. It was difficult to gain any traction in Caswell County Schools or Warren County Schools. The researcher considered whether the limited engagement was because of COVID-19 or a culture of fear.

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Table 1

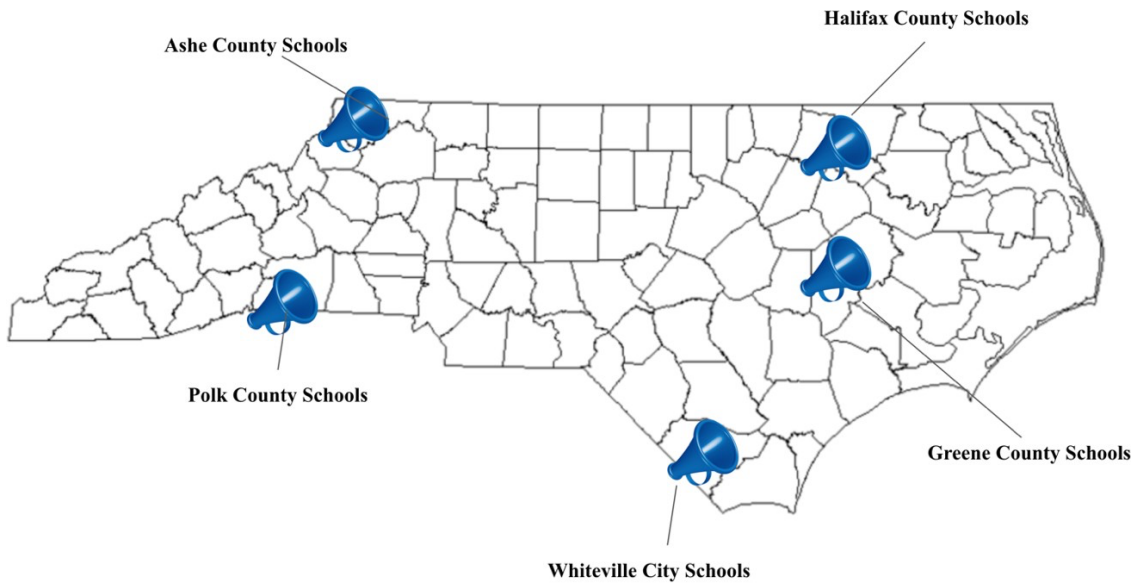
NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey: Teachers feel comfortable raising issues and concerns that are important to them (Question 7B)

District	Strongly Agree + Agree	Strongly Disagree + Disagree
Anson County Schools	74%	26%
Ashe County Schools	82%	18%
Caswell County Schools	63%	37%
Greene County Schools	77%	23%
Halifax County Schools	63%	37%
Polk County Schools	73%	27%
Warren County Schools	59%	41%
Whiteville City Schools	83%	17%

Five teachers committed to participating in the improvement initiative from Ashe County Schools, Greene County Schools, Halifax County Schools, Polk County Schools, and Whiteville City Schools.

Figure 6

Map of Participants' School Districts



Participants selected a pseudonym to be included in this disquisition, and they self-reported their race and gender. Out of five participants, three were female. Two identified as male. Four of the participants identified as White, and one identified as Latinx. A brief overview of participants by demographics is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Participant Pseudonyms and Demographics

Name	Gender	Race	Years of Experience
Abigail	Female	White	18

Donald	Male	White	26
Hillary	Female	White	17
Jackson	Male	Latinx	12
Jennifer	Female	White	23

Method for Selecting Show Guests (General Assembly Members)

The special guests for each show were selected based on a variety of factors including chamber, committee membership, availability, and show topics. Due to the uber-partisan climate of our state and nation (Wines, 2022), the researcher created conditions so that all guests were treated fairly and felt comfortable appearing on the show. The conversations were focused on educational issues instead of narrowing in on political affiliations. Nevertheless, there was a concerted effort to book a balanced guest list of Democrats and Republicans as well as having an even split between state representatives and state senators. Each guest served on the education policy committee either in the North Carolina House or the North Carolina Senate.

The researcher was unable to balance the number of males and females appearing on the show as special guests. Based solely on availability and willingness to appear on *Tar Heel Teachers at Home*, the guest list leaned heavily female with 75% of the guests being women. The female members of the General Assembly seemed more willing to come on the show, and they required less accommodations. The two men who came on the program needed either a phone screening before the recording or opted to bring an associate to the taping for support. Men outnumber women in the General Assembly (see Table 3), so the researcher expected more men to appear on the program particularly the education committee chairmen for both the North

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Carolina House and the North Carolina Senate as well as the one public school teacher who is currently serving in the General Assembly.

Table 3

Gender Disparities between NC Teachers & NC General Assembly

Percentage of NC Teachers & NC General Assembly by Gender		
	NC Teachers	NC General Assembly
Female	71%	26.5%
Male	29%	73.5%

The General Assembly members who appeared on the program had a wide range of experience in the state legislature. One guest is in the middle of her first term while three of them have served in the General Assembly for over a decade. Regardless of their experience level, each guest received an extensive outline for the show so that they knew what to expect during the recording. The participants were able to interact with General Assembly members on and off camera, and legislators were able to think about how they can be intentional as it relates to developing constructive relationships with teachers.

Table 4

Tar Heel Teachers at Home Guest List by Episode

Recording Date	General Assembly Member	Chamber	Terms
November 22, 2021	Ashton Clemmons (D)	NC House 57	2

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November 29, 2021	Amy Galey (R)	NC Senate 24	1
December 6, 2021	Rachel Hunt (D)	NC House 103	2
December 13, 2021	Frank Iler (R)	NC House 17	6.5
December 20, 2021	Charles Graham (D)	NC House 47	6
January 3, 2022	Gladys Robinson (D)	NC Senate 28	6
January 10, 2022	Deanna Ballard (R)	NC Senate 45	3.5
January 17, 2022	Donna White (R)	NC House 26	3

North Carolina Teacher Voice Model

This improvement initiative was guided by the comprehensive systemic process outlined in Langley’s *Improvement Guide* (2009). At the core of the improvement framework was weekly exposure to education policy conversations on special episodes of *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* with state representatives and state senators as special guests. The 45-minute length of each broadcast was designed to keep all participants fully engaged in the political conversations. Participants listened to live interviews during the first 30 minutes of the show, and they were granted space to ask questions during the final 15 minutes of the program as members of the virtual studio audience. The usage of the Zoom platform removed barriers of distance, and technology was leveraged to make the policy discussions more accessible to teachers across the state. Participants were provided ample opportunities to engage with decisionmakers during the show’s taping each week in both formal and informal ways. Participants were also invited to engage with policymakers during monthly Twitter chats. Figure 7 depicts the NC Teacher Voice

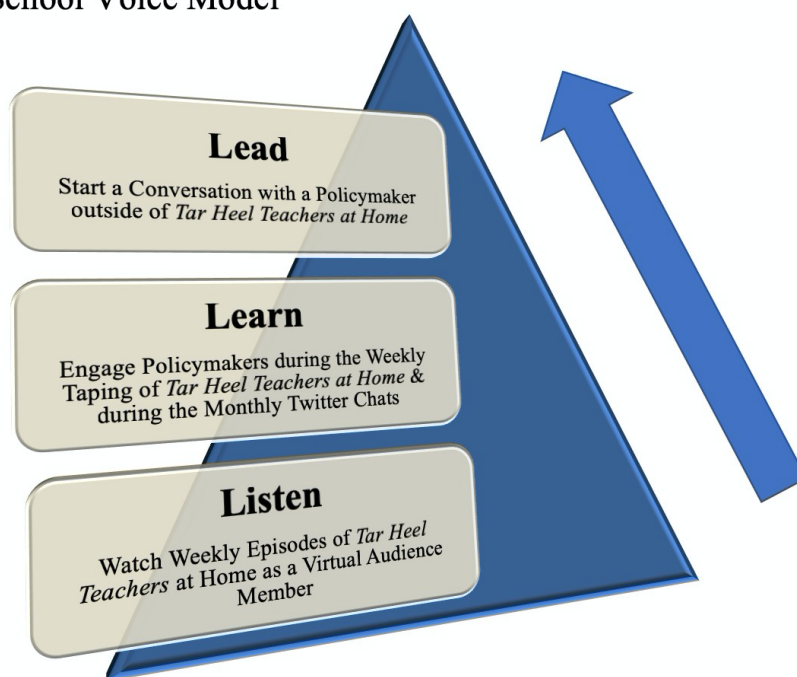
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Model, which guided the improvement initiative. The figure was adapted from Quaglia and Lande’s School Voice Model and was specifically designed to increase the likelihood that the change would be an improvement.

Figure 7

Improvement Initiative Figure (NC Teacher Voice Model) – Adapted from Quaglia and Lande’s School Voice Model

Improvement Initiative Figure – Adapted from Quaglia and Lande’s School Voice Model



Implementation Timeline

The timeline of the intervention from the pre-survey data collection through the post-survey data collection was from November 2021 through January 2022. The intervention sequence was designed to include eight opportunities to be a part of the *Tar Heel Teachers at*

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Home virtual audience with Twitter chats scheduled after the fourth and eighth show recordings.

The show topics were organized around major themes that affect teachers regardless of their setting but are particularly of interest to teachers working in rural environments as outlined in Table 5.

Table 5

Tar Heel Teachers at Home Recording Dates & Major Discussion Topics

Date of Taping	Prominent Topics
November 22, 2021	Leandro Court Case, Teacher Compensation, Calendar Flexibility, & Science of Reading Legislation
November 29, 2021	Teacher Retention, School Finance Reform, Workforce Development, & Master's Pay
December 6, 2021	Teacher Compensation Teacher Assistants, Testing & Accountability, Teacher Shortages, & Teacher Retention
December 13, 2021	Teacher Vacancies, Teacher Compensation, Teacher Assistants, Teaching Fellows, School Calendar Flexibility, & Capital Needs

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December 20, 2021	Testing & Accountability, Support for Low Performing Schools, Leandro Court Case, & School Safety
January 3, 2022	Teacher Compensation, Professional Development, School Safety, & Special Education
January 10, 2022	Child Nutrition Waivers, Principal Licensure, School Psychologists, Literacy Interventions, & Teacher Pipeline Programs
January 17, 2022	School Nurse Shortage, Mental Health, School Safety, & School Infrastructure

The implementation timeline coincided with the release of North Carolina’s first budget in three years. Many of the items that were included in the budget became topics on the show because they were top of mind for the co-hosts and participants.

Episode 1 (November 22, 2021). The improvement initiative began with Representative Ashton Clemmons (D-NC House District 57) as the special guest. Prior to the recording, the participants received background information about Representative Clemmons and several education policies. The episode focused on many topics including the Leandro Court Case, Teacher Compensation, and the Science of Reading Legislation. Four out of five participants attended the first taping, and two of them asked Representative Clemmons questions. Donald

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asked about ways that the state can retain veteran teachers. Jennifer asked about calendar flexibility.

Episode 2 (November 29, 2021). The special guest for the second episode was Senator Amy Galey (R-NC Senate District 24). Prior to the recording, participants received background information about Senator Amy Galey and several education policies. The episode focused on many topics including teacher retention, school finance reform, the intersection of education and industry, workforce development, and master's pay. Two out of five participants attended the second taping, and one of them asked Senator Galey a question. Jennifer asked about calendar flexibility.

Episode 3 (December 6, 2021). The special guest for the third episode was Representative Rachel Hunt (D-NC House District 103). Prior to the recording, participants received background information about Representative Hunt and several education policies. The episode focused on many topics including teacher compensation, teacher assistants, testing & accountability, teacher shortages, & teacher retention. Three out of five participants attended the third taping, and one of them asked Representative Hunt a question. Jackson asked about special education.

Episode 4 (December 13, 2021). The special guest for the fourth episode was Representative Frant Iler (R-NC House District 17). Prior to the recording, participants received background information about Representative Iler and several education policies. The episode focused on many topics including teacher vacancies, teacher compensation, teacher assistants, teaching fellows, school calendar flexibility, & capital needs. All five participants attended the

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fourth recording, and one of them asked Representative Iler a question. Donald asked about the budget process.

Twitter Chat turned Fireside Chat (December 13, 2021). The first Twitter chat was scheduled for December 15th after the fourth episode, and the second Twitter chat was scheduled for January 19th after the eighth episode. The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team reviewed data from the weekly surveys that were completed by participants to compile a list of topics for the Twitter chats. The dates for the Twitter chats were shared with participants and General Assembly members, and everyone was asked to confirm attendance. Participants and General Assembly members expressed that they were unable to commit due to scheduling constraints on December 15th. The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team proposed other dates for the first Twitter chat, but they were unable to confirm a viable date where most participants and General Assembly members could participate. The Twitter chats were designed to provide a way for participants to interact with policymakers in a less structured virtual environment. The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team met to devise an alternative to the Twitter chats. They decided to institute a Fireside chat with one of the guests after the show taping concluded. The co-hosts left the virtual space, and the participants were able to interact with policymakers without the camera rolling. This approach allowed the North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team to maximize the schedule because teachers and policymakers did not have to commit to another day. The first Fireside chat was on December 13th after the appearance of Representative Frank Iler. Additional details about the Fireside chats are outlined in the Formative Evaluation of the Improvement Methodology section.

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Episode 5 (December 20, 2021). The special guest for the fifth episode was Representative Charles Graham (D-NC House District 47). Prior to the recording, participants received background information about Representative Graham and several education policies. The episode focused on many topics including support for students in state custody, testing & accountability, support for low performing schools, the Leandro court case, & school safety. Four out of five participants attended the fifth recording, and none of them asked Representative Graham a question.

Episode 6 (January 3, 2022). The special guest for the sixth episode was Senator Gladys Robinson (D-NC Senate District 28). Prior to the recording, participants received background information about Senator Robinson and several education policies. The episode focused on many topics including teacher compensation, professional development, COVID-19 protocols, & school safety. Four out of five participants attended the sixth recording, and one of them asked Senator Robinson a question. Jackson asked about special education.

Episode 7 (January 10, 2022). The special guest for the seventh episode was Senator Deanna Ballard (R-NC Senate District 45). Prior to the recording, participants received background information about Senator Ballard and several education policies. The episode focused on many topics including child nutrition waivers, principal licensure, school psychologists, literacy interventions, & teacher pipeline programs. All five participants attended the seventh recording, but none of them asked Senator Robinson any questions.

Fireside Chat #2 (January 10, 2022). Due to the scheduling difficulties for the first proposed Twitter chat and the positive feedback regarding the first Fireside chat, the North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team scheduled another Fireside chat on January 10th after

the appearance of Senator Deanna Ballard. Additional details about the Fireside chats are outlined in the Formative Evaluation of the Improvement Methodology section.

Episode 8 (January 17, 2022). The special guest for the eighth episode was Representative Donna White (R-NC House District 26). Prior to the recording, participants received background information about Representative White and several education policies. The episode focused on many topics including the school nurse shortage, mental health supports, school safety, and school infrastructure. Three out of five participants attended the eighth recording, but none of them chose to ask Representative White a question.

Focus Group (January 27, 2022). The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team wanted participants to be able to reflect on their experiences as members of the *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* virtual audience. Therefore, a focus group was held with four out of five participants attending. Hillary was the only participant who missed the focus group.

Measuring Improvement

Proposed and Final Goals of the Study

During the planning phase of the improvement initiative, the North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team established that the ultimate goal for this project was for teachers to be invited by the North Carolina General Assembly to participate in the policy design process. Thinking about long-term impact, the team envisioned a world where the General Assembly would institute a systematic way to solicit feedback from teachers before passing laws that impacted classrooms across the state in the form of a teacher advisory committee or other method where they could gather feedback from education experts and professionals.

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The intermediate goal was to increase teachers' beliefs in their ability to influence education policy. In collaboration with the North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team, the researcher implemented a comprehensive, multi-prong improvement initiative to determine if teachers' beliefs in their ability to influence education policy would increase if they had structured and ongoing opportunities to engage policymakers. Increasing the self-efficacy of North Carolina's teachers was the short-term goal. The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team's explicit goal for the improvement initiative was that the pre-test and posttest comparison will show a 10% improvement in teachers' beliefs in their ability to influence education policy as measured by the Educational Policy Influence Efficacy Survey. Despite the implications from the COVID-19 pandemic and effect that it has had on teachers across the state, the North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team felt that the 10% increase was a realistic goal for the improvement initiative.

Assessments Used

To monitor each participant's progress throughout the improvement initiative, the researcher utilized a mixed-methodology approach to gather data. By employing both qualitative and quantitative, the researcher was able to evaluate various components of the change initiative. In *The Practice of Social Research* (2010), Babbie outlines the function of quantitative research. Quantitative research focuses on collecting numerical data and generalizing it across groups of people. Qualitative research techniques were also used to provide more insight into each participant's experience during improvement initiative. Qualitative research involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data (Babbie, 2010). The inclusion of the qualitative research methods provided the researcher with teacher perspectives that could shed light into how teacher

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voice could be elevated in various parts of the state. Figures 10 and 11 outline the proposed and actual assessment plans during the formative data collection phase.

Figure 8

Proposed Assessment Plan for Formative Evaluation

PROPOSED PRACTICAL EVALUATION MEASURES - FORMATIVE			
TYPE OF MEASURE	Description	Collection Frequency	Evaluation Frequency
Driver Measure	Data from Twitter Chats	Monthly	Monthly
Process Measure	4 Question Online Survey Administered at the End of Each Episode	Weekly	Monthly
Balancing Measure	Run Chart of Participant Attendance	Weekly	Bi-Weekly

Figure 9

Actual Assessment Plan for Formative Evaluation

ACTUAL PRACTICAL EVALUATION MEASURES - FORMATIVE			
TYPE OF MEASURE	Description	Collection Frequency	Evaluation Frequency
Driver Measure	Data from Fireside Chats	Monthly	Monthly
Process Measure	4 Question Online Survey Administered at the End of Each Episode	Weekly	Monthly

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Balancing Measure	Run Chart of Participant Attendance	Weekly	Bi-Weekly
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Process Measure

Process measures help to discover if an intervention is being implemented with fidelity (Langley et al, 2009). The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team designed a 4-question open-ended survey (see Appendix C) to provide feedback on the episode and to share their diverse viewpoints. The 4-question qualitative survey was sent to participants immediately after each episode to allow them to provide a quick assessment. This component was also included to keep the participants engaged as well as to help them reflect. The researcher conducted an informal review each week to determine if adjustments needed to be made within the first cycle of the improvement initiative. The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team reviewed the data after the first monthly cycle to determine if more formal changes needed to be made to the second cycle. The informal and formal reviews showed that the participants felt prepared to participate as members of the *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* virtual audience because of the background information that was provided before each taping. They also communicated in the weekly surveys that all their questions were answered by the North Carolina General Assembly members during the discussions.

Balancing Measure

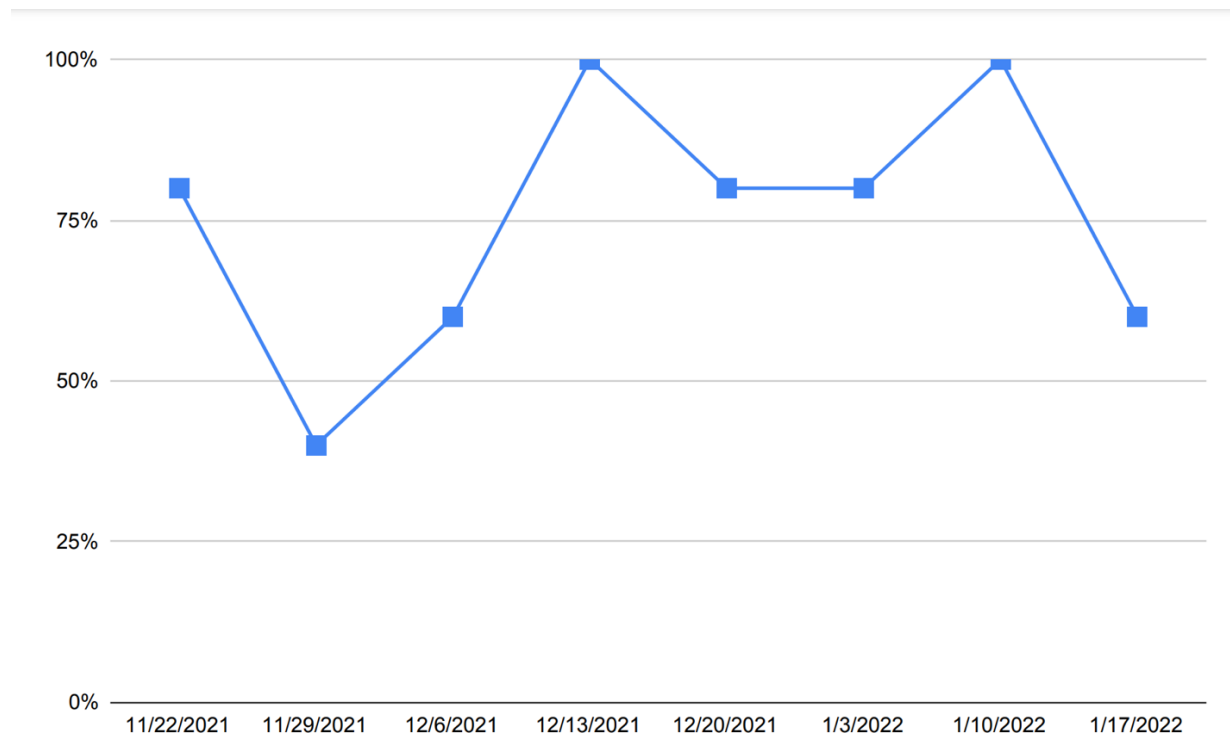
Balancing measures are implemented to monitor any unintended consequences (good or bad) of the improvement effort. These measures ensure that the intervention occurs as designed and to detect if the intervention is causing a negative impact (Crow, Hinnant-Crawford, &

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Spaulding, 2019, pg. 43). The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team chose to track the percentage of participants attending each taping by using a run chart as shown in Figure 12. A run chart or trend chart is a graphical display of data plotted in some type of order (Langley et al., 2009). A run chart was utilized to help show the impact of the implementation timeline on the improvement initiative since the project was enacted around three major holidays. This balancing measure was essential to determine if the improvement initiative was positively or negatively impacted by the implementation window.

Figure 10

Percentage of Participants Attending Each Taping (N=5)



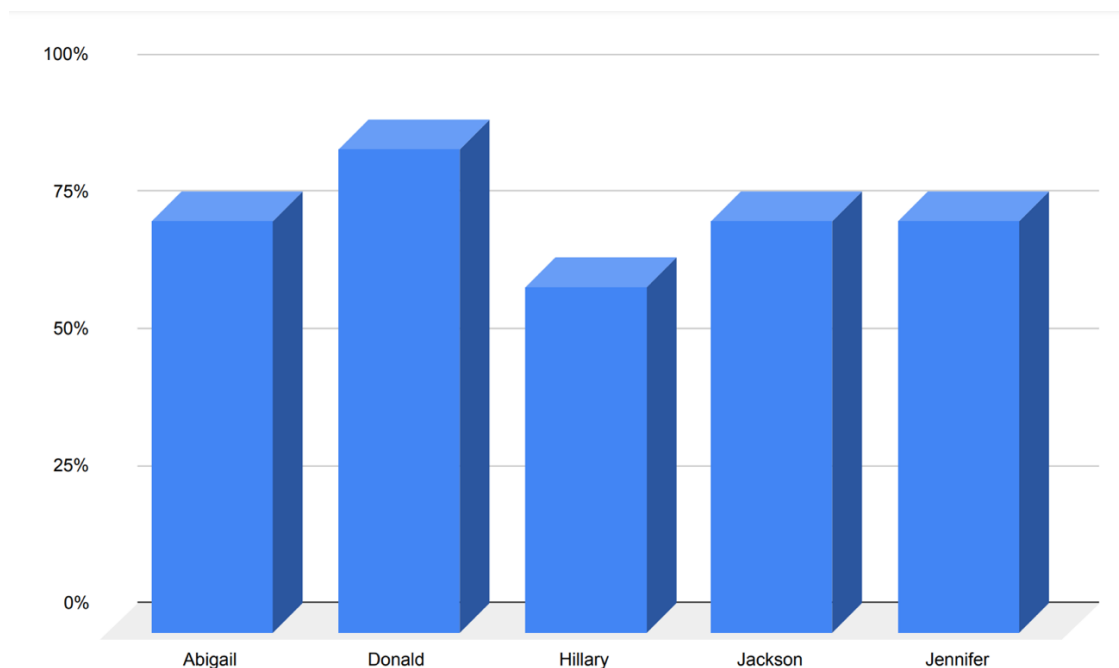
The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team reviewed each participant's attendance every two weeks. During the first week, the goal was met with 80% of participants

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attending. During the second week, attendance dropped to 40%. The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team hypothesized that the decrease could be related to the show being recorded the day after the Thanksgiving holiday. As a way of stabilizing attendance, the researcher sent out Remind messages on the morning of each taping and an hour before the recording started. Attendance never dipped to 40% again after the reminders started. Final results show that none of the participants attended all eight tapings. Donald attended seven out of eight recordings. Abigail, Jackson, and Jennifer attended six out of eight recordings. Hillary attended five out of eight recordings. Overall, four out of five participants attended 75% of the tapings as members of the *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* virtual audience.

Figure 11

Percentage of Taping Attendance by Each Participant



Driver Measure

The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team designed monthly Twitter chats to serve as a less formal way for teachers to engage with members of the North Carolina General Assembly. Data from the Twitter chats were connected to the driver measure, which was used to help determine if progress was being made toward the immediate goals of the improvement initiative (Langley et al., 2009). Because of COVID-19's impact on teachers and scheduling conflicts, the Twitter chats were converted to Fireside chats so that the participants would not have to attend another event. The Fireside chats took place immediately after two recordings (December 13, 2021 and January 10, 2022) so that the participants could still engage with policymakers in a more informal space. The data that were collected during the monthly Fireside chats to monitor teachers' engagement with policymakers and general statements about their efficacy in influencing policy. The survey responses and observations from the Fireside chats were coded using In Vivo and Descriptive coding methods for first cycle coding, allowing codes to rise organically from the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2015).

Formal Evaluation

The improvement initiative followed the tenets of the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycle. The Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycle was originally used to generate improvement in the healthcare field (Langley et al., 2009) Since then, the process has been a foundational tool of improvement science in many fields including education. The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team designed two PDSA cycles to gauge the effectiveness of the interview series, *Tar Heel Teachers at Home*, as a vehicle to improve teacher voice in North Carolina particularly as it relates to educational policy discussions. The show is produced weekly, and four episodes

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are produced each month. There were two PDSA cycles to monitor engagement over the course of two months (eight episodes). The NC Teacher Voice Activation Team used PDSA cycles to ensure effective and purposeful engagement throughout the eight weeks. During the *Plan Phase*, the North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team convened to discuss the key components of the improvement initiative. They verified the guest list, and they ensured that it was balanced in terms of political affiliation. They also reviewed participation list by region. They also outlined the show topics with an intense focus on rural issues, the Leandro Case, and recommendations outlined in the WestEd Report. The North Carolina teacher Voice Activation Team also discussed the supporting materials and resources that would be shared with the participants, co-hosts, and special guests. In the *Do Phase*, the participants joined the *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* virtual audience, and eight special episodes were produced with members of the General Assembly as special guests. Participants started to submit both qualitative and quantitative data, and the researcher monitored attendance rates and participant engagement. The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team met during the *Study Phase* to determine the effectiveness of the intervention. They reviewed engagement data and monitored participation rates to see any trends were starting to develop. They reexamined show topics to see if the conversations were resonating with the participants. After participants and General Assembly members communicated that they were unable to participate in the Twitter chats, the North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team had to take immediate action during the *Act Phase* by shifting the Twitter chats to Fireside chats.

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Cycle 1

The first PDSA cycle spanned the first month and a half of the improvement initiative from November 1st through December 15th included planning and implementation. The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team evaluated the progress of the intervention after the first cycle concluded and provided feedback before the second cycle was initiated. Participants seemed to enjoy being in the *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* virtual audience based on feedback from the 4-question open-ended survey, data from the first Fireside chat, and participant attitudes. The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team decided to make one additional change to the improvement initiative aside from shifting the Twitter chats to the Fireside chats. The Fireside chat modification did not seem to have an adverse effect on the intervention because participants were still able to interact with policymakers in a more informal way. To gather another level of feedback from participants, the North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team opted to add a focus group at the end of the improvement initiative.

Cycle 2

The second cycle covered the second month of the intervention. Following the comprehensive midpoint debrief, the North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team decided to move forward with the second half of the improvement initiative. Cycle 2 consisted of four more opportunities for participants to join the *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* virtual audience. The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team opted to shift the second Twitter chat to a Fireside chat after positive feedback from participants following the first Fireside chat. The second Fireside chat occurred on January 10th after the recording of the 7th episode. This date was selected to avoid scheduling challenges so all participants could attend. A virtual focus group was added by the North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team to give participants one final opportunity

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to share how the improvement initiative has impacted them.

Impact

Both quantitative and qualitative measures were used to determine the impact of this improvement initiative (outcome measures). The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team wanted to utilize both types of data collection to have a comprehensive understanding of the usefulness of this initiative as a viable way to engage other teachers in education policy conversations and ultimately to incorporate teachers in the policy design process. In an effort to provide purposeful analysis and outline major themes, the researcher utilized data integration. Each method is delineated, followed by the consolidated analysis.

Figure 12

Proposed Assessment Plan for Summative Evaluation

PROPOSED PRACTICAL EVALUATION MEASURES - SUMMATIVE			
TYPE OF MEASURE	Description	Collection Frequency	Evaluation Frequency
Outcome Measure	Pre and Post Surveys Adapted from Dr. Hinnant-Crawford's Educational Policy Influence Efficacy Scale	Before and After Implementation	Before and After Implementation

Figure 13

Actual Assessment Plan for Summative Evaluation

ACTUAL PRACTICAL EVALUATION MEASURES - SUMMATIVE			
TYPE OF MEASURE	Description	Collection Frequency	Evaluation Frequency
Outcome Measure	Pre and Post Surveys Adapted from Dr. Hinnant-Crawford's Educational Policy Influence Efficacy Scale	Before and After Implementation	Before and After Implementation
	Focus Group	After Implementation	After Implementation

Quantitative Data Collection & Results

The researcher administered an online survey before and after the intervention to collect quantitative data. Specifically, the Educational Policy Influence Efficacy Scale (Hinnant-Crawford, 2016) was administered to teachers before and after the improvement initiative as an outcome measure. The instrument (see Appendix A) was designed to gather responses from teachers regarding confidence in their ability to influence education policy. There are two types of items on the instrument: micropolitical behaviors and overtly political behaviors. The survey was slightly modified (see Appendix B) to see if teachers were more willing to engage policymakers based on a specific level (local, state, or federal jurisdiction). The North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team initially reviewed the results of the pre-survey/efficacy scale to determine baseline data for teachers’ beliefs in their ability to influence education policy. The

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efficacy scale was administered again to determine the impact of the intervention. Results were analyzed to determine each participant's percent change, as shown in Table 6. The results covered a broad spectrum.

Table 6

Endpoint Percent Change in Overall Efficacy Scores by Participant

Participant "Name"	Beginning Efficacy Rating	Endpoint Efficacy Rating	% Change Beginning to Endpoint
Abigail	3.6	3.6	0%
Donald	3.4	3.7	8.82%
Hillary	3.3	3.4	3.03%
Jackson	3.8	3.4	-10.53%
Jennifer	4.3	4.1	-4.65%

Note: Beginning and Endpoint scores indicate the arithmetic mean of each participant's scores on ten questions. Scores range from 1-5, with 5 being the highest.

Additionally, the percentage change for each question (See Appendix B) was examined by participant, and an average percent change was found by each question, as shown in Table 7.

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Table 7

Percent in Score by Question for Each Participant and Average Change for All Participants from Beginning to End of Project

Name	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
Abigail	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Donald	50.00	50.00	50.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	25.00	-50.00
Hillary	-50.00	-50.00	50.00	25.00	0.00	0.00	25.00	25.00	25.00	0.00
Jackson	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	-80.00
Jennifer	0.00	0.00	-25.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	-25.00	-25.00	33.33
Average Change	0.00	0.00	15.00	5.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	5.00	-19.33

Note. Q=question. Numbers presented are percentages.

Overall results were analyzed using a paired samples *t* test. The paired samples *t* test compares the means of two measurements taken from the same person, object, or related units (Saldana, 2016). The results from this test, shown in Table 8, were taken before the intervention and after the invention. The results were statistically non-significant in the score of overall efficacy in teachers' beliefs in their abilities to influence education policy $t(4) = .331, p = .75$. These results suggest the exposure to education policy discussions impacted participants in more anecdotal ways.

Table 8

Results from Paired Sample t Test of Overall Results

	Paired Difference				Lower	Upper	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	M difference	<i>SD</i>	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
Pre- /posttest	.040	.270	.121	-.296	.375	.331	4	.757	

The calculated difference was analyzed for each of the 10 questions on the Educational Policy Influence Efficacy Survey. Results showed that there was no statistical significance for any of the questions, as shown in Table 9.

Table 9

Results from Paired Sample t Test of Each Question

Questions	T	df	p-value
Once a local education policy is in place, I cannot do anything to challenge it.	.000	4	1.00
Once a state education policy is in place, I cannot do anything to challenge it.	.000	4	1.00
Once a federal education policy is in place, I cannot do anything to challenge it.	.535	4	.621
I can determine when to speak out about decisions made in my school.	-1.000	4	.374

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I can influence state leaders to consider my opinions in decision-making.	.-	-	-
I can contribute ideas when discussing solutions to educational problems.	.-	-	-
I can contact local policymakers to share my insights on education.	-1.000	4	.374
I can contact state policymakers to share my insights on education.	.000	4	1.000
I can influence education policy by working with other teachers in groups like the National Education Association (NEA), North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE), or subject specific groups like NCTE or NCTM.	-.535	4	.621
If I believe a policy is not in the best interest of my students, I can seem like I'm adhering to the policy, even when I am not.	.930	4	.405

Note: Significance=less than 0.05

Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data collection was employed to flesh out participant responses to quantitative surveys, as a means of adding context to their responses, and recognizing related themes. To assess the overall outcome that the improvement initiative had on participants, the North Carolina Teacher Voice Activation Team recommended that the researcher assemble the teachers into a focus group so that they could unpack their experiences as members of the *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* virtual audience. The focus group was held one week after the final taping. In vivo coding and descriptive decoding were utilized to capture participant responses. In vivo

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coding records direct quotes from research participants to represent their authentic voices, phrases, and ideas while descriptive coding links major topics and ideas (Saldana, 2016).

Overall Analysis of Results

The overall results on the Educational Policy Influence Efficacy Scale were not statistically significant. The efficacy scores for two participants improved while there was a decline for two participants. One participant's efficacy score remained the same from the beginning of the improvement initiative through the end. None of the participants met the North Carolina TeacherVoice Activation Team's initial goal of a 10% improvement in their efficacy score. The goal was realistic for each participant. However, the well-documented state of affairs as it relates to North Carolina's educational landscape and the current climate may have impacted the growth for the participants during this improvement initiative. Teachers in North Carolina have collectively had to deal with partisan divides and polarization for nearly a decade. It may take longer than two cycles of this improvement cycle to convince teachers that they can play a significant role in impacting and designing education policy in this state. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has seemed to exasperate the problem of teachers feeling powerless because of the persistent stress. It is hard to contemplate influencing and addressing statewide issues when you can barely handle the day-to-day pressures at the school level. The implementation timeline may have shaped the participants' experiences during the improvement initiative.

Analysis of Results for Selected Participants

As shown in Table 5, the participant whose efficacy rating increased the most was Donald. He was the most consistent participant. He only missed one *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* taping. He was also the participant who was most likely to ask a question during the recording. He seemed willing to engage in the process, and he was very open throughout the experience. He just moved to North Carolina a few years ago, which could be one of the reasons that he does not

have a fixed mindset when it comes to interactions with the North Carolina General Assembly. He described guests as “truly genuine.” He may feel more empowered to engage with the North Carolina General Assembly because he believes that he will have genuine interactions with them.

The only other participant whose efficacy rating improved was Hillary. Her efficacy score was the lowest when she completed the pre-survey, but it increased slightly after the improvement initiative. It is also interesting that her efficacy increased because her attendance was lower than the others. She only joined the *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* virtual audience for five out of the eight recordings. Hillary never asked any questions during the show, but her responses to the weekly 4-item questionnaire showed that she was very thoughtful and reflective about each guest and what he or she had to share during the show. She consistently shared in her response that she wanted to know more, which may indicate that she would be willing to engage with the policymakers outside of the show.

Qualitative Analysis of Focus Groups

Three major themes rose to the surface after the researcher employed in vivo coding to organize common thought patterns among the participants as it relates to elevating teacher voice in education policy discussions and the viability of *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* as a vehicle for teachers to engage with policymakers. The overarching themes were convenience, collective voice, and the necessity of a safe space. Each theme is described and examined in relation to findings from the focus group.

Convenience. A major theme that emerged is that if teachers are going to engage with policymakers, it must fit alongside the teachers’ [?] numerous professional and personal responsibilities.

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Participants routinely communicated that they were busy and had to juggle many roles. During the focus group, Donald and Abigail, said that their plates were “full.” When participants had to miss a recording, they indicated that it was because of scheduling issues as opposed to their being disinterested in attending. Policymakers need to provide convenient opportunities for teachers to share their professional expertise. *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* was described as a convenient way for teachers to interact with policymakers. Jackson mentioned that being a member of the virtual audience was “very convenient for us after school and work while staying at home and relaxing; still you’re engaging in something important by listening to senators and representatives who deal with education.” He went on to say, “It’s very useful for us. For us to be a part of this program is really important. I encourage more teachers to be a part of this program.” Abigail also spoke about how convenient it was to be part of the *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* virtual audience. She added, “I thought it was very convenient. I mean, it’s not right after school, so you’re not dead tired. Seven o’clock was good. I mean, you got time to go home, get the kids settled, eat a little bit and then get up there and Zoom in. The fact that you can just do that means it’s a lot easier nowadays.” Teachers need opportunities to engage with policymakers that are not taxing or too intrusive into their worlds so that advocacy will not be overwhelming.

Collective Voice. Another major theme that surfaced was around the importance of teachers being organized and collectively advocating for the needs of the profession. Donald shared that it is hard to influence education policy as an individual. He said that, “it almost has to be an uprising, and I don’t mean that word belligerently. But collective as a group, our voice needs to be heard and understood a little better.” Donald recognized that teachers can be more influential if they advocate as a group. A few of the policymakers encouraged teachers to

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communicate shared ideas to the NC General Assembly. Jennifer expressed that she felt more empowered to speak up because she knew that she was not alone as a member of the *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* virtual audience. She shared, “there were several people who were kind of on the same page and made you think of other things that you hadn’t really voiced yourself.” Jackson said that teachers have, “the same advocacy to help, to improve our educational system.” There is power in numbers, and the participants felt more capable of advocating because other teachers had similar ideas and professional opinions.

The Necessity of a Safe Space. Fear is a barrier to teachers advocating for the profession. They do not want there to be a backlash if they speak about political issues. Jennifer conveyed that teachers, “fear for their job.” She went on to say that teachers need to know that, “it’s going to be a safe space and there’s not going to be any kickback from their opinions being voiced.” Abigail shared that the safe space may be teachers’ own classrooms. She said that she would like to even the playing field by inviting policymakers into her classroom. She added, “let them come in and they can see what we do, and then we can feel comfortable talking to them.” General Assembly members should visit schools and classrooms so that they can talk with teachers in environments where they are more comfortable.

Limitations and Recommendations

Limitations

As with most research projects, there were several limitations associated with this improvement initiative. One of the major limitations was the sample of participants. The original goal was for eight teachers to participate, one from each of the North Carolina State Board of

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Education regions. Only five teachers participated in the improvement initiative so there were three regions that were not represented. The participant demographics were limited as well with four Caucasian and one Latinx teacher. Increasing the sample size and diversifying the participants are recommendations for further study.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the impact that it has had on North Carolina's teachers also restricted the teachers' full participation in the improvement initiative. Teachers were unable to commit to the Twitter chats because of scheduling and exhaustion. Teachers are tapped at the end of the school day because they must cover classes due to employee absences because of the pandemic as well as ongoing teacher shortages. The Twitter chats were designed to provide space for teachers to interact with policymakers in more informal ways. Further research could investigate if the Twitter chats help teachers to feel more empowered in their interactions with policymakers.

Lessons for Social Justice

A key component of this improvement initiative was to center the voices of rural teachers. Most school systems in North Carolina are located in rural counties. It is imperative that rural teachers are included and consulted when state initiatives and laws are developed. Rural districts face unique challenges, and teachers in these communities are positioned to offer relevant insight. Technology is a tool that can be utilized to connect rural teachers with policymakers across the state. Policymakers must be willing to acknowledge that policies can be improved if teachers from diverse communities are invited to share their expertise. Teachers in rural environments are more likely to work with a higher concentration of students living in poverty, which means that their perspectives are particularly important.

Lessons for Political Programming for Teachers

The teachers who participated in this important initiative shared that they had limited interactions with state policymakers and specific policies before joining the *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* virtual audience. Infrequent exposure to certain topics causes some teachers to feel intimidated and discouraged because they do not feel adequately prepared. Education by design is political. Teachers should be offered a specialized public policy course during undergraduate programs or before they enter the classroom as foundational knowledge. Teachers should also have ongoing opportunities to learn more about the political process through education policy conferences and workshops. The NC General Assembly could also release education briefs that truly are digestible for busy teachers who want to stay informed.

Recommendations for the NC General Assembly

The researcher recommends that the North Carolina General Assembly explore ways to involve more teachers in the policy design process. The Governor's Office and the North Carolina State Board of Education identify teacher advisors who can provide feedback and insight on education policies. Some local boards of education and district superintendents also invite teacher leaders to participate in the decision-making process. Both chambers of the North Carolina General Assembly should consider including teacher voice in the policy design process so that teachers will not have to rectify policies during the implementation process. One of the most convenient ways that the General Assembly could involve teachers is through virtual townhall meetings that are specifically for these frontline educational experts. To start the process of engaging teachers in education policy discussions, these virtual townhall meetings

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should be scheduled at least quarterly and during convenient time intervals so that teachers across the state can participate.

Recommendations for School District Leaders

Teachers are employees in each public school system, but they are impacted by the decisions that are made at the state level. School districts cannot dictate how the North Carolina General Assembly or other state agencies involve teachers in the policy design process. School districts can be more intentional when it comes to involving teachers in the implementation of state policies at the local level. As often as possible, school districts should purposefully include a diverse set of teachers in the decision-making process as a way of recognizing teachers as the experts that they are. By granting teachers choice and elevating teacher voice, districts communicate that they value and respect the contributions of the teachers.

Recommendations for Continued Scholarship

Implementing this improvement initiative around Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day affected participation and attendance levels. One of the chief recommendations for continued scholarship is to implement this intervention earlier in the school year so that major holidays will not interrupt the implementation window or cause scheduling conflicts for some of the project components. Research could also explore the longer-term impact that the experience had on the teacher participants to determine if their attitudes changed over time and if they remained in the teaching profession. Additionally, this improvement initiative involved teachers across the state who work in rural school systems. Further research could be conducted to explore the impact that being in the *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* virtual audience had on

suburban and urban teachers.

Conclusion

Elevating teacher voice in North Carolina is an inexpensive way that schools, districts, and the state can improve working conditions for nearly 100,000 teachers nobly serving. By denying teachers access to decision-making tables and settings, policymakers are overlooking expert opinions and practical knowledge that can help to save time and resources for the state. The result is dissatisfied teachers who want to leave the profession, which costs the state millions of dollars in terms of recruitment and retention efforts.

This improvement initiative aimed to empower teachers across North Carolina to engage state representatives and state senators in structured ways that leverage technology tools so that the interactions were convenient for teachers. By participating in education policy discussions, teachers were able to advocate for themselves, their students, and the profession. This research represents a critical first step because teachers need to be systematically incorporated in the policy design process, which will yield stronger policies with less unintended consequences that waste time and resources. Members of the General Assembly should develop long-term plans that regularly include teachers in the creation and implementation of policies that directly and indirectly affect the classroom. *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* will be revamped due to this improvement initiative. Each quarter, members of the North Carolina Assembly will be invited to the show as special guests so that teachers and policymakers are interacting frequently. Teachers from across the state will be routinely invited to share their professional perspectives as members of the virtual audience. The virtual audience is a non-threatening way to include more

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teachers without putting them on the spot. Over time, teachers will feel more empowered to interact with policymakers outside of *Tar Heel Teachers*. The ultimate goal is for North Carolina to be a model state in terms of teachers being involved in the policy design process with teachers and policymakers regularly engaging in productive and respectful conversations. State agencies across the country can replicate this format and provide teachers with a platform to contribute to education policy discussions.

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Appendix A: Educational Policy Influence Efficacy Scale

Education Policy Influence Efficacy

1. Once a school policy is in place, I cannot do anything to challenge it.
 2. Once a federal policy is in place, I cannot do anything to challenge it.
 3. I can determine when to speak out about decisions made in my school.
 4. I can influence school leaders to consider my opinions in decision-making.
 5. I can contribute ideas when discussing solutions to educational problems.
 6. I can contact policymakers to share my insights on education.
 7. I can influence education policy by working with other teachers in groups like the National Educators Association (NEA) or subject specific groups like NCTE or NCTM.
 8. When policies are implemented, I disagree with, I can close my classroom door and do my own thing.
 9. When policies are implemented, I disagree with, I can convince other teachers not to follow the policy.
 10. If I believe a policy is not in the best interest of my students, I can seem like I'm adhering to the policy, even when I am not.
-

Appendix B: Modified Educational Policy Influence Efficacy Scale

Modified Education Policy Influence Efficacy

1. Once a local education policy is in place, I cannot do anything to challenge it.
 2. Once a state education policy is in place, I cannot do anything to challenge it.
 3. Once a federal education policy is in place, I cannot do anything to challenge it.
 4. I can determine when to speak out about decisions made in my school.
 5. I can influence state leaders to consider my opinions in decision-making.
 6. I can contribute ideas when discussing solutions to educational problems.
 7. I can contact local policymakers to share my insights on education.
 8. I can contact state policymakers to share my insights on education.
 9. I can influence education policy by working with other teachers in groups like the National Educators Association (NEA), North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE), or subject specific groups like NCTE or NCTM.
 10. If I believe a policy is not in the best interest of my students, I can seem like I'm adhering to the policy, even when I am not.
-

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Appendix C: NC Teacher Voice Weekly Survey

Question 1:	What are your key takeaways from this week's episode?
Question 2:	What did you want to hear that was omitted?
Question 3:	What questions do you still have for this week's guest?
Question 4:	Next week's guest is_____. What topics would you like to see discussed?

Appendix D: Participants Flyer

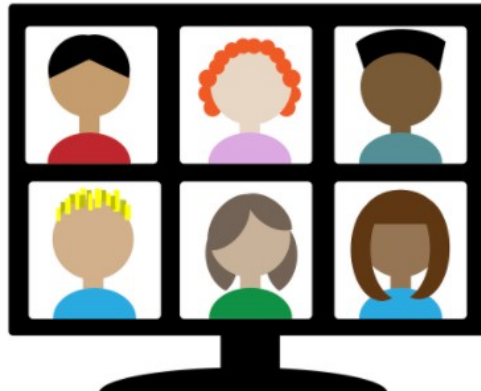


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Appendix E: *Tar Heel Teachers at Home* Episodes

- November 22, 2021 Episode – [Interview with Representative Asheton Clemmons](#)
- November 29, 2021 Episode – [Interview with Senator Amy Galey](#)
- December 6, 2021 Episode – [Interview with Representative Rachel Hunt](#)
- December 13, 2021 Episode – [Interview with Representative Frank Iler](#)
- December 20, 2021 Episode – [Interview with Representative Charles Graham](#)
- January 3, 2022 Episode – [Interview with Senator Gladys Robinson](#)
- January 10, 2022 Episode – [Interview with Senator Deanna Ballard](#)
- January 17, 2022 Episode – [Interview with Representative Donna White](#)