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No Solutions, Only Trade-Offs? Evidence about Goal Conflict in Street-Level Bureaucracies

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Theories of goal conflict suggest that public organizations confront two possibilities when they face multiple policy goals: (1) organizations attain synergy among lower-order, instrumental goals in order to achieve higher-order objectives, or (2) organizations face a zero-sum trade-off among goals. Implicit in this debate is the proposition that trade-off is more likely when performance toward the attainment of multiple goals is measured with substantively exclusive metrics and under varying environments of task difficulty. This research examines which of these theories appears to explain the implementation and interaction of multiple policy goals in the context of Georgia public high schools. The findings demonstrate the highly contingent nature of goal synergy and trade-off. While goal synergy is possible in the interaction of multiple lower-order goal attainment, more robust gains can be made toward a higher-order objective by focusing on one particular lower-order goal rather than an all-inclusive approach to goal attainment.

Street-level bureaucrats face an array of task demands that must be balanced under time constraints and with limited resources (Lipsky 1980). These task demands often represent broader policy goals that managers in street-level bureaucracies must attempt to reconcile with one another, particularly as resource constraints prohibit them from pursuing all goals with full force. Policy goals often conflict with one another—particularly in an environment in which goal prioritization is ambiguous (Chun and Rainey 2005)—yet elected officials increasingly support the creation of specific, measurable performance metrics against which public agencies are evaluated (Moynihan 2008; Radin 2006). At the same time, managers rely on street-level bureaucrats to use their discretion effectively in these highly contingent environments. If managers are interested in obtaining organizational-level objectives that are defined by these performance metrics, and the metrics themselves appear to reflect substantively disparate goals, what are the consequences for service delivery?

At least two outcomes are possible when public managers are forced to balance multiple goals. The first is

that goals can be accomplished synergistically, such that achieving more than one policy goal simultaneously can make it *more likely* that the agency achieves benefits above and beyond its proximate expectations (Chackerian and Mavima 2000; Wenger, O’Toole, and Meier 2006). An alternative view is that managers are forced to make trade-offs between goals that are substantively incompatible (Chackerian and Mavima 2000; Slocum, Cron, and Brown 2002). Under this scenario, these trade-offs reflect a zero-sum game in which efforts directed toward one policy goal detract from other lower-order policy goals but may still be related to the ability to obtain benefits (higher-order objectives) that are not specifically required in the day-to-day operation of the organization.

The purpose of this article is to compare how these two theories explain goal conflict. Using a data set of Georgia public high schools, we test whether schools that accomplish lower-order education goals (e.g., compliance, discipline, athletics) are able to simultaneously accomplish a higher-order goal (e.g., graduating students). We also test whether the achievement of one lower-order goal comes at the cost of another, as their interaction relates to the obtainment of a higher-order objective. We begin by reviewing the literature on organizational goals and goal conflict and then move to a discussion about goal conflict in the context of public schools. After describing our data set, variables, and method, we review the key findings from our analysis and close with policy implications and suggestions for future research.

Organizational Goals and Goal Conflict

Goals are the “value premises that can serve as inputs to decisions conveyed in the laws and regulations that justify policy and its implementation” (Simon 1997, 152). Laws mandate *official* organizational goals, which are “the general purposes of the organization as put forth in the charter, annual reports, public statements by key executives, and other authoritative pronouncements” (Perrow 1961, 855). The best predictors of behavior within organizations,

however, “are not the official goals, but those that are embedded in major operating policies and the daily decisions of the personnel” (Perrow 1961, 854). This axiom is especially evident in street-level bureaucracies, in which organizational outcomes are arguably aggregates of the individual decisions made by frontline workers, who are typically afforded broad discretion in delivering public services (Lipsky 1980).

Decision makers must often make choices based on a wide array of goal types and dimensions, and therefore they must either synthesize goals to the decision problem or choose among them. Chackerian and Mavima (2000) argue that at the organizational level, goals might be *synergized*, or attained interactively in order to multiply the benefits inherent to any one individually. They argue that various policies can interact in ways that multiply benefits or in ways that significantly conflict, “with clear winners and losers” (2000, 357–58). In other words, lower-order policy goals can either interact in harmony to advance the attainment of a higher-order objective or produce conflict that prevents it.

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The relative interaction of goals is “constrained by the institutional environment” (Chackerian and Mavima 2000, 355). Even when performance metrics are vertically imposed on subunits of an organizational structure (such as schools in districts), managers often encourage employees to achieve some goals at the expense of others (Hall 2007). The goal environment reflects a system of levers in which employee discretion is broadened and narrowed by both internal and external actors in the policy process (Chun and Rainey 2005). However, this discretion is never completely determined in the “rule saturated, but not rule-bound” task environment of street-level service organizations (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, 10), largely because of the contingent and nuanced environments in which street-level bureaucrats work.

Organizations guided by conflicting mandates experience substantial transaction costs as those mandates are vertically integrated, and this becomes particularly problematic for agencies with limited capacity (Wood and Bohte 2004) and/or a mandate to produce highly individualized policy outputs (Lipsky 1980). Explicit and quantifiable goals may be poor predictors of how policies contribute to social outcomes (Radin 2004). There is the potential conflict of “client-centered goals versus organizational goals” as actors must choose between goals when the best interests of service recipients collide with employee incentives (Lipsky 1980, 44). Goal conflict can also be more difficult to manage in environments of scarce resources (Donahue, Selden, and Ingraham 2000; Meyers, Riccucci, and Lurie 2001; Riccucci et al. 2004; Smith and Larimer 2004) or intensified task difficulty (Hamidullah, Wilkins, and Meier 2009; Meier and O’Toole 2003). As we discuss in more detail later, this is amplified in public schools, where client (student) needs become more difficult to address in a solitary fashion, depending on the economic disparities across student populations.

Goal Conflict in Public Schools

Public schools provide an excellent context in which to examine goal conflict. Four factors suggest that schools will provide a tough test for producing synergies between goals. First, official goals are

by nature ambiguous in education. School mandates are organized holistically around a service recipient (the student) rather than individually around discrete objectives. Second, schools have multiple and complex goals. The goals that are most appropriate for one student are likely to be inappropriate for another, which results in multiple goals when student needs are aggregated to the school level. For example, one student may need assistance in preparing for college, while another may desire only to graduate from high school, two goals that may be difficult to achieve simultaneously. Third, schools rarely have the resources they need to comfortably accomplish their goals (Burtless 1996), which may exacerbate goal conflict. Finally, task difficulty is not uniform across schools, and those with students from low-income backgrounds face challenges that schools with wealthier students do not have to consider. These considerations are seldom applied to the calculation of resource allocation, thereby hamstringing the ability of schools with disadvantaged populations to obtain equitable returns on investment (Kozol 2005; cf. Hanushek and Lindseth 2009, who argue that more money is not necessarily the solution to improved academic outcomes).

We examine goals in the context of schools as they exist on four dimensions: (1) *compliance*, or the extent to which a school has made “adequate yearly progress” in No Child Left Behind (NCLB) assessment; (2) *order and discipline*, or the extent to which the school has focused on rehabilitative and progressive student discipline policies; (3) *athletics*, measured using a standardized point system awarded to high school athletic programs for achievement across all sports; and (4) *graduation*. This last goal, we argue, represents a higher-order objective for schools, in that it represents the school’s end-stage goal for all students and goes further than the others in preparing students for success in adulthood. In the following sections, we discuss how these four dimensions of goals operate among public schools in different institutional environments and specify how goal conflicts are likely to emerge.

Compliance

The goals of the No Child Left Behind law are improved academic achievement for all students, enhanced equity, and assurance of quality teachers for all students.¹ To gauge advancement toward academic achievement, the NCLB requires states to set yearly goals for schools and districts. “Adequate yearly progress” (AYP) is the required metric used to gauge whether schools, school districts, and states are meeting objectives for student performance on statewide tests in reading and mathematics. States are required to identify the schools and districts that make and do not make AYP, stipulating that all students must be proficient in reading and mathematics by 2014. The law requires a minimum of 95 percent participation of all students and subgroups of students in the statewide assessment program. Subgroups include minority students, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students. If participation overall or in one or more subgroups is below 95 percent, a school or school division is not considered to have made AYP regardless of the percentage of students demonstrating proficiency.² Schools that do not meet targets are subject to interventions that include offering students the ability to transfer out of a school at that school’s

expense, withholding federal funding, or closing “failing” schools (Darling-Hammond 2004).

Order and Discipline

A school’s discipline policy can have far-reaching consequences. In the public education context, policy tools designed to respond to student behavioral problems can be defined as either more likely to support learning and capacity building or as more closely associated with potentially stigmatizing sanctions. For example, schools might execute simple “punishments” that provide little in the way of rehabilitation—these tools might include expulsion or out-of-school suspension. The use of such tools in recent years has been heightened, as a number of schools have initiated “zero-tolerance” policies toward some student behaviors, leading to automatic suspension or expulsion (Kaufman et al. 2001). Research indicates that feelings of exclusion and denigration are prevalent among those who are subject to these types of disciplinary actions (DeRidder 1991; Gershoff 2002; Owen 2005; Strauss 2001).

On the other hand, schools also have the option of using more complex and costly disciplinary techniques that are rehabilitative in nature, such as in-school suspension or alternative school arrangements. In these cases, students are kept in the school environment and usually receive some sort of counseling or behavioral therapy aimed at addressing the issues behind the student’s misbehavior (Green and Barnes 1993; Lawrence and Olvey 1994; Short, Short, and Blanton 1994). These types of actions, particularly when compared to simple punitive actions, are more likely to promote self-discipline and personal responsibility for conduct (Kadel and Follman 1993; Short, Short, and Blanton 1994; Siskind et al. 1993).

Athletics

Many school districts face tough decisions about how to divide funds between academic and athletic programs. Arguments for athletic participation focus mainly on the range of ancillary benefits that participation accrues, such as character building, teamwork, lower dropout rates (Mahoney and Cairns 1997; McNeal 1995), and improved academic performance (Otto and Alwin 1977; Takemura, Maehara, and Kobayashi 2007). As Meier et al. document, these arguments have “long been a justification for the expenditure of a great deal of time and public money by school districts, students, and communities” (2004, 799–800). There is a strong tradition, especially in the South, that is fundamentally grounded in the pride and prestige that comes from success in athletics (see Bissinger 1991). The impetus for this is typically found in the community. Nonetheless, the notion that this goal can be generalized as a priority across districts or schools (even within the South) is problematic, particularly given the resource limitations that many schools face. This presents the possibility that avoidance of interaction between athletic achievement and other lower-order goals is the preferred course of action for schools that face more restrictive resource constraints.

Graduation Rates

College readiness is the primary goal for many students who attend high school, but for a number of others, graduation is a

more important concern. Most students who graduate from high school never complete college and a large minority never attend college, especially those who come from financially disadvantaged backgrounds (Burtless 1996; Vleminekx and Smeeding 2003). Therefore, the graduation rate may be *the* primary end-stage objective of schools with large percentages of lower-income students, and schools with low standardized test scores may be evaluated on their graduation rate as a secondary indicator.³ Because graduation is a secondary consideration of AYP, we expect that the lower-order goals that compete with NCLB compliance, such as athletics and discipline, are more likely to be marginalized in efforts to graduate students.

Potential Conflicts

It is unclear whether accomplishing NCLB compliance goals can interact synergistically with athletic performance and rehabilitative discipline to achieve the higher-order objective of graduation. NCLB compliance is likely to be the most important politically. If faced with a limited pool of resources or environments of high task difficulty, it seems unlikely that schools would choose to divert capital *away* from NCLB compliance, particularly those that have difficulty making AYP. This raises the question of whether schools can pursue all lower-order goals simultaneously. As we pointed out earlier, graduation rates are a secondary consideration of AYP. Therefore, we should expect a positive relationship between compliance and graduation rates. The expected relationship between compliance and this higher-order objective might, in turn, disincentivize organizations toward the attainment of other lower-order goals.

For example, there is substantial evidence that discipline goals conflict with lower-order academic goals related to NCLB compliance. Even prior to the NCLB requirements, Poland (2000) reported that school principals who devoted curriculum time to anger management and violence prevention were “under tremendous pressure to raise academic scores on the state accountability test” (quoted in Kohn 2004, 93). Augustina Reyes of the University of Houston noted a similar conflict between compliance and discipline: “If teachers are told, ‘Your scores go down, you lose your job,’ all of a sudden your values shift very quickly. Teachers think, ‘With bad kids in my class, I’ll have lower achievement on my tests, so I’ll use discretion and remove that kid’” (Fuentes 2003, 20). Schools are incentivized to focus their energies on achieving the highest possible “pass rate” on standardized tests, which may be at odds with implementing a progressive discipline policy (Bohte and Meier 2000).

Similarly, we expect that the relationship between athletics and NCLB compliance is likely to reflect both resource scarcity and the substantive dissimilarity of the goals themselves. Athletic performance goals are generally unambiguous: winning is a strong and accurate measure of success. Accordingly, as Meier et al. (2004) argue, the attainment of these goals may conflict with “fuzzier” academic achievement goals. A strong commitment to athletics may also compete with a school’s academic mission by inculcating “conflicting values” and diverting scarce resources from academic goals (Meier et al. 2004, 800). While athletic involvement may have positive effects on participants’ academic performance, resources

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devoted to athletics may have negative academic impacts on nonathletes (Meier et al. 2004). At the same time, an organizational culture that prioritizes athletic success could promote widespread involvement in athletics, which, in turn, could indirectly lead to positive academic outcomes. However, the relationship between athletic outcomes and academic success on a *schoolwide basis* has not been tested in the literature. We suspect that the indirect link between athletic and academic performance is marginal in the aggregate. As a result, we expect that success in athletics will conflict with NCLB compliance on two primary bases: (1) that it is connected to a reallocation of resources that would potentially be spent on academic initiatives, and (2) that schoolwide athletic success is not substantively compatible with the ability to achieve NCLB compliance for the student population generally.

Data and Method

To test the extent to which these types of lower-order goals conflict with one another or are synergized toward the attainment of the higher-order objective of graduation, we use a data set of all public high schools in the state of Georgia during the 2007–8 academic year ($N = 345$). To determine how these goals potentially conflict under different task environments, we split the sample by high and low values of student poverty, measured by the percentage of students receiving free lunch. This measure has been evidenced as an important indicator of task difficulty in public school settings (e.g., Keiser et al. 2002; Meier and O’Toole, 2001, 2003), reflecting “the truism that some students are easier to educate than others” (Hamidullah, Wilkins, and Meier 2009, 6–7). Task difficulty can determine the methods that teachers use to deliver curriculum, the setting and nature of student interaction, the ability of teachers to give attention to students’ individualized needs, and teachers’ allocation of time and ancillary resources.

In addition to testing the model with the entire sample population, the sample is also split above and below its median value of the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch over the entire sample (42.69 percent) to account for differences in relative task difficulty. The dependent variable for our analyses is the *graduation rate*. Descriptive statistics for all variables appear in tables 1A and 1B.

Table 1B Descriptive Statistics, Comprehensive Population

	Mean	S. D.	Min.	Max
Graduation rate (%)	72.491	13.133	0	100
Athletic achievement index	148.605	142.331	0	830
Rehabilitative discipline policy	0.600	0.249	0	1
No Child Left Behind index	1.714	4.423	–5	10
Student enrollment (logged)	6.864	0.803	3.178	8.155
Student racial/ethnic diversity	0.386	0.185	0.008	0.733
Free/reduced price lunch students (%)	0.411	0.218	0	1
Students with disabilities (%)	0.119	0.123	0	2.108
Limited English proficiency students (%)	0.022	0.044	0	0.410
Average administrator salary	75.092	7.906	0	100.26
Average administrator experience (years)	20.640	4.777	0	43
Average teacher salary	47.784	3.033	36.750	60.071
Average teacher experience (years)	13.291	2.590	2.222	19.550
Teachers with advanced degrees (%)	57.419	9.732	0	90
Student–teacher ratio	15.982	15.982	0.56	124

We include as independent variables a series of lower-order goals that we argue may come into conflict in the process of increasing a school’s ability to achieve a higher-order objective of graduation. The first of these is *athletic achievement*, which we measure using the number of points a school has earned toward the Georgia Athletic Directors Association’s Director’s Cup. Each school is awarded a certain number of points based on its success in the 25 official Georgia High School Association sports.⁴ Scores on this variable (over the entire sample) ranges from 0 to 830, with an average of 148.126.

We also include a variable that measures school success in adhering to No Child Left Behind regulations. We create an *NCLB Index* based on the following formula:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{NCLB Index} = & \text{Consecutive years adequate yearly progress (AYP) is met} \\ & + \text{number of years AYP is met with distinction} \\ & - \text{number of years school qualifies as “Needs} \\ & \quad \text{Improvement”} \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

This formula creates a variable with both positive and negative values. Positive values indicate that a school has consistently met AYP standards, with high values awarded to schools that meet AYP with distinction. Negative values indicate that a school has consistently qualified as “Needs Improvement.” In our data, the NCLB

Table 1A Descriptive Statistics, Low and High Task Difficulty Populations

	Low Task Difficulty (Free/reduced price lunch students < 41.12%)				High Task Difficulty (Free/reduced price lunch students > 41.12%)				
	Mean	SD	Min.	Max	Mean	SD	Min.	Max	p-value
Student–teacher ratio	16.551	8.727	0.561	124	15.452	3.023	3.105	25.962	0.103
Teachers with advanced degrees (%)	59.486	10.139	0	90	55.558	8.976	19.231	80	0
Average teacher experience (years)	13.154	2.533	2.222	19.55	13.415	2.64	2.346	19.185	0.339
Average teacher salary	48.483	3.032	37.084	60.071	47.155	2.9	36.75	54.962	0
Average administrator experience (years)	20.379	4.057	7	34	20.875	5.343	0	43	0.324
Average administrator salary	76.333	6.661	40.174	97.858	73.975	8.747	0	100.26	0.004
Limited English proficiency students (%)	0.02	0.028	0	0.162	0.024	0.054	0	0.41	0.441
Students with disabilities (%)	0.111	0.157	0	2.108	0.127	0.079	0.036	1	0.221
Free/reduced price lunch students (%)	0.224	0.125	0	0.409	0.58	0.126	0.414	1	0
Student racial/ethnic diversity	0.383	0.175	0.013	0.692	0.389	0.194	0.008	0.733	0.771
Student enrollment (logged)	7.014	0.855	3.178	8.155	6.729	0.73	3.332	7.92	0.001
No Child Left Behind index	4.374	4.262	–4	10	–0.656	2.988	–5	10	0
Rehabilitative discipline policy	0.634	0.245	0	0.96	0.57	0.249	0	1	0.014
Athletic achievement index	209.407	209.407	0	830	94.137	81.743	0	370	0
Graduation rate (%)	78.997	10.906	43.7	100	66.72	12.233	0	91.2	0

index ranges from -5 ("Needs Improvement" for five previous years) to 10 (met AYP with distinction for all five previous years) in both samples.

Our third independent variable for lower-order goals is the extent to which a school implements a *rehabilitative discipline policy*. Rehabilitative discipline is more expensive and time-consuming to administer than punitive discipline, and, to the extent that scarce resources must be allocated across different goals, we expect that focusing on rehabilitative discipline will come at the expense of other lower-order goals. At the same time, such a focus may keep students in school who would have otherwise dropped out, thereby leading to higher graduation rates. We measure rehabilitative discipline as the percentage of all disciplinary actions that are rehabilitative in nature (Roch, Pitts, and Navarro 2010):

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Rehabilitative discipline} = & \text{In-school suspensions} \\ & + \text{alternative school assignments} \\ & + \text{out-of-school suspensions} \\ & + \text{expulsions} \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

Our data set includes schools at both extremes: some use only punitive discipline and others use only rehabilitative discipline.

We also include a series of control variables to take into account characteristics that potentially affect graduation rates. We control for five characteristics of the student population. First, we include a measure of *total school enrollment*. We also control for the percentage of *students with disabilities* and the percentage with *limited English proficiency*.

We control for *student race/ethnicity* by using a Blau index of dissimilarity:

$$D_i = 1 - \sum p_j^2 \quad (3)$$

where D measures the racial/ethnic diversity of each school (i) by taking the sum of the proportions of students (p) in each racial/ethnic group (j). This yields a value of 0 for schools in which all students belong to the same racial/ethnic group and a value of 0.833 for schools in which students are dispersed equally among the six racial/ethnic categories used by the Georgia Department of Education.⁵

In addition to the aforementioned student-focused variables, we include a series of six variables about teachers and administrators: *average administrator salary* and *years of experience*; *average teacher salary* and *years of experience*; *percentage of teachers with advanced degrees*; and *student-teacher ratio*.⁶

We use moderated multiple regression (MMR) to examine goal conflict, with the following estimating equation for each sample:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 N_i + \beta_2 R_i + \beta_3 A_i + \beta_4 N_i R_i + \beta_5 N_i A_i + \beta_6 R_i A_i + \beta_7 N_i R_i A_i + \beta_8 S_i + \beta_9 T_i + \beta_{10} I_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (4)$$

where Y_i = the average SAT score or graduation rate; N_i = NCLB compliance; R_i = rehabilitative discipline; A_i = athletic achievement index; S_i = vector of student control variables; T_i = vector of teacher and administrator control variables; I_i = vector of control variables for quality of instruction.

MMR is an ordinary least squares model that includes a series of two- and three-way interaction terms designed to examine how our three lower-order goals work together (or do not) to affect graduation rates. While interpreting the results is slightly more cumbersome than in a strictly linear model, this provides a more nuanced account of the extent to which the relationship between any given lower-order goal and a higher-order objective is moderated by the other two lower-order goals. A statistically significant coefficient for the two-way and three-way interaction terms is evidence that moderation is at work (Dawson and Richter 2004). All other relationships are modeled as linear with the exception of school enrollment, which is logged. We use robust standard errors clustered by school district.⁷ Consistent with the points made in the foregoing sections, we expect goal conflict across schools. Therefore, if there are moderating effects among lower-order goals, we expect them to be negative. In environments of high task difficulty, we expect conflict among lower-order goals to be exacerbated.

Table 2 Regression Results

	Graduation Rate		
	High Task Difficulty	Low Task Difficulty	Comprehensive
	Unstand. Coefficients	Unstand. Coefficients	Unstand. Coefficients
NCLB compliance index	1.712*** (0.468)	4.407*** (0.408)	2.333*** (0.398)
Rehabilitative discipline policy	-6.767 (4.341)	26.260*** (5.307)	0.510 (4.071)
Athletic achievement index	0.005 (0.028)	0.108*** (0.022)	0.039** (0.019)
NCLB compliance index × Rehabilitative discipline policy	-0.524 (0.965)	-5.316*** (0.675)	-1.859*** (0.627)
NCLB compliance index × Athletic achievement index	-0.004 (0.042)	-0.015*** (0.003)	-0.006** (0.003)
Rehabilitative discipline policy × Athletic achievement index	-0.001 (0.042)	-0.136*** (0.032)	-0.033 (0.028)
Three-way interaction term	0.002 (0.009)	0.021*** (0.004)	0.008** (0.004)
Student enrollment (logged)	-2.542 (1.689)	-0.117 (1.316)	-1.023 (1.024)
Student racial/ethnic diversity	3.985 (3.836)	1.339 (4.244)	2.384 (2.646)
Low-income students (%)	-14.389** (6.611)	-28.608*** (6.659)	-10.205*** (3.286)
Students with disabilities (%)	-77.623*** (12.116)	-59.699** (22.630)	-66.831*** (12.262)
Limited English proficiency students (%)	-33.682** (13.273)	-3.078 (21.843)	-29.241*** (10.405)
Avg. administrator salary (\$ thousands)	-0.211* (0.115)	-0.280** (0.108)	-0.311*** (0.099)
Avg. administrator experience (years)	0.193 (0.170)	-0.138 (0.184)	0.151 (0.146)
Avg. teacher salary (\$ thousands)	1.292*** (0.439)	0.864*** (0.284)	1.217*** (0.336)
Avg. teacher experience (years)	-1.053*** (0.392)	-0.792** (0.373)	-1.310*** (0.306)
Teachers with advanced degrees (%)	0.022 (0.094)	0.091 (0.084)	0.004 (0.069)
Student-teacher ratio	-0.073 (0.454)	-0.564* (0.321)	-0.222 (0.307)
Constant	70.903*** (19.467)	66.084*** (10.727)	70.210*** (13.887)
N	181	163	344
Adjusted R^2	0.448	0.708	0.641

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$ (two-tailed).
Clustered robust standard errors in brackets.

Findings

At first glance, we find that all coefficients of interest in the model for low task difficulty environments are statistically significant. This suggests that the lower-order goals, in this task environment, do have moderating effects on one another's relationship with the higher-order goal. For the high task difficulty model, we find that only NCLB compliance has a statistically significant, positive association with graduation rate. Additionally, we do not find moderating effects among competing lower-order goals, suggesting (if anything) that single, lower-order goals work in isolation from one another toward the attainment of higher-order objectives in such environments. Finally, for the comprehensive model, we find that most of the coefficients of interest are statistically significant, with the exception of rehabilitative discipline and the interaction between rehabilitative discipline and athletic achievement, while the three-way interaction among lower-order goals is statistically significant. This, too, suggests that lower-order goals have moderating effects on one another's relationship with graduation rates (see table 2).⁸

These interaction terms prevent us from relying on individual coefficients to interpret the substantive relationships. Our lower-order goal variables appear in the model four times each: once as a base variable, twice in two-way interaction terms, and once in the three-way interaction term. In order to interpret the three-way interaction of the competing lower-order goals, we compute the slope of the dependent variables on each independent variable of interest when the competing lower-order goals are held at various combinations of high and low values (Dawson and Richter 2004).⁹ For each model, this gives us a total of four slopes for each of our lower-order goal independent variables. For example, we are able to understand how athletic achievement is associated with graduation rates under four different scenarios: (1) in a school with low NCLB compliance

and low rehabilitative discipline, (2) in a school with high NCLB compliance and high rehabilitative discipline, (3) in a school with high NCLB compliance and low rehabilitative discipline, and (4) in a school with low NCLB compliance and high rehabilitative discipline.

If there are no moderating impacts, the slopes will be identical. The slopes become different as the moderating influences grow larger. Evidence of goal conflict between the lower-order goal of interest and the other lower-order goals will appear when the slope for graduation rate on that particular lower-order goal is more *positively* pronounced under conditions in which the competing lower-order goals *are not* being met (or more *negatively* pronounced under conditions in which any one of the competing goals *are* being met). Conversely, evidence of goal synergy between the lower-order goal of interest and the other lower-order goals will be when the slope for graduation rate on that particular lower-order goal is more positively pronounced under conditions in which the competing lower-order goals are being met at high levels.

Figure 1 demonstrates the relationship between NCLB compliance and graduation rates in high and low task difficulty task environments, as well as across schools ("comprehensive"). In the comprehensive sample, the regression lines for all four scenarios are positive and statistically significant at the 0.05 level. For environments of low task difficulty (i.e., schools with fewer than the median number of free lunch students), the regression lines in two of the four scenarios are positive and statistically significant: low rehabilitative discipline/low athletic achievement and high rehabilitative discipline/high athletic achievement. Each coefficient for high rehabilitative discipline/low athletic achievement and low rehabilitative discipline/high athletic achievement is negative but nonsignificant.

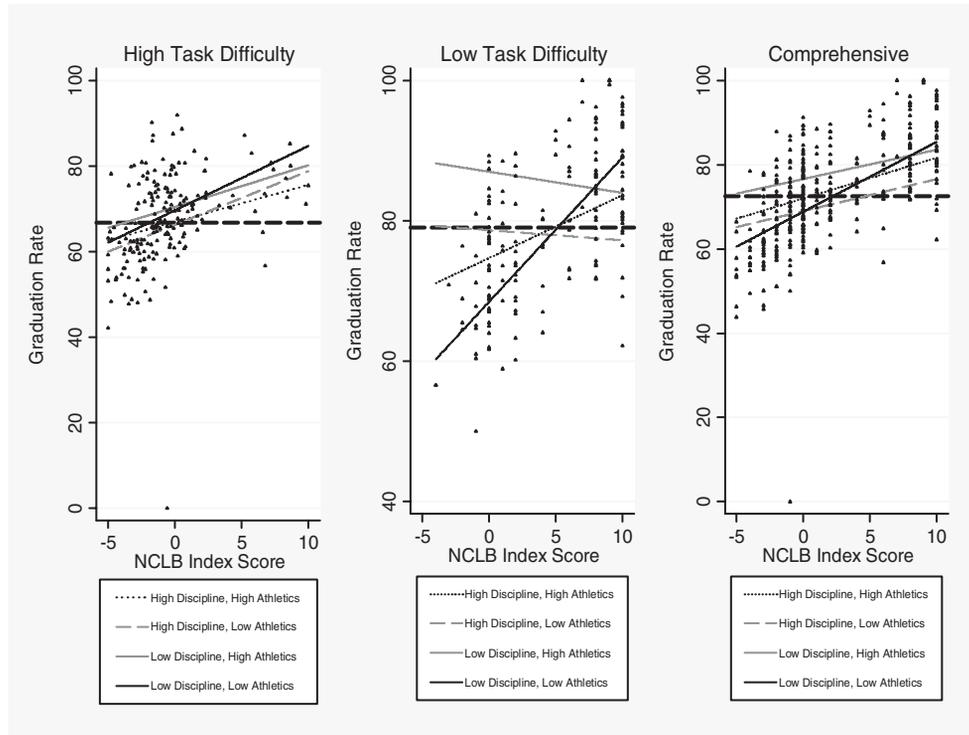


Figure 1 Regression Slopes for Graduation Rate on NCLB Compliance

While the relationship between NCLB compliance and graduation rates appears to be positive generally, the *magnitude* of the association is moderated by schools' athletic achievement and rehabilitative discipline outcomes. Across the entire sample, an increase of one unit in the NCLB compliance index corresponds to an average increase in graduation rate of 1.66 percent in schools with *low* athletic achievement and *low* rehabilitative discipline. The same increase in NCLB compliance corresponds to an average graduation rate increase of only 0.96 percent in schools with *high* athletic achievement and *high* rehabilitative discipline.¹⁰ In low task difficulty environments, the difference is more pronounced—a one-unit increase in NCLB compliance corresponds to a 2.06 percent and a 0.90 percent increase, respectively. These findings suggest that the potential for accomplishing synergy among lower-order goals is outweighed by the robustness of the relationship between NCLB compliance and graduation rates when competing lower-order goals are held at low levels. Thus, avoidance of competing lower-order goals, with a focus on NCLB compliance, seems to be the optimal option for the attainment of the higher graduation rates in low-difficulty task environments or across schools generally.

However, in high task difficulty environments, we find some evidence that synergy between at least two lower-order goals is possible. Each of the slopes for NCLB compliance is statistically significant and positive. There is, however, a statistically significant, one-tailed difference ($p = .054$) between conditions in which competing goals are held at high levels and when they are held at low levels, with the latter being more robustly positive. This, too, indicates that avoidance of competing lower-order goals is optimal to attempts at goal synergy.

Overall, it makes sense that schools would be able to adopt courses of action that work toward accomplishing both NCLB compliance

and higher graduation rates simultaneously. Taken as a pair, these two goals are not incompatible, and the evidence of relative synergy that we find in the results for institutional environments of low and high task difficulty mesh well with evidence on the types of goals, and the contexts, that are likely to produce problematic conflict (e.g., Meyers, Riccucci, and Lurie 2001). Indeed, the relationship between these objectives could be endogenous.¹¹ Yet if NCLB compliance is endogenous to graduation rate, then our results might indicate that when NCLB compliance is held at a high level, the slope of any other competing goal will be more robustly positive than when NCLB is held at a lower level. However, our findings indicate that the relationship between any competing goal and graduation rate is usually more positive when NCLB is held at a low level (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean). At the very least, we find that there is variation among the slopes of competing lower-order goals (regardless of the direction of the relationship) when holding NCLB constant at different levels. Moreover, if NCLB is endogenous with graduation rates, our findings should show equally robust and positive relationships with graduation, regardless of the level at which attainment toward a competing goal is held. We do not find this. Indeed, the relationship between NCLB and graduation is more robustly positive when competing goals are held at low levels, across our models. Additionally, when the competing goals are dropped from the models for graduation rate, the coefficients and standard errors in the high task difficulty model do not change appreciably, thereby providing further evidence that these lower-order, instrumental goals are not generally effective in reaching the larger fundamental goal of graduation with high low-income populations.

Figure 2 depicts the relationships that rehabilitative discipline has with graduation rate under various conditions of task difficulty and

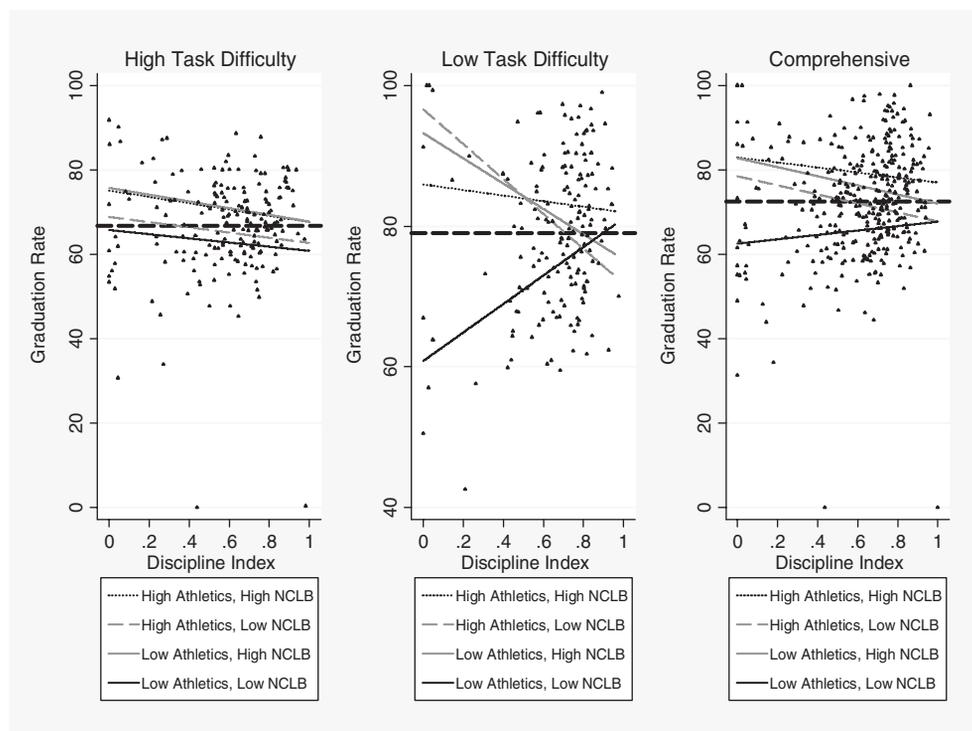


Figure 2 Regression Slopes for Graduation Rates on Rehabilitative Discipline

goal conflict. For institutional environments of low task difficulty (the middle panel of the figure), the findings are similar to those for the NCLB model. The only statistically significant, positive coefficient in low task difficulty environments for rehabilitative discipline is when the competing goals are held at low levels. When either NCLB or athletic achievement is held at a high level and the other competing goal is held at a low level, the coefficient for graduation rate on rehabilitative discipline is negative and statistically significant. In the figure's left panel, we find that there is no difference among the conditional slopes in high task difficulty environments, thereby nullifying any contention that the interaction of rehabilitative discipline with competing lower-order goals is more or less likely to lead to students graduating in high task difficulty environments. For the figure's right panel, we find that all of the slopes are negative, with the exception of when competing goals are held at low levels. Nonetheless, this slope is not statistically significant.

Finding only one of the four slopes to be positive and statistically significant in the low task difficulty model suggests that a focus on rehabilitative discipline has a weaker relationship with graduation rates than we found for NCLB compliance in figure 1. The advancement of the higher-order objective is only related to rehabilitative discipline in schools that rate low in both NCLB compliance and athletics. This suggests conflict among these lower-order goals in schools that struggle to meet expectations on *any* dimension of performance, and discipline problems only exacerbate existing issues in academic and athletic achievement. Promoting student rehabilitation through a progressive discipline policy may be a threshold requirement for advancing the school's performance in these other areas, which is certainly more crucial for schools that are low on all dimensions than those that are high on at least one of the other dimensions of performance.

Figure 3 illustrates that the relationship with graduation rate is the same for athletics as for NCLB compliance in environments of low task difficulty, with two of the four slopes being positive and statistically significant. As with our findings for NCLB compliance, we see that the significant relationship takes place in contexts that are low in both rehabilitative discipline and NCLB compliance or in contexts in which both competing goals are being met at high levels—suggesting an all-or-nothing approach. Like the model for NCLB compliance, however, we find that more robust gains in graduation rates are attained when both competing goals are held at low levels. The differences between the slopes for low rehabilitative discipline/low NCLB and high rehabilitative discipline/high NCLB are statistically significant at the 0.05 level ($p < .003$).

In a high task difficulty environment, none of the respective slopes is statistically significant. In the comprehensive model, our results are similar to those in low task difficulty environments. We find a significant and positive relationship in contexts of low rehabilitative discipline/low NCLB compliance or high rehabilitative discipline/high NCLB compliance. However, we find that more robust gains in graduation rates are attained when both competing goals are held at low levels ($p < .073$, one-tailed).

One might argue that our findings do not reflect any action on the part of the school, but rather the fact that a school's students will be predisposed to do well or poorly on all of these goals. We guard against this sort of spuriousness by including control variables that reflect such a predisposition on a number of dimensions, including race/ethnicity and the percentages of low-income students, students with disabilities, and students who speak limited English. We also control for a number of factors related to administrators and teachers, helping ensure that the relationships that we uncover do not reflect systematic differences in staff education or experience. Even

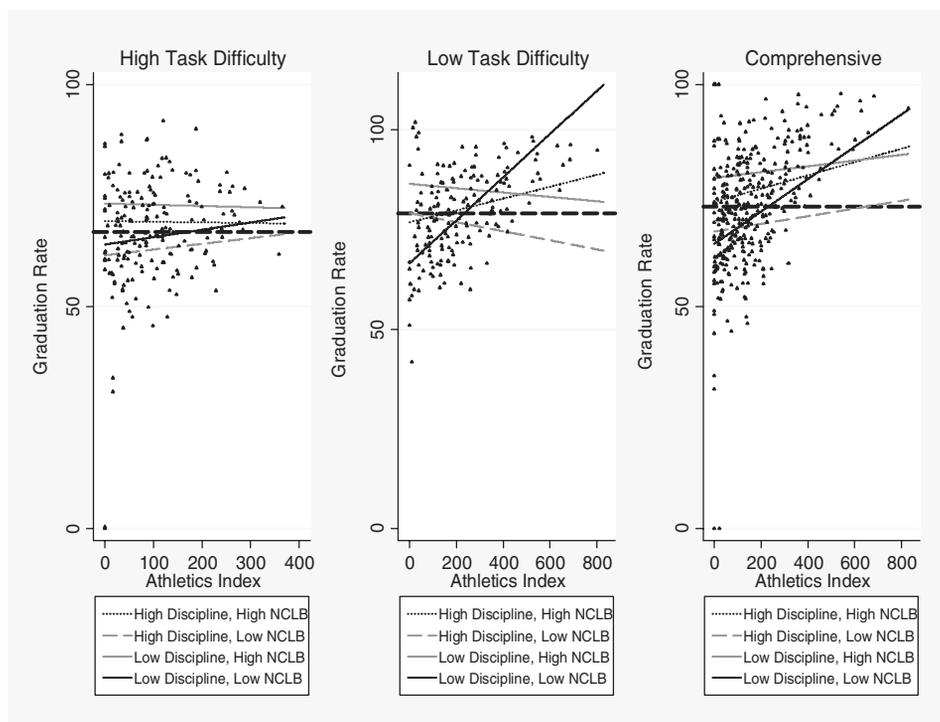


Figure 3 Regression Slopes for Graduation Rates on Athletic Achievement

controlling for all of these factors, our analysis finds that the most convincing evidence indicates that higher-order objectives are more readily attained when organizations focus on one lower-order objective, in spite of competing objectives.

Implications and Next Steps

We find interesting but nuanced evidence that schools are capable of accomplishing multiple goals simultaneously. Opportunities for synergy appear to be strongest when the organization's focus is on a lower-order goal that is more substantively connected to the higher-order objective than competing lower-order goals. When that goal is not being met, the default option is then trade-off in the interaction of lower-order objectives. These results reflect a general pattern in which it is easiest for schools to obtain higher-order objectives and improvement when they forsake other lower-order objectives.

Several methodological caveats warrant mention. First, these findings are derived from a cross-sectional data set that constrains us from assuming that these relationships are causal. Second, we are limited in our ability to examine goal conflict across the full spectrum of goals that public schools pursue. The four goals that we include in our analysis are arguably *among* the most salient goals that schools seek to achieve, but including other goals could yield different results. For instance, student attendance is arguably a more salient goal for schools than athletic achievement. Indeed, all three of our lower-order goals might not be reached without basic attendance. Unfortunately, we did not have access to attendance data across schools and therefore could not include it as one of our lower-order goals. Third, we focus on a single policy area that is arguably different from others in the discretion that it affords to street-level bureaucrats. Research from other policy settings would improve our ability to ensure that these relationships operated similarly in other contexts. Along those lines, our use of a single state limits our ability to generalize broadly to other organizations or schools in other parts of the United States. Additional qualitative research would help to sort out the causal mechanisms that we are unable to address in our large-*N* analysis. Finally, important trade-offs among higher-order outcomes may also be faced by teachers and school administrators (Smith and Larimer 2004). For instance, more demanding courses of study that promote college readiness may push marginal students out of schools, thereby lowering the graduation rate. How lower-order goals might interact toward one higher-order objective in spite of another would be an interesting avenue for future research, using the framework we have developed here.

Our analysis of goal conflict is primarily descriptive in that it demonstrates when goal synergy is possible. Research on the implications of these findings would be a positive next step in the literature, particularly as it could help policy makers understand the practical consequences of choosing some goals at the expense of others. For example, what are the implications of focusing on academic achievement in lieu of student discipline? If a school chooses a basic, no-frills punitive discipline policy, will the ramifications in the community in terms of lower civic engagement and higher crime outweigh the initial benefits that the school might see in the way of higher test scores and more effective classroom learning? On the other hand, if

The most convincing evidence indicates that higher-order objectives are more readily attained when organizations focus on one lower-order objective, in spite of competing objectives.

our results are accurate in that the achievement of a lower-order goal is actually associated with improved academic outcomes, *how many* and *what kinds* of resources should be devoted to a given program in comparison to another? Is there eventually a drawback, and if so, where does it happen? In order to move forward, the field will need more and better sources of data that will permit testing how goal trade-offs operate differently across the full array of

policy areas and levels of government, and greater attention should be paid to how resource combinations vary to achieve more than one goal simultaneously.

Notes

1. No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 20 U.S.C. § 6319 (2008).
2. See <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html> (accessed October 23, 2012).
3. See <http://archives.doe.k12.ga.us/ayp2009/second.asp?SchoolID=000-0000-b-1-0-0-0-5-6-0-8-9-0> (accessed October 23, 2012).
4. For more information, see <http://www.gadaonline.net/> (accessed October 23, 2012).
5. The upper limit is equal to $1 - 1/k$, where k is the number of categories. The groupings used by the Georgia Department of Education are white, African American, Hispanic, Asian American, Native American, and multiracial/other.
6. Ideally, we would use expenditures per pupil or a similar measure to represent financial resources, but we do not have data on actual spending. The analysis that we present here is robust to several different proxy measures of resources (e.g., administrator salary, student-teacher ratio, student-administrator ratio).
7. To the extent that the relationship between higher-order objectives (our dependent variables) and lower-order goals is endogenous, the coefficients or standard errors of any other independent variables are not affected when one of the main independent variables of interest is omitted from a strictly linear ordinary least squares form of the model (without interaction terms).
8. We found a variance inflation factor (VIF) score of no larger than 2.40 on any individual predictor in regression models run without interactions, indicating that multicollinearity is not a problem among individual predictors. Average VIFs were no larger than 1.77. As a robustness check to our ordinary least squares estimates, we also ran the full MMR analyses with and without the percentage of high school age students enrolled in career, technical, and agricultural education in both district (%CTAE[D]) and school (%CTAE[S]) as well as square terms for administrator and teacher experience. When we add both %CTAE and the square terms to our analysis, our focal results do not change and none is correlated with graduation rates.
9. We define "high" and "low" values as those that are one standard deviation above and below the mean for that variable.
10. The difference between the slopes for low athletic achievement/low rehabilitative discipline and high athletic achievement/high rehabilitative discipline are statistically significant at the 0.01 level ($p < .004$).
11. We instrumented for NCLB using two-stage least square regression (2SLS). For both task difficulty subsamples, we used %CTAE (D and S) as a predictor of NCLB compliance (test scores) using two-stage least square regression (2SLS) and then tested for the impact of the endogeneity. The first stage regressions have low partial R^2 values (0.0809 and 0.0012), and F tests for the joint significance of the instrumental variables (i.e., %CTAE at school and district levels) in the first-stage regression do not meet the generally accepted threshold of 10 (4.34 and 0.14). In short, this indicates that the instrument is weak. Durbin-Wu-Hausman results further indicate that NCLB compliance is *not* endogenous ($H_{0(LTDE)}$: NCLB compliance is exogenous, $p = 0.23$, fail to reject; $H_{0(HTDE)}$: NCLB compliance is exogenous, $p = 0.77$, fail to reject). We also thought that

the subsamples may limit the N necessary to run 2SLS and therefore suffer from finite sample bias. So we combined the subsamples and ran a 2SLS on the entire sample. The results, however, are no better as they pertain to the weakness of the instrument (partial $R^2 = 0.0013$), and the Durbin-Wu-Hausman statistic for this model also indicates that we fail to reject the null hypothesis that NCLB compliance is exogenous ($p = 0.75$).

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