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5Essentials Survey in CPS

Using School Climate Survey Results
to Guide Practice



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Executive Summary

Driven by extensive evidence linking school climate to positive educational outcomes, states and districts across the country have increasingly turned to school climate surveys to provide practitioners with data to guide improvement in these areas and, in some cases to hold schools accountable for creating productive learning environments.

Despite evidence supporting the importance of school climate, little is known about how practitioners understand and use data from climate surveys to guide school-wide improvement. The expanded use of school climate surveys underscores the importance of understanding how schools and districts are utilizing this evidence both to drive improvement and to simultaneously evaluate and hold schools accountable. This information is critical to ensuring that policymakers, states, and districts establish appropriate expectations and allocate adequate resources for the data's use in practice.

This report explores how schools in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) understand and utilize data from one climate survey, the *5Essentials* Survey, in the context of CPS improvement efforts and accountability policies. Of the more than 50 existing school climate surveys, one of the few with extensive validation is the *5Essentials* Survey. Developed more than twenty years ago by researchers at the UChicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium), the *5Essentials* Survey is a comprehensive, evidence-based system designed to drive improvement in schools through the identification of strengths and needs associated with five critical domains of school organization.

Since its initial development, the *5Essentials* Survey has been administered to more than two million students and nearly 300,000 staff in CPS. In 2014, CPS tapped the *5Essentials* for inclusion in its School Quality Rating Policy, through which the district assigns annual performance ratings and accountability standings to its more than 500 schools. School-level results from the *5Essentials* Survey are shared with school and district officers to inform continuous improvement plans; reports are also made available to the public through UChicago Impact's website. Under CPS' school accountability policy, scores from the *5Essentials* comprise between 5 and 10 percent of a school's overall Quality Rating.¹

The decision to include the *5Essentials* as one of the performance metrics in the district's School Quality Rating Policy (SQR) reflected CPS leaders' commitment to recognizing and evaluating multiple dimensions of school success. Though academic growth and achievement data continue to make up the largest portion of schools' ratings, results from the *5Essentials* shed light on organizational conditions and leadership capacity, both of which shape student learning and school outcomes.

¹ See <https://www.cps.edu/about/district-data/metrics/sqr/> for further information about the weighting of metrics in SQR.

Questions of how the *5Essentials*' ties to accountability might influence schools' engagement with the survey and its results have been raised by practitioners and district officers alike. Concern over the impact of accountability on data quality and use is not limited to Chicago. At the federal level, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), requires all states to include non-academic indicators of school performance in accountability plans. At least 13 states, including Illinois, have elected to use climate surveys to satisfy these requirements and, in many cases, to inform school improvement. These plans operate on the assumption that schools can utilize climate survey data to examine and strengthen organizational practices. At the same time, they attach external stakes to schools' climate "performance" by linking data to sanctions and rewards through accountability and/or the public sharing of schools' results.

While research suggests strategic efforts can facilitate improvements in school climate, few if any studies have examined how schools understand and utilize data from climate measures to guide these efforts. In contrast, numerous studies have examined practitioners' use of academic performance data in school improvement and accountability. Findings from this work indicate that the political contexts of schools and school districts shape how data are taken up and used. By making school performance metrics the make-it or break-it measures of school success, high-stakes accountability policies have been shown to incentivize responses to data that reward management or manipulation over real improvement.

This report encompasses findings from a year-long qualitative study examining the processes and outcomes of practitioners' engagement with the *5Essentials* Survey in the context of school improvement.

Our study addresses two primary research questions:

1. How do schools understand and utilize data from the *5Essentials* Survey in the context of improvement efforts?
2. What factors facilitate or impede schools' engagement with their *5Essentials* results?

To answer the research questions, our research team conducted interviews with three core stakeholder groups:

1. **Principals and staff in six CPS schools**—three elementary and three high schools, all district-run, with mid-range *5Essentials* survey results—to elicit their understandings of the *5Essentials* Survey and its use as a tool in school improvement. We intentionally recruited schools that were representative of the geographic, racial, and economic stratification of the city of Chicago. The six participating schools were located in different neighborhoods and represented five different CPS Networks.
2. **District leaders in three key offices** to gain insight into the policies, agendas, and expectations for the survey's implementation and use by schools.
3. **Leadership coaches from two school support organizations** to better understand the scope of external support for the use of *5Essentials* data in school improvement.

Given the expanded use of school climate surveys by states and districts, understanding how educators conceive of and utilize climate data is critical to effective policy implementation. We hope findings from this report will provide helpful information for policymakers, districts, and state and local education agencies considering the use of school climate surveys in accountability, reporting, and/or improvement.

Context

The *5Essentials* Survey in CPS

The *5Essentials* Survey and underlying framework originated in the 1990s as a tool for studying differential progress among schools at a time of historic school reform in Chicago.² Researchers at the UChicago Consortium examined whether having strength in five key areas of school organization explained why some schools improved student achievement and others did not. In consultation with other researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and community stakeholders, these researchers created a conceptual framework called the

² Throughout this report, we refer to the underlying framework as the "five essential supports" and the survey that was created based on this framework as the *5Essentials* Survey.

“Five Essential Supports for School Improvement.” This framework identified five key elements, or “essential supports,” of a school that influenced its students’ learning: Effective Leaders, Collaborative Teachers, Involved Families, Supportive Environment, and Ambitious Instruction.³ The *5Essentials* Survey captures the strength of each essential support through survey questions (also called items) completed by teachers⁴ and students.⁵

A longitudinal validation study using 15 years of districtwide elementary school data (collected between 1991 and 2005) and 20 years of research provided evidence that these five essential supports of a school organization were the foundation of a school’s ability to increase students’ learning gains over time. This extensive work was published in the book, *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago* in 2010 and examined the relationship between *5Essentials* Survey results, elementary school test scores, and attendance.⁶ A key finding was that students in schools that were strong in at least three of the essential supports were up to 10 times more likely to experience substantial gains on both reading and math scores than students in schools that were weak in three or more of the supports.⁷ Recent quantitative studies re-examined the validity of *5Essentials* measures using data from 2011-18 in both elementary and high schools.⁸ Findings showed that all measures predicted school improvement in multiple student outcomes. Expanding on the original study, these outcomes included not only test scores and attendance rates, but also GPA. In high schools, outcomes also included Freshman OnTrack and college enrollment. Results suggest that the *5Essentials* Survey and its underlying framework continue to be meaningful indicators for schools working to improve student outcomes.

Since the original work of *Organizing Schools*, changes in the landscape of school accountability in Chicago, and

across the country, have altered the goals and expectations attached to the *5Essentials* Survey’s implementation. Understanding how practitioners perceive, interpret, and utilize *5Essentials* data in the current context of improvement and accountability is necessary to guide future efforts and revitalize existing policy and practice. In order for the *5Essentials* to function not only as a research tool but as a resource in the work of school improvement, an in-depth analysis of the measure’s current implementation and use is well-warranted and timely.

Key Findings

Practitioners, district officers, and coaches all characterized the *5Essentials* as a source of potentially valuable insight into organizational health and school performance. Teachers described the *5Essentials* as a survey designed to evaluate the “general climate” and “overall functioning” of a school from the perspectives of students and staff. They appreciated that the survey elicited feedback from students and staff about their experiences and credited it as an opportunity for “all voices” to contribute to school improvement. Leaders from CPS Central Office similarly referred to the *5Essentials* as a valued source of “student and teacher voice” and noted the survey was the sole “qualitative measure” included in school performance ratings. CPS leaders also framed the *5Essentials* a “leading indicator” of schools’ capacity for continuous improvement and pointed to the *5Essentials* as evidence of the district’s commitment to holistic school evaluation and regard for culture and climate as integral parts of school quality.

Despite these promising appraisals, accounts from across schools showed practitioners’ engagement with the *5Essentials* consistently failed to achieve the goals and expectations attributed to it as a tool for guiding school improvement. Our findings highlight three overarching factors that influenced schools’ use of the data.

3 Authors originally used different terms for the five essential supports in early reports, referring to: school leadership, professional capacity, parent-community ties, student-centered learning climate, and instructional guidance.

4 Some but not all of the survey questions completed by teachers are also completed by non-teaching staff in schools (e.g., teacher assistants, counselors, librarians, etc.).

5 While a parent survey is administered online for families in CPS, this survey is constructed and run by CPS and is not part of the official *5Essentials* Survey.

6 Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton (2010).

7 Schools were categorized as “strong” on an essential support if their survey score on that indicator fell in the top quartile of Chicago elementary schools. Schools ranked in the bottom quartile for an essential indicator were classified as “weak” on that essential support.

8 Hart, Young, Chen, Zou, & Allensworth (2020).

Factor 1: Nature of the *5Essentials* Data

Practitioners perceived the *5Essentials* Survey data as opaque and unactionable. District administrators, coaches, and school leaders felt the results schools received from the *5Essentials* Survey were not immediately transferrable to practice. A common critique centered on the lack of insight offered by the data into underlying causes of issues and complaints—such as responses that highlighted a lack of trust between administrators and teachers or those that suggested students felt unsafe in their schools. Practitioners reported having to “really dig down” into the data in order to determine the “root causes” of issues raised in their results. Several schools engaged in supplemental inquiry to better understand the nature of specific concerns raised by students and teachers. Even with those findings, school leaders struggled to translate their insights into action.

The survey’s focus on school leadership meant *5Essentials* results were uniquely personal for principals, making it difficult for them and their teams to engage impartially with the data. The *5Essentials* was widely regarded as an evaluation of school leadership and principal effectiveness. District officers described this as a source of tension for some school leaders. A number of principals and teachers also reported that the *5Essentials* functioned as “a sort of report card for the principal” where staff in schools had the opportunity to provide public feedback to their principal about leaders’ effectiveness. Unlike other performance metrics, the *5Essentials* situated the interpersonal relationships and social dynamics of people in schools as objects of evaluation. Evidence suggests principals, at times, struggled to engage productively with data they felt cast them or their leadership in a negative light.

Allegations that some respondents used the survey to disparage school leadership fueled concerns about the data’s credibility. Interviews with school leaders and staff surfaced a widely held opinion that some respondents used the survey as a forum to air grievances or condemn their school leaders as acts of retaliation. A number of teachers acknowledged having colleagues

who engaged with the survey in these ways. Similar claims were made about students by a handful of teachers and school leaders, who suggested some students’ responses were driven by “emotion, not fact.” The notion that even a few individuals responded to the survey to further their own agendas, or simply out of spite, was particularly frustrating to leaders because of the implications of the survey for school ratings. Administrators from all six schools voiced concern about staff members they perceived as using the survey to publicly criticize school leadership.

Factor 2: Support for Data Use by Schools

CPS granted considerable autonomy to schools in determining how *5Essentials* results were used to guide improvement. School leaders were charged with determining their own needs for support in analyzing the data and developing appropriate responses to issues raised. Principals reported receiving few, if any, instructions for interpreting and using *5Essentials* results to guide practice, though they understood the district’s broader expectation that data from multiple performance measures would inform each school’s Continuous Improvement Work Plan. Principals were expected to work closely with their leadership teams to derive insights and construct practical implications from multiple data sources, including the *5Essentials*.

While the district’s approach offered flexibility to schools in engaging with their *5Essentials* results, practitioners, coaches, and district leaders frequently depicted the uniquely complex nature of the data as an impediment to its use. Findings suggest a system with more centralized guidance and support may have increased the capacity of schools to meaningfully utilize the data for improving practice.

Schools received little support in using *5Essentials* data from their network chiefs, whose role was framed as largely evaluative. Leaders from five of the six schools said they received little to no guidance from their network chiefs in using *5Essentials* data, though other metrics received prominent attention. According to several principals, data-centered conversations with

their network chiefs focused almost exclusively on academic indicators tied to school accountability. Though school ratings encompassed data from the *5Essentials*, the survey was regarded as a “very small part” of the overall score, which many implied factored into the scant attention it received. Though the majority of principals characterized their relationships with network chiefs in positive terms, few credited them as sources of technical support. According to multiple coaches, principals often found it difficult to “ask for help” or show vulnerability with their network chiefs, due to their power over leaders’ evaluations. Although district officers conceived of network chiefs as the primary sources of guidance and support in practitioners’ efforts to utilize data from the *5Essentials*, evidence from schools suggests this was rarely the case. Accounts framed network chiefs as largely disengaged with the *5Essentials* as a source of insight into school improvement, and instead focused primarily on how results from the survey impacted schools’ performance ratings.

In the absence of further guidance and support, schools were left to construct their own agendas and routines in using *5Essentials* data. Most principals took steps to engage their leadership teams in the process of interpretation and planning; those fortunate to have coaching relationships with school support organizations also derived support from those partnerships. Ultimately, though, principals and coaches both implied that *5Essentials* was frequently underutilized due, at least in part, to the effort and skill required to derive actionable insights from the data. Even when the survey helped to identify or corroborate problems, schools faced constraints in resources (e.g., time, funding, community support, instructional capacity) that diminished their ability to act on the data.

Principals working with technical assistance providers credited their leadership coaches as key support figures and “thought partners” who helped them process information, gain perspective, and work through challenges in using *5Essentials* data. Coaches pushed leaders to attend to aspects of school performance, like organizational climate, they might otherwise have

overlooked or neglected due to competing demands for their attention. Principals also credited leadership coaches with providing tools, routines, and protocols that facilitated their analysis of *5Essentials* data and helped to bring greater meaning to the results. Coach interviews revealed that most, if not all, believed supplemental inquiry and self-reflection were integral to utilizing data from the *5Essentials* to guide decision-making and practice. Coaches’ efforts to facilitate principal sensemaking around the *5Essentials* were beneficial in developing more nuanced understandings of the data and providing school leaders with analytic tools and strategies they brought to data use, more broadly.

Systematic collaboration by Instructional Leadership Teams increased school capacity for using *5Essentials* data. Though the majority of principals we interviewed shared *5Essentials* results with members of their Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs) shortly after data were released, they credited those teams with widely varying levels of support in interpreting and using the data. In two schools, ILTs helped principals interpret the feedback received from teachers and students, construct and evaluate implications for action, and determine how the results would be shared with the broader school community. Leadership team members brought different perspectives, experiences, and knowledge that informed interpretation of *5Essentials* results. Especially in larger schools, where teachers reported more contact with their department leaders than with their principals or other administrators, these leaders often had unique insight into the dynamics of culture and climate at the department level. In several cases, ILTs helped to contextualize and validate the perceptions of students and staff. By involving ILT members in the early stages of sensemaking around the data, one school’s administrators leveraged the capacity and expertise of individual team members to connect the survey results to organizational conditions and practices with enough time to inform planning for the following year.

Factor 3: Pressure Under Accountability

School leaders determined their priorities for school improvement based on SQRP and district accountability policies.⁹ The *5Essentials*' role in school accountability had important implications for how schools engaged with the survey and its results. Though district officers conceived of the *5Essentials* as serving complementary functions as a tool for guiding school improvement and metric for ensuring accountability, our data highlight a tendency for the latter to drive the dynamics of practitioners' engagement. School leaders, in particular, said the pressure associated with the district's accountability policy defined their priorities for school improvement and directly influenced how they interacted with the survey and its results. For a number of school leaders, the stakes of accountability justified diverting attention and effort away from issues raised on the *5Essentials* to focus on improving scores on more heavily weighted performance metrics.

Though leaders at all six schools attributed potential value to insights afforded by the *5Essentials* survey, most conceded to underutilizing the data due to constraints in their time, resources, and organizational capacity. To the extent that school leaders conceived of the *5Essentials* as one of the multiple performance metrics they needed to control under accountability, their engagement with the data showed signs of strain under competing demands. Despite the *5Essentials* relatively minor contribution to SQRP,¹⁰ because survey results were perceived as more manipulable than other performance outcomes (e.g., test scores, attendance), leaders strategically focused their attention on "moving" responses to the survey to achieve favorable results.

Communication within schools foregrounded the *5Essentials*' ties to accountability, diminishing the measure's visibility and potential use as an improvement tool. Though leaders intended to frame the *5Essentials*

Survey in terms of its dual purposes, as a tool for guiding organizational improvement and metric for evaluating school performance, reports from across schools indicate messaging about the survey's administration skewed heavily toward the latter. According to teachers, communication surrounding the *5Essentials* cast the survey's administration and their participation in a negative light—as acts of compliance rather than opportunities to share feedback and inform decision-making at their schools. Messages consistently framed the importance of survey completion in terms of meeting the district's reporting standards, which required response rates of 50 percent from both students and teachers in order for schools to receive credit.

Messaging in some schools also emphasized the public visibility of *5Essentials* results, which many practitioners perceived as an additional layer of accountability, given the importance of public opinion in recruiting and retaining students within a school-choice system. Per-pupil funding allocation means that a decrease in enrollment results in a decrease in funding. Leaders from four of the six schools said pressure to increase enrollment and attract high quality teaching staff exacerbated the threat imposed by SQRP. Staff in schools that had previously been threatened with potential closure were acutely sensitive to the risks associated with underperformance and under-enrollment. For these individuals, the threat of sanctions loomed large in ways that some depicted as influential to their participation on the survey.

Some schools conducted "mock surveys" to redirect critical feedback and preemptively address complaints, furthering skepticism about the intent behind climate improvement efforts. Accounts from more than half of schools described the sizable efforts undertaken to develop, administer, and analyze data from "mock surveys" modeled after the *5Essentials*. Though several ILT

⁹ At the time of this study, the CPS School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP) was the district's policy for measuring annual school performance. Through this policy, each school received a School Quality Rating and an Accountability Status, annually. School ratings were determined according to a weighted system based on a school's performance on multiple indicators. Indicator scores were calculated using a five point scale and then averaged (some indicators were weighted more heavily

than others in this average). The weighted average—also calculated on a five point scale—was then used to determine a school's rating. See <https://www.cps.edu/about/district-data/metrics/sqrp/> for more information. CPS is currently redesigning their accountability policy. In addition, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, SQRP ratings were not issued for 2020 or 2021.

¹⁰ Dependent on grade levels served, the *5Essentials* Survey comprises between 5-10 percent of each school's rating.

members and leadership coaches depicted mock surveys as “progress monitoring” tools devised to assess changes in culture and climate in between annual cycles of the official survey, interviews showed that these internal surveys also functioned as litmus tests used to surface and respond preemptively to concerns that might otherwise have detracted from official survey results.

Though a number of school leaders and several ILT members credited useful insights to data collected from mock surveys, comments from other teachers indicate the practice may have contributed to some staff members’ perceptions that actions taken in response were disingenuous or that the exercise was designed solely to boost responses on the official survey. To the extent that these surveys may have detracted energy and resources from other efforts to improve culture and climate, or raised doubts about the rationale for collecting feedback, the short-term value associated with practice surveys may have come at the expense of the actual data’s use.

The stakes attached to accountability and school ratings influenced how some teachers responded to the *5Essentials* Survey. Teachers voiced concerns about the potential for their responses on the *5Essentials* Survey to negatively affect their schools’ ratings and reputations. Nearly a quarter of the teachers we interviewed suggested the data’s public visibility and ties to SQRP influenced their thinking and participation in the survey. Concerns about the public nature of schools’ results were compounded by the survey’s relationship to school ratings.

Teachers widely espoused the belief that unfavorable *5Essentials* results could “harm” their schools or “cause (SQRP) ratings to drop.” Several teachers we interviewed described their ambivalence toward sharing negative or critical feedback on the survey, even when they felt improvements could be made, because of the potential implications for their schools’ ratings. On the other hand, teachers also referenced colleagues whose wariness over the confidentiality of individuals’ responses deterred them from participating in the *5Essentials* Survey. Teachers in smaller schools and those in specialized roles worried that the reporting of

disaggregated data would single out their responses, even if other identifiers were removed.¹¹ Suspicions that some staff opted out of the survey or responded disingenuously, to protect themselves or their schools’ ratings, raised questions about the representativeness of the data produced by the *5Essentials*.

Respondents indicated the survey’s ties to accountability detracted from the data’s capacity to guide improvement by raising skepticism about the credibility of *5Essentials* results. Practitioners, coaches, and district officers broadly acknowledged concerns about the quality and credibility of data produced by the *5Essentials* Survey, which some felt were compromised by the measure’s association with school accountability. Indeed, our findings suggest many of the practices and processes that defined schools’ engagement with the *5Essentials* detracted from the survey’s legitimacy and raised questions about the authenticity of results. In the broader context of school accountability established through the district’s implementation of SQRP, practitioners’ engagement with the *5Essentials* consistently focused attention on the data’s role in external evaluation over its potential, largely unrealized, to provide insight into organizational conditions. Together, accounts of compliance-laden messaging, controversial mock surveys, and teachers’ fears about the potential ramifications of their responses on the survey cast doubt on the accuracy of survey results and the legitimacy of insights derived from the *5Essentials*. While recent empirical evidence reaffirms the survey’s strength as a valid measure of organizational conditions and school capacity, in its current role as part of district accountability, concerns about the data’s authenticity are widespread and need to be addressed in order to build system-wide trust in the survey results.

Though a preponderance of the evidence converged around barriers and constraints practitioners had encountered in their interactions with the *5Essentials* Survey, accounts from a handful of sources shed light on conditions, routines, and structures that appeared to facilitate more successful engagement with the data, which in at least two instances prompted changes in

¹¹ Notably, the reporting of *5Essentials* results does not disaggregate teachers’ responses within a school.

school policy and practice. Promising practices depicted in these examples formed the basis for more hopeful findings and paved the way for specific recommendations to guide policy and implementation of the *5Essentials* moving forward.

Conclusion

Our findings show that **despite the district's goals for implementation and use of the *5Essentials* as both an accountability metric and school improvement tool, constraints in schools' capacity and tensions stemming from the survey's role in SQRP detracted from the data's use in practice.** Interviews with school leaders and staff highlighted challenges associated with the nature of the data and its reporting; the availability of guidance and support for practitioners' use of the survey results; and the competing demands placed on school leaders in the context of accountability. A number of factors contributed to practitioners' perceptions of the survey as a compliance task and threat to their schools' ratings. These impressions, in turn, fueled skepticism about the authenticity of survey results and the motives behind efforts taken to address complaints. Despite acknowledgment of the data's uniquely personal focus on principal effectiveness, few if any school leaders received guidance or support for using *5Essentials* results from their network chiefs, whose responsibilities and presence were seen as evaluative. Though external support from leadership coaches facilitated more productive engagement with culture and climate data in a few schools, access to these partnerships remains quite limited. While leaders in nearly all of our schools credited the *5Essentials* as a source of insight into organizational conditions, reports suggest fewer than half of schools ultimately utilized evidence from the survey to enact substantive improvements in practice. The survey's ties to school accountability—both as a metric in SQRP and object of public evaluation—arose consistently as a threat to the measure's legitimacy and the data's credibility. Tensions stemming from the *5Essentials* competing functions detracted from the data's use in school improvement.

Ultimately, these findings speak to the largely unrealized potential of the *5Essentials* Survey to meaningfully inform schools' improvement efforts and highlight

opportunities for policy and practice to (re)establish the survey's intended use as a practical tool. We offer the following points for consideration, in the hope that this report may inform current and future use of the *5Essentials* Survey in Chicago, and similar climate measures in other K-12 districts, as resources for guiding school improvement in Chicago and beyond:

- **Both school and district use of climate data relies on school districts' ability to define and communicate a coherent theory of action that maps the interpretation of *5Essentials* results to specific resources, activities, and supports dedicated to furthering school improvement.**
- **Schools need training, resources, and sustained support for using school climate data to guide changes in practice.**
- **By aligning communications and messaging around the survey, districts can provide stakeholders with a more accurate understanding of what the survey is and how data from it should be used to promote school improvement.**
- **More research is needed to provide evidence-based recommendations for using school climate data to further school improvement.**

Given increased focus on the use of school climate data in school accountability and improvement, now is a critical moment to reimagine the *5Essentials*' role in local policy and practice, and to develop plans for furthering its use as a practical tool. Findings from this study indicate that the two aims of accountability and school improvement are not equally served by existing structures. District expectations of schools' engagement with the *5Essentials* exceed what is viable and equitable given the level of resources currently allocated to supporting the data's use. Our work also suggests, however, that the *5Essentials* can play an important role in expanding and promoting a more holistic definition of school success, one that builds upon multiple dimensions of organizational capacity and recognizes the importance of relationships in teaching and learning. Our hope is that this report sheds light on opportunities and obstacles in the use of organizational climate surveys for accountability and school improvement.

Introduction

Guided by evidence linking school climate to favorable student and school outcomes,¹² states and districts across the country have increasingly turned to student and staff surveys as sources of data intended to drive improvement in these areas and, in some cases to hold schools accountable for establishing positive environments for learning. Policies calling for the collection and use of school climate indicators have left many school leaders scrambling to engage effectively with these data as part of school improvement efforts. Despite the proliferation of climate surveys, little is known about how practitioners understand and use data from these measures to further school-wide improvement.

Of the more than 50 survey measures of school climate,¹³ one of the few with extensive validation is the *5Essentials* Survey. Developed more than 20 years ago by researchers at the UChicago Consortium, the *5Essentials* Survey is a comprehensive, evidence-based system designed to drive improvement in schools through the identification of strengths and needs associated with five critical domains of school performance.

The *5Essentials* Survey has been administered to more than two million students and nearly 300,000 staff in CPS since its inception in 1991. In 2014, CPS tapped the *5Essentials* for inclusion in its School Quality Rating Policy, through which the district assigns annual performance ratings and accountability standings to its nearly 600 schools. School-level results from the *5Essentials* Survey are shared with school and district officers to inform continuous improvement plans; reports are also made available to the public through UChicago Impact's website. Under CPS' school accountability policy, scores from the *5Essentials* also comprise between 5 and 10 percent of a school's overall Quality Rating.¹⁴

The decision to include the *5Essentials* as one of the performance metrics in the district's School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP) reflected CPS leaders' commitment to recognizing and evaluating multiple dimensions of school success. Though academic growth and achievement data continue to make up the largest portion of schools' ratings, results from the *5Essentials* shed light on organizational conditions and leadership capacity, both of which shape student learning and school outcomes.¹⁵

Practitioners and district leaders alike have expressed concern about how the *5Essentials*' inclusion in the district's accountability score might influence schools' engagement with the survey and its results. Such concerns include pressure on respondents to answer based on political agenda rather than honest assessment, potentially compromising data quality. Likewise, pressures on school leaders may incentivize efforts focused on cosmetic and quick fixes rather than more substantial and authentic changes to practice.

Given the expanded use of school climate surveys in schools and as part of accountability policies, under-

12 Research consistently demonstrates that school climate—a concept which broadly encompasses characteristics of schools, as organizations, that are experienced by students and staff—has important implications for learning and school performance. Studies have shown significant relationships between positive school climate and a host of favorable outcomes, including increased student achievement (Berkowitz, Moore, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2017), decreased absenteeism

(Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018), and higher rates of teacher retention (Allensworth, Nomi, Montgomery, & Lee, 2009; Kraft, Marinell, & Yee, 2016).

13 Clifford, Menon, Gangi, Condon, & Hornung (2012); Voight & Hanson (2012).

14 See <https://www.cps.edu/about/district-data/metrics/sqrp/> for further information about the weighting of metrics in SQRP.

15 Bryk et al. (2010).

standing how educators perceive and use this evidence is important for effective implementation. Further, while research suggests strategic efforts can facilitate improvements in school climate, few studies explore how schools effectively use data from climate measures for improvement, especially under accountability policies. Existing research finds that high-stakes accountability policies may condition organizational responses to data that prioritize results management or manipulation over genuine improvement. Even when climate surveys are not used under accountability policies, the overall political contexts of schools and school districts invariably shape how data are discussed and used.¹⁶

This report responds to pressing concerns of practice and policy around the use of climate surveys through a focused examination of how practitioners in CPS perceive, interpret, and utilize *5Essentials* data under CPS policies.¹⁷ Findings speak to the affordances and limitations of the data’s use in the context of high stakes accountability and the potential for policy and district leadership to leverage the *5Essentials* more effectively as a practical tool in the work of school improvement.

Context and Framing: *5Essentials* Surveys

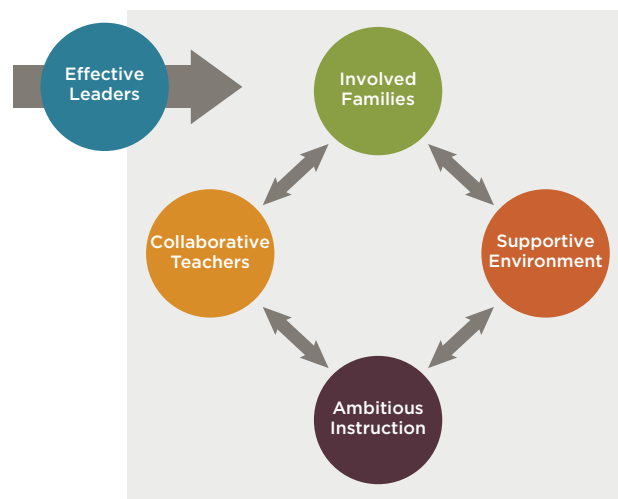
Development of the Five Essential Supports Framework

In 1994, Chicago’s education stakeholders sought to produce a guide for school improvement during a wave of historic districtwide reform. With input from the superintendent, principals, teachers, university professors, community activists, and parents, Consortium researchers took the primary role in crafting an initial conceptual framework to inform school improvement. After studying that framework with qualitative data, survey data, and administrative data from 1991–2005, an empirically-grounded framework emerged that school communities could use to guide their improvement efforts.¹⁸

The current iteration of the framework includes five key elements (see Figure 1):

- **Effective Leaders** are “the driver for change” and school improvement is highly unlikely without a strong principal to build and maintain the other essential supports.¹⁹ Principals coordinate the work of the staff and school community toward a clear and coherent vision. Leadership is then assumed to influence the other four essential supports.
- **Collaborative Teachers** are able and willing to trust and work together with their faculty and staff colleagues. This measure also encompasses teachers’ assessment of the quality of ongoing professional development, and staff commitment to students, colleagues, and school.
- **Involved Families** have input in school decisions and support school staff.
- **A Supportive Environment** is safe, nurturing, stimulating, and focused on learning for all students.
- **Ambitious Instruction** challenges students through well-organized curricula.

FIGURE 1
A Framework of Five Essential Supports



¹⁶ Coburn & Turner (2011).

¹⁷ Policies described are those that existed at the time of the study. CPS is currently in the process of redesigning their accountability policies.

¹⁸ Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu (2006).

¹⁹ Bryk et al. (2010).

The *5Essentials* Survey captures the strength of each essential support through survey questions (also called items) completed by teachers²⁰ and students.²¹ Surveys ask teachers and students how much they agree that the components of each essential are present in their school. Underlying concepts that make up each essential, such as Instructional Leadership or Student-Teacher Trust, are captured using groups of items (called “measures”).

Original Validation of the Five Essential Supports Framework

Examining elementary schools in a longitudinal validation study using 15 years of districtwide elementary school data collected between 1991 and 2005, Consortium researchers investigated whether strength in the essential supports was associated with increased student learning gains and attendance rates, and also whether weaknesses in the essential supports were likewise associated with decreased or stagnant learning gains and attendance rates. Each of the five areas (leaders, teachers, families, environment, and instruction) were measured by multiple survey scales for teachers and students. This extensive work was published in 2010 in the book, *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*, and provided evidence that strength in these five key areas of the school organization were indeed essential for school improvement and validated the instrument with which these constructs were measured.²² In fact, schools that were strong in at least three of the five essential supports were 10 times more likely to improve students’ reading and math gains, compared to schools that were weak in three to five supports. Few schools with consistently low scores across the five essential supports improved students’ test score gains in either reading or math.²³

Subsequent Research Linked the Five Essential Supports with Student and Teacher Outcomes

Beyond the original validation work, the UChicago Consortium has conducted research to continually refine survey measures and study their relationships with school outcomes. For example, a 2009 study found that teachers’ survey reports effectively measured work conditions and predicted a school’s ability to retain teachers. Teachers tended to stay in schools with principals that were strong instructional leaders who had established the trust of teachers, where there was strong trust and collaboration among teachers, and where teachers saw each other as partners in school improvement.²⁴ A 2016 study evaluated how different aspects of effective leadership established the conditions for student growth and found that achievement growth was higher in schools where principals leveraged teacher leadership to promote improvements in school climate.²⁵

Consortium research on high schools, though short of the full longitudinal validation done for elementary schools, supports the importance of the *5Essentials* for schools at that level. A 2015 study of schools in CPS and across the state of Illinois found that strength in the essential supports was associated with improved high school attendance rates, higher graduation rates, and higher average ACT scores.²⁶ Allensworth and Easton’s work establishing the now widely-used Freshman OnTrack indicator assessed factors affecting high school students remaining on track and graduating from CPS. They found that many of the *5Essentials* Survey measures related to students performing better-than-expected in terms of GPAs, course failures, and absence rates.²⁷ Other Consortium studies found that a college-going culture, assessed by a Supportive Environment

20 Note that some, though not all, of the survey questions completed by teachers are also completed by non-teaching staff in schools (e.g., teacher assistants, counselors, librarians, etc.).

21 While a parent survey is also administered by CPS, this survey is constructed and run by CPS and is not part of the official *5Essentials* Survey. Scores from the Parent Survey are not factored into schools’ quality ratings.

22 Bryk et al. (2010).

23 Bryk et al. (2010). Schools were categorized as “strong” on an essential support if their survey score on that indicator fell in the top quartile of Chicago elementary schools. Schools ranked in the bottom quartile for an essential indicator were classified as “weak” on that essential supports.

24 Allensworth et al. (2009).

25 Sebastian, Allensworth, & Huang (2016).

26 Klugman, Gordon, Sebring, & Spote (2015).

27 Allensworth & Easton (2005); Allensworth & Easton (2007).

measure in high schools, was the single most consistent predictor of student progress toward college enrollment and was also related to greater improvement in high school test scores and higher graduation rates.²⁸

The *5Essentials* Today

Since the original work of Organizing Schools, changes in the landscape of school accountability in Chicago, and across the country, have altered the goals and expectations attached to the *5Essentials* Survey's implementation. Beginning in 1997, CPS schools that participated in the *5Essentials* received individualized reports summarizing student and staff response data. Principals received these reports of their schools' results directly, and they had license to share and use as they saw fit. District offices encouraged, but did not mandate, use of *5Essentials* results in school improvement plans. In 2011, the *5Essentials* Survey and reporting of schools' results moved online and administration of the survey expanded to include high schools. In the same year, CPS decided to release schools' results publicly; giving teachers, families, and community members access to the same reports utilized by school leaders. Most recently, in 2014, the *5Essentials* was added to the district's accountability policy, known widely as SQRP. Today, results from the survey make up 5 to 10 percent of schools' quality ratings.²⁹

Other changes have also affected how data are used at the school and district level. Since the 1990s, district governance has shifted from a highly decentralized model to one with a more centralized structure. The city of Chicago has witnessed sizable demographic and economic shifts—with slowed immigration, increased wealth gaps, and declining overall population, especially in the Black community. School choice has expanded by way of the district's open enrollment policies³⁰ and the growth of charter school networks—leading to patterns of under-enrollment in many of the city's neighborhood schools and fierce competition for admission into the district's eleven selective-enrollment high schools.

Together, changes in the *5Essentials*' implementation and reporting—combined with broader shifts in the landscape of school improvement and accountability—warrant this investigation of schools' engagement with the survey and results. The question of whether or not these changes have undermined the usefulness of *5Essentials* Survey data in gauging schools' capacity for improvement was addressed in recent quantitative studies that re-examined the validity of *5Essentials* measures. Using data from 2011-2018, findings showed that all measures were predictive of school improvement in multiple student outcomes.³¹ These outcomes included test scores, attendance rates, and GPA in both elementary and high schools. Additionally, in high schools, outcomes included Freshman OnTrack and college enrollment. These results suggest that the *5Essentials* Survey, and its underlying framework, continue to be meaningful indicators for schools working to improve student outcomes. However, the ability of the *5Essentials* to guide schools in developing their school environments does not depend solely on the quality and robustness of the survey's statistical underpinnings. This qualitative study explores how the *5Essentials* is experienced by teachers and administrators in Chicago schools to understand whether and how the survey data is used to inform school improvement efforts.

Data Use in School Improvement

Federal and state policies enacted in the nearly twenty years since No Child Left Behind (NCLB) require schools to use data, research, and other forms of evidence to drive decision making and improvement. Correspondingly, research on how schools (and to a lesser extent, school districts) engage with and use data has proliferated, much of which focuses on the ways test scores and academic performance data are used to guide instructional decision-making and benchmark improvements.³² Studies examining data use in the context of school improvement consistently note the significance of organizational learning and structured

²⁸ Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, Moeller, Roddie, Gilliam, & Patton (2008); Allensworth, Correa, & Ponisciak (2008).

²⁹ See <https://www.cps.edu/about/district-data/metrics/sqrp/> for further information about the weighting of metrics in SQRP

³⁰ See <https://www.chicagofed.org/publications/economic-perspectives/2017/5>

³¹ Hart et al. (2020).

³² Datnow, Park, & Wholstetter (2007); Diamond & Cooper (2007); Honig & Coburn (2008).

routines as factors that shape practitioners' success in interpreting and using data to guide practical decision making. Comparing data use strategies in three school districts, Kerr et al. (2006) found that several factors, including teachers' and leaders' perceptions of data validity, training and support for data analysis and interpretation, and the alignment of data use strategies with instructional initiatives influenced schools' success in utilizing data to inform practical decisions.³³

Studies have also demonstrated that the political contexts of schools and districts—where, in most cases, authority and decision-making are hierarchically distributed—shape the goals, outcomes, and dynamics of practitioners' interactions with data. High-stakes accountability policies, which frame performance metrics as arbiters of school success, alter relationships between evidence and action. For example, Lasater et al. (2020) illustrated how data use practices in eight schools prioritized compliance over instructional improvement, contributing to deficit perspectives of students and their performance.³⁴

Though research on data use in schools has centered mostly on achievement data, interest in how schools engage with non-academic indicators has grown.

Coburn and Turner's 2011 conceptual framework situates data use in schools as an interpretive process, which encompasses the ways people notice data, make sense of it, and construct implications for action.³⁵

Data use is shaped by context—which in the case of schools, implicates the policies, relationships, practices, and routines that organize institutional life. In other words, who interacts with data, for what purposes, and in what ways are all consequential to the use of data in schools. The expanded use of school climate surveys underscores the importance of understanding how schools and districts are utilizing this evidence to evaluate and hold schools accountable. Further, the extent to which climate survey data can and should be utilized to guide improvement in practice warrants further study.

With respect to this study, our interviews with educators in many different roles in very different schools across the city all reflect the tension between using data for honest self-assessment and external accountability. While these purposes are often at odds, we believe this analysis reveals concrete ways in which researchers, district leaders, and educators can improve their mutual efforts to strengthen school culture and promote student learning.

³³ Kerr, Marsh, Ikemoto, Darilek, & Barney (2006).

³⁴ Lasater, Albiladi, Davis, & Bengston (2020).

³⁵ Coburn & Turner (2011).

Why and How School Climate Matters

Research shows that students' academic and social development are influenced by characteristics of their instructional environments.^A The term school climate refers broadly to those characteristics of schools, as organizations, which are experienced by students, teachers, administrators, and others in the community.^B Though individuals' experiences of policies, practices, and procedures may result in differing perceptions of climate, similarities emerge from the collective nature of life in schools. Climate represents the overarching character of individuals' perceptions of a given organizational setting.^C

Growing interest in climate as a key factor in school success stems from evidence linking positive climates to a variety of educational outcomes—including higher attendance, graduation, and college enrollment rates, lower suspensions, and increased learner engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy. Though research to date is largely correlational based on a preponderance of evidence, federal, state, and local education agencies have increasingly targeted climate in school improvement and accountability initiatives.^D

Research on school climate highlights the salience of particular aspects or characteristics of schools as organizations, including: **1)** order, safety, and discipline; **2)** academic supports; **3)** personal and social relationships; **4)** school facilities; and **5)** school connectedness.^E Because climate is shaped by structural and systemic conditions (e.g., resources, policies, programs, and codified practices), as a construct, it remains relatively stable over time.^F

Compared to other dimensions of school performance, such as academic achievement and credential attainment, principals are assumed to have greater control over organizational conditions, including school climate.^G In fact, some studies have suggested principals' influence on student achievement can be traced indirectly via their effectiveness in establishing safe and supportive learning environments.^H Principals, can

determine what human, financial, material, and social resources are brought to bear on schools, and how those resources are allocated.^I In light of these findings, school districts and states have turned increasingly to school climate surveys as measures of principals' effectiveness in driving school improvement.^J

Research indicates that school climate is malleable, and that it is possible for principals and teachers to improve school climate.^K Shifts in leadership and improvement activities within schools have been shown to affect school climate. In one study, students' and teachers' perceptions of climate improved when teams of teachers were empowered to identify and address school-wide issues.^L Another study revealed similar shifts in climate in schools that implemented the Comer School Development Program, which focused on building supportive learning environments.^M

In their review of research, Thapa et al. (2013) criticized the lack of evidence-based frameworks for studying and enacting school climate improvement plans.^N Their work called for studies engaging qualitative and case study methods to analyze processes of change in school climate from multiple perspectives.^O

While the *5Essentials* Survey is often credited as a "school climate survey," climate comprises only part of the *5Essentials* framework, which also encompasses other dimensions of organizational performance. Notably, key indicators of climate like trust in interpersonal relationships (between teachers and students, amongst school staff, and between staff and families), perceptions of safety, and perceptions of support are referenced in the *5Essentials* Survey. But other critical aspects of the school as an organization, such as principal and teacher leadership, ambitious instruction, and relationships between adults (principals, teachers, and families) can provide a more complete picture of a school's capacity. Given this, schools that perform well on the *5Essentials* are described as "well organized" instead of "having positive climate."

A Allensworth, Farrington, Gordon, Johnson, Klein, McDaniel, & Nagaoka (2018); Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger (2011).

B Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral (2009).

C Gray (2007).

D Schweig, Hamilton, & Baker (2019).

E Bear, Gaskins, Blank, & Chen (2011); Brand, Felner, Seitsinger, Burns, & Bolton (2008); Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins (2004); Cohen et al. (2009); McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum (2002).

F Ostroff, Kinicki, & Tamkins (2003).

G We use the term credential to refer to a diploma, certificate, or degree signifying program completion.

H Aspen Institute (2020); Devine & Cohen (2007); Voight, Brown, & O'Hara (2018).

I Hallinger & Heck (1998); Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom (2004).

J Schweig et al. (2019).

K Balch (2012); Boyd, Grossman, Ing, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff (2011); Clifford et al. (2012); Ferguson (2007).

L Rhodes, Camic, Milburn, & Lowe (2009).

M Wang & Degol (2016).

N Thapa et al., (2013).

O Work by Sun, Penner, and Loeb (2017) serves as an exception to this critique. Results showed that schools who developed improvement plans around the *5Essentials* framework saw improved outcomes in student performance.

Focus of This Report

More than a decade after the *5Essentials* Surveys were initially validated, implementation has expanded to more than 500 district-run public schools in CPS. Beyond the survey's initial use as a facilitative measure of school improvement, both the State of Illinois and CPS now utilize school climate data from the *5Essentials* Survey in compliance with federal reporting requirements for public schools.³⁶ Though the framework of five essential supports continues to operate as a fixture in the district's school improvement framework, the survey's more recent ties to school accountability have affected schools' engagement with the measure and the results.

With this study, we set out to understand the nature of schools' experiences with the *5Essentials* Survey, as both a metric utilized in high stakes accountability and as a source of evidence intended to support improvement efforts at the school level. Based on interviews with school leaders and staff in six CPS schools, findings presented in this report shed light on the obstacles and opportunities associated with practitioners' engagement with the survey and its results. Existing research on data use in schools speaks to the many ways individual, organizational, and political factors in and around public schools shape practitioners' efforts to use data in practice. Our findings contribute to this knowledge base through our study's focus on practitioners' use of school climate data—which we suggest differs in marked ways from the use of academic performance data.

This study is framed by the following research questions:

1. **Research Question 1:** How do schools understand and utilize data from the *5Essentials* Survey in the context of improvement efforts?
2. **Research Question 2:** What factors facilitate or impede schools' engagement with their *5Essentials* results?

In this report:

- **Chapter 1** describes the promise and potential that many district officers and practitioners attributed to the intended use of the *5Essentials* Surveys in schools and depicts the annual cycle of survey implementation and reporting that framed schools' engagement with the data.
- **Chapter 2** accounts for the challenges practitioners faced in interpreting results from the survey, many of which stemmed from the unique nature of school climate data and the lack of support schools received in the data use process.
- **Chapter 3** examines how the survey's ties to school accountability policy shaped people's motives for engaging with the survey and detracted from the perceived credibility of the results.
- **Chapter 4** sheds light on promising practices reported in several schools that appeared to promote greater success in practitioners' efforts to understand and act upon *5Essentials* results.
- **Chapter 5** concludes with insights and implications for schools, districts, and research partnerships.

³⁶ The state of Illinois utilizes survey completion rates in reporting; CPS utilizes measure scores from the survey.

Research Methods

In order to examine the ways schools experience and utilize the *5Essentials* Survey, we conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with school administrators (i.e., principals, APs) and instructional staff at six district-run public schools. We conducted interviews with school staff at two timepoints in order to elicit evidence from their experiences and observations at different stages in the annual cycle of administration and reporting for the *5Essentials* Survey. We also interviewed leadership coaches from two technical assistance organizations to gain insights into how schools access and leverage support around their use of data in the improvement process. To establish a three-dimensional account of activity around the *5Essentials* Survey, we lastly conducted interviews with school district officers in three departments whose work directly intersects with policies and practices related to the survey and its use.

Sampling

We recruited principals and staff from six district-run CPS schools to participate in this study. Sampling involved consideration of several factors, including geographical location, student demographics, and *5Essentials* performance (see **Appendix A for more detailed information on sampling and research methods**). We decided to focus on schools in a middle range of the *5Essentials* scores—schools with room to grow but also with some capacity for improvement. In schools with top scores, we believed we might not see efforts to use the data in substantive ways. Similarly, based on findings discussed in *Organizing Schools for Improvement*, we suspected that schools with very low scores might lack the capacity to engage productively with their *5Essentials* results. Consequently, we excluded from our prospective sample schools that consistently scored in the top and bottom quartiles on both the Instructional Leaders and Collaborative Teachers *Essentials* between 2015 and 2018. (This means schools could not have consistently scored either 60-99 or 1-40 in both of these two essentials for all four years.) Schools also needed to have survey data for these years and consistent principal leadership for at least the last two years. Finally, we selected from traditional neighborhood schools, excluding selective enrollment, charter, contract, and options schools. Given our interest in how schools leveraged support for data use from the district and other external sources, we purposively sampled from a subset of schools identified as partnership sites to one of two technical assistance organizations that provided leadership coaching, hereafter School Support Organization 1 (SSO1) and

School Support Organization 2 (SSO2). We selected these SSOs based on two criteria: their coaching models involved **1**) direct support to school leaders, and **2**) consideration of school climate as a factor in school improvement. Our final sample included a total of three high schools and three elementary schools, four of which had coaching relationships, and two of which had no formal ties to coaching organizations. **Table 1** summarizes the different characteristics of the six schools.

We recruited principals, assistant principal(s), and at least four, full-time instructional staff at each school to participate in initial interviews during the spring of 2019. We randomly selected and recruited a combination of teacher leaders and other full-time teachers/instructional staff based on lists provided by each school's principal. We also recruited coaches from two school support organizations (SSOs) for interviews to understand the types of support available to school leaders in using data to guide improvement. Seven leadership coaches were invited and agreed to participate. Though individual coaches worked concurrently with leaders at different schools, out of concern for the privacy of those partners and our research participants, coaches were not asked to disclose the names of schools or the identities of leaders with whom they worked. To gain insight into the school district's agenda and support for implementation of the *5Essentials* Survey, we also interviewed three CPS officers who each represented a different department whose work intersected with policy and practice around the *5Essentials* Survey and/or data use efforts in schools.

Procedure

We conducted interviews in schools to establish rich descriptions of individuals' experiences with the survey and their perceptions of the implementation process and sharing of results (see **Appendix B for Interview Protocols**). These took place between April and October of 2019. Interviews with a total of seven leadership coaches (three from SSO1, four from SSO2) were conducted during the summer of 2019. We developed separate protocols to examine coaches' familiarity and experiences with the *5Essentials* Survey, to understand the process and goals of their leadership coaching models, and to surface their impressions of data use by school leaders in the school improvement process. Interviews with CPS district officers focused on CPS' goals for implementation of the *5Essentials* at the district- and school-levels, the affordances and barriers individuals associated with these efforts, and the nature of support for schools' use of the *5Essentials* data.

Continued

TABLE 1
Descriptive Summary of Participating Schools, 2018–2019

	E1	E2	E3	H1	H2	H3	District Average
Type	Elementary	Elementary	Elementary	High School	High School	High School	N/A
Coaching Partner	SSO1	SSO1	N/A	SSO1, SSO2	SSO2	N/A	N/A
Number of Students	200–400	400–600	200–400	1200–1400	600–800	1400–1600	N/A
% Black	90–100%	0–10%	90–100%	10–20%	90–100%	10–20%	37%
% Latinx	0–10%	70–80%	0–10%	70–80%	0–10%	80–90%	47%
% FRL	90–100%	80–90%	90–100%	70–80%	90–100%	90–100%	77%
% ELL	0–10%	30–40%	N/A	0–10%	0–10%	20–30%	19%
% SPED	10–20%	20–30%	10–20%	10–20%	20–30%	20–30%	14%
SQRP Rating 2018–2019	Level 2	Level 2+	Level 1+	Level 2+	Level 2	Level 2	N/A
5Essentials Score 2018–2019	Partially Organized 2	Organized 4	Well Organized 5	Partially Organized 2	Moderately Organized 3	Organized 4	N/A

Note: Enrollment figures and percentages are expressed in ranges rather than exact numbers so as not to identify schools. SQRP rating is on a 5 point scale ranging from a high rating of 1 to low of 3: 1+, 1, 2+, 2, 3. *5Essentials* overall rating is also on a 5 point scale: well-organized, organized, moderately organized, partially organized, not yet organized.

Quality and Transferability of Findings

The findings presented in this report correspond with themes that emerged from qualitative analysis of data from semi-structured interviews with school-based practitioners, district leaders, and technical assistance providers (i.e., leadership coaches). Through iterative cycles of exploratory and descriptive analysis, the research team coded, clustered, and ordered evidence from more than 80 interviews (see **Appendix A for details of our analytic strategy**). We subjected each of our findings to multiple confirmatory tests—triangulating across multiple informants and data sources, pursuing negative or contradictory evidence, and examining rival explanations. We focused particular attention on the ways our roles and relationships—as researchers affiliated with the UChicago Consortium—shaped the data we collected, and the inferences drawn from our analyses. Due to the UChicago Consortium’s active role in bringing the *5Essentials* Survey to scale in CPS and the organization’s partnership with the district (including ongoing engagement with Central Office leaders), we took various steps to account for and, where possible, reduce the effects of bias on the

evidence and our interpretations. Even so, in presenting the findings of this study, our institutional positionality warrants acknowledgment. Our relationship to the *5Essentials* Survey confers a sense of responsibility for reporting earnestly the challenges practitioners faced in using the measure and presents a unique opportunity to contribute to necessary improvements. In addition, we must acknowledge some limitations to the generalizability of the report’s conclusions. The schools and practitioners that participated in this study were purposively sampled based on inclusion criteria described in Appendix A. Findings, therefore, reflect the experiences and accounts of individuals who agreed to participate, and may not generalize to broader staff, school, and district populations. However, our findings did reveal consistent needs and concerns, providing valuable insights into the real challenges faced by educators. We therefore offer some important considerations districts, schools, and researchers must contend with in deciding when and how to use school climate data. We also propose recommendations for future research to validate and extend this study’s findings as part of our discussion of implications in Chapter 5.



Perceptions: *5Essentials* Survey's Purpose, Potential, and Limitations

The *5Essentials* Survey has a long history in CPS. The framework and measure emerged from locally-driven school reform efforts that took root in the early 1990s. Validation of the survey and theoretical framework utilized 15 years of data on elementary schools district-wide. Since its inception the *5Essentials* has served multiple functions, as an indicator of school performance, a predictor of student outcomes, and lever for organizing school improvement.

This chapter explores how CPS practitioners, district officers, and leadership coaches conceive of the *5Essentials* as a source of information for managing school improvement and enhancing measures of accountability. Their experiences highlight the important opportunity the survey provides students and staff to share their perspectives on “life in schools.” CPS officials also valued the *5Essentials* as the sole “qualitative” measure in the district’s school accountability policy. District leaders framed the survey as a leading indicator of future performance and school capacity for improvement.

Despite the potential attributed to the *5Essentials*, practitioners struggled to derive practical implications for school improvement from their *5Essentials* data. While schools received in-depth summaries of teacher/student survey responses, further analysis and supplemental inquiry were often required to connect the results to practice. Educators noted that survey reports alone provide little insight into root causes or underlying conditions of concerns raised by students and teachers. Some educators also questioned the credibility of the survey data due to potential negative motives of survey respondents. Others raised concerns about the uniquely “personal” nature of the *5Essentials* data for principals, which many described as an evaluation of school leadership.

Teachers understood the *5Essentials* Survey as a measure designed to evaluate the “general climate” and “overall functioning” of a school from the perspectives of students and staff. Several teachers described the survey as a tool used “to evaluate how a school is functioning” and shed light on “what it’s like” to be a student or teacher in that space. Said one, “it’s just to get a general climate of the school and what you’re feeling. It’s trying to get a good overall view of what a school looks like and... how comfortable you are within that setting.” A high school teacher described the *5Essentials* Survey as attending broadly to two questions: *How does it feel to be in this school?* and *What’s it like to be a teacher or student here?* Another high school instructor reported similarly that the survey afforded the district and general public a “*better view of the school culture and community, like, what’s going on in the school and how people feel about the school environment.*” Reflecting on how their understandings of the survey had changed with time, a teacher leader at one school said:

“So initially, I thought it was just about what we [i.e., teachers] thought about the principal. But as I’ve grown as a teacher, I realized it’s taking an overall peek at the school. And it gets information from all the stakeholders, not just the teachers, but the children. And [it] looks at overall, how you feel about your workplace.”

Teachers appreciated that the *5Essentials* elicited feedback from students and staff about their experiences. They depicted the survey as an opportunity for “all voices” to contribute to school improvement. Roughly half of the teachers we interviewed referred to the survey as “giving voice” to individuals in schools. One teacher indicated that participating in the survey

“empowered” students, staff, and parents³⁷ to share their experiences of and perspectives about the school. Accounts from teachers highlighted two ways they characterized the survey, as a source of “voice,” benefiting those in schools. First, many suggested that simply by documenting and reporting on the experiences and perspectives of teachers and students, the survey differed from other school performance metrics in the insights it afforded. One said, *“The 5Essentials Survey, to me, is the only way that you can hear all voices that are connected to what we’re doing, from administration, to the teachers, to the students, to the parents.”* The data as a representation of “different perspectives” was described by teachers as a source of value.

Second, teachers felt the survey provided respondents—particularly students—the opportunity to weigh in on decisions that affected their education. A high school teacher noted it was sometimes difficult to persuade students to complete the survey but found that those who did appreciated “having a say” and giving feedback on policies and practices at the school. Teachers noted instances when students realized that participation provided an opportunity for them to share their opinions. An elementary teacher described reinforcing this in conversations with students, saying, *“I tell them, ‘Yeah, you have a voice in this. This is your school. This is about you saying what’s working, what’s not working.’ And once they get that understanding, they feel empowered.”* Another teacher juxtaposed the *5Essentials* to other school performance metrics in characterizing the survey as a sort of democratic means for students to evaluate their leaders. She said, *“No one asks teachers or the kids how they feel about things. So, the survey... lets you have a voice. Nowadays the way you’re evaluated, you don’t get a big voice in everything that happens. But in this, you do have a vote.”* She went on, *“It’s kind of like voting for the president. You get to say, ‘This is how I feel about everything.’ Even if you felt like you were ignored, this is your chance to talk about what’s going on.”*

Central Office leaders pointed to the *5Essentials* as a uniquely valued source of “student and teacher voice” as well as the only “qualitative indicator” encompassed by the district’s school accountability policy. Officers said the survey shed light on the more “qualitative aspects” of school performance, which they juxtaposed with evidence derived from “more quantitative” metrics, including academic performance data, test scores, and attendance rates. As a survey administered to teachers and students, the *5Essentials* also shed light on individuals’ experiences in schools. One district leader said, *“[The 5Essentials] is probably the only data point that we have to get student perceptions about different things, and teacher (perceptions).”*

Another administrator depicted the *5Essentials* as “an important source of student and teacher voice” and portrayed the survey’s continued use by CPS as evidence of the district’s commitment to leveraging multiple forms of evidence in defining and evaluating school performance. They said:

“One of the things that [district leaders] want to set up in any quality evaluation is to set the expectation for what excellence looks like [by] drawing parallels [to] tons of other evaluation frameworks, the research behind what excellence in school is, and our desire to capture data around that, as a district. So, how do we know that there is a strong culture and climate in a school?”

A representative from the office of school accountability outlined a similar rationale for factoring *5Essentials* results into school performance ratings: *“I think the fact that it is student and teacher voice, and that is relevant [to school performance]. That is important, that is real; and [5Essentials] is the only measure that we have that [offers] this qualitative voice piece.”*

District officers regarded the *5Essentials* as evidence of a schools’ capacity for continuous improvement.

Administrators in the district’s Central Office characterized the *5Essentials* as a “leading indicator,” a term

³⁷ A number of teachers expressed confusion about the *My Voice, My School* Parent Survey, which they perceived as related to, or in some cases, part of, the *5Essentials* Survey. Though both measures were, at one point, assigned the same

moniker, the *My Voice, My School* Parent Survey is not an official part of the *5Essentials* Survey or its reporting. CPS does not issue requirements for minimum response rates on the parent survey.

which referred to the potential for schools' survey results to foreshadow shifts in other areas of performance. A member of the executive team drew comparisons between the *5Essentials* and other school-wide performance metrics, saying:

"All of SQRP is outcome-based and it's very much like, looking back on what happened. Like, 'It's done. That's it.' Whereas, I feel like 5Essentials allows for this more of like, leading indicator information of what's possible. And I think because it's in SQRP, and obviously those big outcomes are kind of the thing that schools focus on the most, I feel like there's a big opportunity there to actually see the 5Essentials and what you're getting on the 5Essentials as an input with enough time to maybe change course and change direction."

The potential for *5Essentials* results to inform decisions also motivated the district's 2011 decision to publish schools' results online, according to district leaders. Providing access to school performance data allegedly gave families the opportunity to "vote with their feet" in selecting schools, particularly in the context of district choice policies. As one officer explained, *"I think part of [the impetus] was like—this [5Essentials data] is gonna tell [people], 'Our school is on a trajectory to be successful,' and if that [information] lives and dies in the principal's hands, that's a problem."* Whether families actually utilized the data in these ways is unclear. A senior data strategist in Central Office admitted, *"To be honest, I don't know. I don't have any data to back up my gut on this... I think there are pockets of parents that engage with it."*

The same officer acknowledged that the *5Essentials* was *"talked about a lot [as a] leading indicator of where things are going,"* though they expressed some doubts about the predictive power of survey data derived from a single point in time. They said:

"I don't know if it's as leading of an indicator as [much as] a concurrent point—like, I think it's telling us what's going on in the building right now. I think maybe the trendline of a school is a leading indicator, but I don't know if that point-in-time survey is more about what's to come or what's really going on right now."

Though the annual survey offered schools and the district *"a very current temperature check of what's going on,"* the data strategist surmised that multiple years of data were necessary to effectively appraise a school's capacity or forecast changes in performance.

Many school leaders perceived survey results as opaque and unactionable. Interviews with coaches and principals highlighted a gap between what many depicted as the potential of the *5Essentials* to inform improvement and the data's actual use in practice. Their accounts revealed the reporting of survey results might be partially responsible for the disconnect. According to multiple sources, the effort required to deconstruct schools' performance on various measures (e.g., Student-Teacher Trust; Collective Responsibility) and interpret item-level responses detracted from practitioners' engagement with the data.

In order for *5Essentials* results to inform action or guide improvement, leaders first needed to make sense of the data on a tangible level. While results from some of the survey measures translated easily to practice, others were more "opaque," requiring substantial effort to unpack and connect to individuals' experiences or actions. If, for example, a school received low scores on measures of Student-Teacher Trust, how did that manifest in and across classrooms? Due to the nature of the survey questions, which asked respondents to indicate their agreement with broad statements such as "My teachers treat me with respect," certain results—even when reported at the item level—offered little insight into how these dynamics played out in individuals' experiences.

School leaders also struggled to identify the so-called "root causes" of interpersonal and climate-related concerns. A leadership coach offered clarity in understanding the problem from the perspective of those in schools, saying, *"What we found is that there's a limitation [in] what the 5Essentials data tells you... It tells you the percent (age) of kids who agree that their teacher keeps their promises. It doesn't tell you what that means about the underlying processes that are contributing to that."*

District leaders appeared well aware of the challenges practitioners sometimes faced in distilling applicable insights from the survey. An officer who oversaw support for data use in schools conceded that the data's interpretive demands hampered its potential use. *"You get tons of information,"* she noted, *"but you really need to fish for it and dig for it and think about how to connect it with practice. So that's been... I think that's been one of the challenges."*

Ultimately, while most of the school leaders we interviewed struggled to derive practical insights from the data, notable exceptions emerged in cases where principals leveraged support from trusted partners—such as coaches and leadership teams. In at least two examples, sustained collaboration and joint inquiry led to new insights that informed practice in positive ways. These exceptions speak to the potential for *5Essentials* data to facilitate organizational learning and change under certain conditions and serve as the basis for our discussion in Chapter 4.

Educators saw the survey reports as a public evaluation of principals. The *5Essentials* Survey was widely regarded by the teachers we interviewed as an evaluation of school leadership and principal effectiveness, which set the survey apart from other school performance metrics. Two of the four measures of Effective Leaders on the *5Essentials* Survey ask teachers to evaluate the actions of their principals and leadership teams.³⁸ District officials noted that these boundaries made the results easier to interpret. One explained:

"Everyone looks at [the data] around leadership because that's just really directed towards one particular recipient, the principal. So, (that) is one of the data points that I will say everyone looks at, and is very easy to digest and understand what folks are saying and the trends over time, right? So, when you're looking at that data point, it's about the principal. It's about the principal, the assistant principal, the leadership in the school."

Central officers also suggested that the explicit focus on leadership rendered *5Essentials* data uniquely personal for principals, some of whom took issue with the public visibility of results.³⁹ Referencing conversations with principals who had been tapped to give feedback on CPS' school accountability policy, one officer referred to wariness expressed by some of the data produced by the *5Essentials*. *"I think they were a little fearful of that information,"* she said, *"(because) The 5Essentials results (are) taken as... sort of a personal evaluation (of principals). Like, there are components that are solely about school leadership."*

Teachers and school leaders often framed the *5Essentials* as "a sort of report card for the principal" where staff in schools had the opportunity to provide feedback to their principals about their effectiveness. One elementary school teacher characterized the *5Essentials* Survey as a "mechanism used to judge the principal." Another teacher suggested her colleagues responded "harsh(ly)" to the survey because they viewed it as an evaluation of school leaders. Reflecting on conversations amongst staff at her school, she said, *"What comes to mind is just people thinking that [the survey is] a way to evaluate the administration, so they take it harsh, I guess you could say. And [it's] a way for their voice to be heard about our administration."* Conspicuously, while many participants lauded the survey for "giving voice" to those in schools, principals were afforded no such opportunity.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, principals struggled to engage productively with results they perceived as unfairly critical of their leadership. CPS officers reported that maligned leaders—especially those who were new to their posts—sometimes rejected their evaluations as unfounded—or dismissed critical feedback as an inevitable response to their efforts to institute changes in policy and practice. As one officer explained:

"There are conversations that I've had (where, for example) a new principal comes in or a principal is trying to change some things and they're pissed"

³⁸ Principal-Teacher Trust and Instructional Leadership, see Appendix C for examples.

³⁹ CPS elected to publish school-level *5Essentials* Survey results online in 2011. Prior to that year, reports were released exclusively to principals.

because their 5Es (score) goes down, and they're like, 'That's not fair.' But I'm like, 'Yes, it is. That's what's happening in your building. There are teachers that are pissed, and you are viewing this as them taking it out on you on the survey.' And yes, maybe they're responding more negatively than they normally would have, but there's strife and that's what's going on."

Analogously, our interviews with school leaders highlighted their ambivalence toward instituting major shifts in policy and practice, due in part to the potential for repercussions on the survey. Three of the principals we interviewed reported having enacted changes in school-wide policies and practices, even though they believed doing so would negatively affect their *5Essentials* score in the short term. A high school principal offered his experience as an example, saying, *"Last year was a little different because I [was] pushing new initiatives. Nothing changed about me, right? Nothing changed about the trust relationship [with teachers]."* Even so, as a principal leading the work, he explained, *"You're nudging [teachers] a little more, especially with some of the new things that you're doing. And so, teachers felt a certain way."* The principal said he fully expected to see a drop in his *5Essentials* results. *"I understood when they took that survey, I told my AP, I said, 'Yeah, we're gonna get it this year.' And it was understood."* Even so, he admitted he was "very disappointed" when the survey results showed a decline in evaluations of leadership.

Principals struggled to act upon leadership evaluations.

Despite these grievances, principals from all six schools said they persisted in their attempts to make sense of and derive value from the results of the *5Essentials*, even those critical of their leadership and/or interpersonal relationships to teachers. A high school leader described his reaction to the previous year's survey results, which showed low ratings of leadership. He said, *"I mean, it hurt to read them, but I can't say I was surprised."* Although others on the school's leadership team looked to discredit the data or assign blame for the results, he said, *"I tried to refocus it much more like [on], 'What can I as a leader do better and what can my team do better and what can we as a school do better?'"* By using the data to identify and respond to the concerns staff and students raised on the

survey, he explained, *"I built a lot of trust through that process, because I was modeling vulnerability and I was saying, 'Look, I understand that things have been hard.'"* Though in this example, the principal was able to understand and accept the negative results generated by the survey, this was not always the case.

Not surprisingly, principals struggled in cases where teachers' evaluations of their leadership differed markedly from their self-perceptions. In more than one instance, school leaders sought to reconcile incongruent feedback directly with staff—typically in the context of large group meetings. Though principals framed these discussions as genuine appeals for clarification or resolution, accounts from those present suggest they fell short of either aim. A second year principal saw *5Essentials* leadership ratings decline, particularly on measures of trust in relationships between administrators and teachers. Though he and his team had enacted a major curricular initiative that he recognized pushed teachers "outside their comfort zone," he had not fully anticipated the effects of the work on trust. He recalled broaching the negative survey results with staff during a meeting in order to gain further clarity around teachers' concerns. He explained:

"I said, 'Okay, so that's how you guys feel? So, let's have a conversation about it,' right? 'How can we improve this?' Dead silence for a while. I had to probe a little bit... And so, we just kind of pulled on it. And the thing was, [the teachers wanted for me] to be more transparent. So, I said, 'Okay, well what does that mean? Like what does that mean?' And they really couldn't say... We didn't come out with anything concrete around principal-teacher trust."

Despite taking what he described as a non-confrontational approach to inquiring, the conversation failed to produce meaningful insights into the problem. This example, and others like it, highlight important considerations in the use of climate survey data to inform practice. Teachers and school leaders alike suggested the "uniquely personal" nature of *5Essentials* results, at times, complicated interpretation and use of the data.

Unlike other performance metrics, the *5Essentials* situated the interpersonal relationships and social dynamics of people in schools as objects of evaluation.

These relationships, in turn, reflected the hierarchical structures of power and authority in schools, as organizations. Given their relative positions, it follows that many teachers were reluctant to present honest and critical feedback to their leaders in the context of an all staff meeting. Even so, that a number of leaders persisted in their efforts to improve school climate and develop more functional relationships to staff spoke to their commitment to learning from and using the data.

School leaders voiced concerns that the survey might be used to express personal grievances. A related set of concerns stemmed from allegations that some respondents used the survey to air grievances or publicly disparage their school leaders. Principals and administrators across schools shared similar accounts of staff members whom they suspected of responding negatively to the survey as a means of retaliation—though most attributed this to a small, if vocal, minority of respondents. The notion that even a few individuals responded to the survey to further their own agendas, or out of spite, was particularly frustrating to leaders because of the implications of the survey for school ratings.

Administrators from all six schools voiced concern about staff members they perceived as using the survey to publicly criticize or condemn school leadership. A high school principal talked about how the public visibility of the data influenced teachers' thinking and their survey responses. He said:

"I feel like there's a certain amount of pressure to game it up from the teachers. Like [some teachers are] saying they want to have a good rating. And then on the other end you get those disgruntled teachers who are like, you know, 'F this, F that,' and then they're going to try to tank the school by giving it a bad rating. And that's not helpful either."

Another principal suggested that strife stemming from changes in policies and practices within schools could also translate into negative evaluations of leadership on the *5Essentials* Survey, where some staff elected to vent their frustrations. He explained:

"[In some cases,] you got staff that you're either trying to, you know [push], like if they're used to one thing and you're trying to put some change together, and they don't like the new requirements or this, or there's some tension, you got a few grievances, and people go, like, '[Screw] the principal,' and then you're done."

A number of teachers acknowledged having colleagues who engaged with the survey in these ways. A high school band teacher said, *"[The survey is] a place to vent. I think it's a place to vent for some people, and I'm like, 'Really?! What's the point of you saying all this negative stuff?'"* Said another, *"I know from previous experience that a lot of teachers feel like, 'Hey, I'm going to dig the principal on here. I'm going to make her look bad.'"*

Multiple school leaders reported messaging to staff preemptively in order to redirect or deter individuals' complaints. For example, one principal's communications leveraged the survey's ties to school accountability to divert critical feedback and prompt more favorable responses. One principal alluded to a tension between honest feedback and the survey's ties to school accountability, saying, *"You gotta set the context and remind folks, 'If you got an axe to grind, [the 5Essentials is] not a good place to grind the axe. Be honest, but also remember that this is really important to the school and the rating policy.'"* Echoing the language of several teachers in our sample, the principal urged staff to redirect negative comments and critical feedback to outlets unaffiliated with SQR. He said, *"If you want to complain, come to my LSC meetings and whatever you want. Don't do it on this survey because we can't afford to lose the points."*

In contrast to school leaders' reports of individuals who they believed used the survey "to stick it to their principal" or to "air grievances" more generally, teachers with whom we spoke described their responses as informed by thoughtful deliberation about the survey's competing functions. Possibly by virtue of individuals' self-selection into this study, none of the teachers in our sample reported using the survey to retaliate or publicly criticize their school leaders, though they believed some of their colleagues did. Instead, in a number of cases,

individuals expressed ambivalence in using the survey to offer constructive or negative feedback, given the potential for the results to detract from their schools' ratings. Said one teacher, *"The thought process is that*

we're trying to improve our school rating, so you need to control the data you can control and put 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' on the surveys. And if you're not doing that, you're basically seen as holding the school back."



Support for Use of *5Essentials* Data

The *5Essentials* Survey is administered on a yearly cycle, following a fairly consistent schedule. Beginning with the survey's administration online in early spring, the annual cycle comprises various routines designed to encourage use of the survey data including dissemination of school-level results to principals just before summer and culminating with release of online reports to the public in the fall (see the box titled **5Essentials Survey Implementation Cycle** on p.28).

In this chapter, we describe the district's approach to supporting schools' use of the *5Essentials* data, educators' perceptions of district support, and illustrative examples of schools' attempts to use the survey data. We find that schools' engagement with the *5Essentials* Survey is anchored by a set of stable routines, interactions, and activities associated with the annual cycle of survey administration and reporting. Though the cycle itself seemed well ingrained in school culture, there were few opportunities for teachers and students in school buildings to interact with the survey results.

In addition, there was considerable variation in the support schools received to utilize data from the *5Essentials* Survey to inform practice. The district's approach to managing improvement privileged school autonomy and placed responsibility for identifying needs and support providers onto school leaders. This strategy ultimately left some schools without the capacity and support they needed to meaningfully engage with culture and climate data. School improvement support that building leaders received from the district was inconsistent and focused almost exclusively on academic performance indicators, rather than culture and climate. Schools with greater leadership capacity and existing infrastructure for data use leveraged both in service of their work with *5Essentials* data, sometimes turning to principals' leadership coaches or other re-

sources in the process. Other schools relied on internal capacity to design and enact improvement plans, which achieved varying levels of success.

Principals set the course for review, interpretation, and use of *5Essentials* data. The phased dissemination of survey results placed principals at the helm of data use in school improvement. Prior studies have shown that the flow of information within and across organizations has implications for how data are interpreted and used.⁴⁰ In the case of *5Essentials* data, the decision to give principals first rights of review also carried historical significance. District leaders characterized this approach, which dated to the survey's early use in CPS, as both a gesture of respect to principals and in line with standard practice for other accountability metrics. One explained, *"I mean that's what we do with all of our data, like as soon as we have it and it's done, principals get it so that they can process it and think about implications."*

Due to the intensity and volume of activity at this point in the year, however, principals' ability to process this data was often delayed. Though five of the six principals said they accessed their schools' reports immediately upon their release, at least two acknowledged their attention was largely focused on the overall score and any areas where scores had dropped. *"I always look at it the day it comes out,"* said an elementary school principal, *"We look at what we got. Are we Well Organized? That's the first thing."* At another school, leaders were pleased to see a positive shift in scores over the previous year and took the opportunity to share the good news with staff. According to the school's AP, having positive data to share at the end of the year *"was really helpful. Being able to end the school year with celebrations, and then identifying opportunities for growth helps inform what we do over the summer. The timing worked really*

⁴⁰ Coburn (2010); Finnigan & Daly, (2012).

5Essentials Survey Implementation Cycle

Survey Administration (Early Spring): The data use cycle begins with the online administration of student and teacher surveys in early spring. The survey administration window typically spans a six-week period from late February through early April. During this time, school leaders coordinate and oversee administration of the student survey by staff. Time, space, and technology resources are allocated to ensure all students have an opportunity to complete the survey. Staff receive invitations, by email, to complete the teacher survey. In most cases, teachers report completing the survey on their own time.

Results Released (Late Spring): The next phase of the cycle occurs in late spring, when UChicago Impact—the organization that implements and supports the administration of the *My Voice, My School 5Essentials Survey*^P—releases initial reports of school-level results to principals. School principals are encouraged by CPS to review the reports with their instructional leadership teams (ILTs), comprised of other administrators and teacher leaders. According to district leadership, support for data use also comes from network chiefs, who directly oversee principals' work and receive the reports roughly a week after school leaders. Some schools also engage external technical assistance providers, including leadership coaches, in interpreting and acting upon data.

School-level reports provide an overall performance rating based on a school's scores on each of the *5Essentials*, as well as comparisons of a school's performance over time.^Q Color-coded indicators are

used to illustrate schools' performance along a five-point scale, from Very Strong to Very Weak. The interactive reports also provide detailed summaries of the measure- and item-level data encompassed by each of the essentials.^R Though principals and their network chiefs are the first to receive school-level results, *5Essentials Survey* reports are published online through UChicago Impact's website several months later and linked to the district's data portal.^S

Results Shared (Fall): In the third phase of the cycle, most school leaders share the results of the survey with staff as part of Back-to-School meetings in the fall. In some cases, data are also reviewed by smaller groups of teachers in grade-level, department, or committee meetings. For example, members of a school climate committee or equity team may engage in further analysis of survey data related to their interests and goals. As part of these discussions, school leadership teams may develop and/or outline plans for responding to issues raised by the survey.

Enact Changes (Fall-Spring): After data are reviewed and target areas have been determined, schools have several months to enact their plans and monitor progress toward improvement. Levels of activity vary considerably across schools and even by departments within schools. Schools are largely independent in establishing the objectives and strategies that guide their improvement work, though many conceive of the following year's *5Essentials Survey* results as the primary indicator of progress.

^P The *5Essentials Survey* is also credited as the *My Voice, My School Survey*

^Q For sample school reports, please visit <https://www.5-essentials.org/demo/5e/2020/>

^R See <https://www.5-essentials.org/cps/5e/2019/> for the most recent year's reports.

^S <https://www.cps.edu/about/district-data/metrics/surveys/>

well last year." A high school principal said he "pulled out relevant sections of the report" to share with his team before the end of the year. He went on, *"I do remember using them for end of the year planning—or like, reflecting so I could do some summer planning with my team."* Other leaders described delving into the data once the school year concluded, when they had more time to make sense of the results.⁴¹

Within schools, principals acted as gatekeepers for the *5Essentials* data until results were made public in the fall. We found that principals' perceptions of the data—its value, intended use, and credibility—had implications for how data came to be interpreted and used. In schools where leaders reported higher levels of mistrust or skepticism around the "validity" and credibility of the data, subsequent engagement with

⁴¹ Though we heard from a district official and small number of coaches that the time "lag" between survey administration and the reporting of results detracted from school leaders'

engagement with the data, principals' interviews failed to corroborate that the reporting timeline—typically around six weeks—affected their review or use of the results.

and sharing of the results by leadership teams seemed to reflect these concerns. Analogously, schools with leaders who reported feeling overwhelmed or limited in their capacity to take on additional responsibilities went on to report lower levels of engagement with and action upon the results of the *5Essentials*.

Most teachers interacted with the *5Essentials* data just once per year, students even less. By the time the *5Essentials* results were shared with teachers and staff, data had typically been processed two times—first by principals and then by leadership teams. Leaders from four of the six schools reported on a subset of survey results to staff, typically as part of a larger review of performance data from the previous academic year. In at least two schools, ILT members shared responsibility for presenting these data to their colleagues. One teacher leader explained, “*Each of us has a role to play in sharing the data from different aspects of the year, whether it’s testing data, Five Essentials, SQRP—whatever the data may be. We’ll discuss the expectations and things for the upcoming school year.*” Winnowing of assessment results allowed school leaders to focus on data points that they believed were most relevant to teachers and was also viewed as a necessity, given the considerable constraints placed on meeting time.⁴²

The sharing of *5Essentials* results with staff, however compressed, served as an important juncture in the data use cycle as one of two time points in the year where teachers recalled focused conversations about the *5Essentials* (the other being survey administration). For a large proportion of staff, this was their only structured opportunity to think about how the data might inform school-wide practice and policy.⁴³ Typically this occurred as part of a larger review of a school’s performance metrics from the previous year, including test scores, attendance rates, and Freshman OnTrack data. A number of teachers reflected on the scope of information presented to staff as exclusive to those indicators associated with school ratings. This review was intended to bring attention to successes and high-light areas for growth during the upcoming year. An

assistant principal described the purpose of the back-to-school data review as, “[*We share*] what was fantastic, how we maintained fantastic, what was okay, how we make it better, what was tragic, and how we make sure there’s not another tragedy.” In all of the schools where data were shared with staff, these conversations were closed to outsiders—ostensibly providing a safe space for candid discussion and serving as an opportunity for teachers to weigh in on the data’s interpretation and proposed use. Teachers from multiple schools reported no further engagement with the *5Essentials* results after the initial sharing of data at back to school.

Efforts to share the results of the *5Essentials* Survey within schools varied in the scope of information conferred and the extent of opportunities for those present to construct understandings based on the evidence. Though both aspects contributed to perceptions of the survey and the data’s relationship to school ratings, the latter defined teachers’ expectations of how the data might be used to guide practice. Ultimately, accounts suggest few schools established clear intentions or agendas for acting upon the data, leading many teachers to perceive the *5Essentials* as largely disconnected from their schools’ improvement efforts.

Although district leaders shared with us the hope that school leaders would also find ways to present the results of the survey with the broader school community—including students and parents—in practice, this rarely came to be. Only one school in our sample described communicating with families about the results as part of their “State of the School” convening—and two reported some sharing of findings with students. As such, in the majority of cases, teachers were the primary audience for the within-school reviews of *5Essentials* results.

Few schools reported meaningful changes in response to *5Essentials* data. Sharing of *5Essentials* results, in most cases, did little to connect the data to practice. The failure to attach practical significance and actionable implications to the survey’s results reinforced existing impressions that the *5Essentials*’ purpose was

⁴² Leaders in five of the six schools reported having just one day to review results from schoolwide performance assessments with staff at the beginning of the year.

⁴³ Though *5Essentials* results were published online, typically around the start of the academic year, only one of the 30 teachers we interviewed reported independently accessing their school’s report.

chiefly evaluative and peripheral to activity in schools. Though we struggled to find evidence of large-scale efforts undertaken in response to the *5Essentials* data, practitioners shared several examples of more modest activities and changes they attributed to insights gleaned from the survey. Two principals described attempting to improve their relationships with staff by focusing more attention on their interpersonal relationships. One leader took steps to more visibly demonstrate appreciation for staff contributions. Another established a weekly time to meet with staff about their concerns and ideas. At an elementary school, leaders said the *5Essentials* informed their choices around professional development for teachers. A high school redesigned several security protocols in response to evidence from the survey. In most cases, such reports came from a single source within a school and were rarely corroborated by multiple informants, making it difficult to ascertain a direct link between the *5Essentials* results and specific actions. Those for which our data offered more substantive support are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4 of this report.

Schools were charged with responsibility for data use despite capacity limitations. While CPS officials acknowledged many of the challenges schools reported in using the data, they maintained that the district’s approach demonstrated respect for the autonomy of schools in organizing and leading improvement. Based on knowledge and experience she acquired working in the district’s office of accountability, one leader explained:

“I think that CPS intentionally values...I think we tend to lean towards school autonomy. We don’t necessarily tell schools what to do and how to do it. We definitely say, ‘Here’s the standard, here’s the bar,’ [and] I think the only reason we’ve been able to do that is because we have confidence in the people in those buildings in terms of the leadership.”

This strategy was exemplified in the reporting of *5Essentials* results to schools—a process independently

managed by UChicago Impact. School leaders reported receiving few, if any, instructions for interpreting and using the data to guide practice. District officers largely corroborated these accounts, and one implied the lack of explicit guidance from the central office showed deference to the expertise of practitioners in schools. A senior data strategist said, *“I feel comfortable saying with SQRP [metrics], the results do not come with necessarily a set of instructions on what to do. That [guidance] lives in other spaces with the content experts.”*

Though CPS provided few explicit directives as to how schools should engage with and use the data, the district did expect that schools would utilize evidence from multiple performance measures in planning for improvement. District leaders placed responsibility for the development of each school’s Continuous Improvement Work Plan, or CIWP,⁴⁴ squarely on the shoulders of the ILT. Principals were expected to work closely with their leadership teams to derive insights and construct practical implications from the data. One officer explained:

“So, the expectation is that schools, when they get back their reports, are digging into (them) to identify ‘what are the areas they’re strong in and what are the areas in which they need to focus?’ And the way that’s operationalized is [that] schools have Continuous Improvement Work Plans [CIWPs] that they have to do, and 5Es is a data element that is used in that. So, if they need to work on something around—[for example] if it’s a Supportive Environment thing, they might say, ‘Oh, on the 5Essentials Survey, our Supportive Environment rating was weak, so that’s evidence that we need to address that, and we will look to see if that improves.’”

Central officers seemed fairly confident that schools understood expectations for their work with the data and surmised that the majority of schools took at least some steps to reach these goals. They acknowledged, however, that capacity for interpreting and using data

⁴⁴ The Continuous Improvement Work Plan (CIWP) outlines a school’s goals and establishes the strategies and benchmarks which will be used to achieve them. See <http://schoolreports.>

cps.edu/ciwp/PrincipallLTTrainingPresentation.pptx for more information.

varied widely across schools—and moreover, that these disparities were consequential in shaping the outcomes of data use. An officer whose team oversaw data analytics for internal district use pointed to gaps in data literacy—particularly amongst principals—as an obstacle and detriment to the data’s use.

In collaboration with UChicago Impact, the same officer had previously led trainings with principals aimed at building capacity and providing support around the *5Essentials* data. In those sessions, she said, *“We would walk through the online reports and try and help principals engage with [the data] but what we often ended up doing was a lot of myth-busting, because a lot of principals are frustrated by how... the scores are created.”* She and her colleagues found that principals often struggled to make sense of the survey’s response scale in relation to the composite scores they received. She said, *“They fail to understand... [that] how strongly [respondents] endorse something is part of the calculation.”* Though these sessions were intended to resolve misunderstandings and facilitate interpretation of the data, the officer said the outcomes were mixed. Some school leaders still walked away with misconceptions—which the district later found contributed to problematic messaging within schools. She explained, *“[Principals] struggled to wrap their heads around, ‘But so many of my teachers said positive things! Why is my score so low?’”*

Despite recognition of the potential for confusion and misinterpretation around *5Essentials* data, the district continued to promote school autonomy in the data use process. While this strategy afforded considerable independence to schools in their engagement with data, evidence suggests it also hindered the larger goals of improvement, particularly in schools with limited capacity and/or support for data use. The district’s framing of autonomy rendered schools responsible for figuring out how to interpret and use results from the *5Essentials*, even as accounts from practitioners, coaches, and district leaders underscored the uniquely complex nature of the data. Whether the conditions of data use exacerbated performance gaps between highly-resourced and under-resourced schools warrants further consideration. Our findings illustrate that schools with the most to gain from using *5Essentials* data were also those least equipped to do so independently.

District support for data use was inconsistent.

According to central officers, district support for data use “funnels” to schools through network chiefs, who oversee principals’ work and provide leadership development and training under the auspices of the Office of Network Support (ONS). An ONS leader explained, *“The Office of Network Support is organized around providing adequate support, accountability, and leadership development to principals for all district-run schools in Chicago.”* In addition to *“evaluating and holding principals accountable, [chiefs] are also responsible for leadership development,”* which the official defined in terms of *“providing feedback, offering resources and support to principals, and helping them grow in their leadership role.”* Facilitating the interpretation and productive use of school performance data represents a *“huge priority”* for chiefs, as the Office of Network Support manages and compiles multiple performance indicators, including *“student achievement data at all levels, attendance, [and SEL] data.”*

Officials openly acknowledged that schools’ engagement with the *5Essentials* lacked consistency—which they attributed in parts to school leaders’ defensiveness in accepting critical feedback, to ambiguity around improving climate, and notably to unevenness in districtwide support and expectations for the data’s use. *“I wouldn’t conclude that [the 5Essentials data] is not used, but it is inconsistently used,”* said one. *They went on, “I wish we did more with the 5Essentials. Sometimes it’s very difficult for folks to take ownership of this data, to think about how it can be used and for what purposes.”*

Officers alluded to idiosyncrasies in the ways individual network chiefs utilized data in their work with principals. A senior network official noted, *“I will say that [5Essentials data] typically is used in combination with other data points. In terms of protocols and how exactly principals review the data, it’s really [up to] the network chiefs’ approach(es) as to how they want to connect principals with the data and have discussions about [it].”* Though she had reason to believe *“many schools [were] actually diving much deeper [into the 5Essentials data] and having follow-up discussions and trying to draft specific actions around addressing certain [issues],”* she understood this was not uniformly the case. Analogously, she highlighted her office’s goal of increasing consistency in guidance and support for data

use amongst network chiefs. In the past, she explained, “It was really left to the network chiefs to decide a lot of the approaches [for supporting data use]. Now, I am trying to drive a more systemized approach that is really focused on a certain set of values and also driving toward the district vision in a more unified way.” Though she referred to a number of district-sponsored resources, professional development programs, and initiatives targeting school climate issues in struggling schools, only one—a technical assistance and leadership coaching program operated by UChicago Impact—focused on the interpretation and use of culture and climate data within schools.⁴⁵ Moreover, as all three CPS officers noted, this program had recently been discontinued and its contracted partnerships with schools dissolved.

Network support felt like surveillance. Though framed by the district as the primary conduits for principal training and data use support, accounts from practitioners painted a very different picture of network chiefs’ role vis-à-vis the *5Essentials*—which some portrayed more as surveillance than support. Leaders from five of the six schools said they received little to no guidance from their network chiefs in using *5Essentials* data. One high school principal who referred to his network chief as a valued “thought partner” explained they often discussed other school performance indicators—such as “Freshman OnTrack, attendance, ECC, and PSAT.” He acknowledged, however, that the “*5Essentials ha(d) never come up in*” those conversations. He said, “*We talk about 5Essentials during 5Essentials time, you know? Like, ‘Here is what folks are doing to make sure they’re setting the tone [for survey administration].’*” When we asked another high school leader whether they had spoken with their network chief about the *5Essentials*, they immediately responded, “*Never talk with them [about it]. No.*” They went on:

“The only time [my chief] ever say(s) something, they’ll send an email and say, ‘Oh, I noticed that you[r score] went down. What’s happening?’”

You know? Because they probably need to address that... I don’t know if they ever look at the breakdown of my [5Essentials] report, other than they just look at the final report. And then it’s like, ‘Hey, you’re not organized this year. What’s happening? Fix it.’”

According to the vast majority of principals and school administrators, data-centered conversations with network chiefs focused almost exclusively on the academic indicators linked to the district’s accountability policy and school quality ratings. Though these ratings encompassed data from the *5Essentials*, the survey was regarded as a “small part” of the weighted overall score, which many implied contributed to the scant attention it received from network administrators.

In these and other accounts, principals, teacher leaders, and technical assistance providers insinuated that network chiefs might be poorly positioned to offer the types of support and coaching that principals needed to make better use of *5Essentials* results. Practitioners regularly characterized network chiefs as “supervisors” whose responsibility it was to “oversee” principals’ work and “report back” to the district’s central office. Though the majority of principals characterized their relationships with network chiefs in positive terms, very few viewed their chiefs as sources of technical support. Asked to describe her network chief’s role, one school leader said, “*It’s pretty much to evaluate me.*” She continued, “*I suppose if you have any serious issues, and you need to think it through, [my chief is] there to do that.*” She admitted she did not seek or receive support from her chief around day-to-day issues and challenges. Such perceptions may explain why none of the principals we spoke with turned to their network chiefs for guidance or support in using the *5Essentials*.

Leadership coaches also spoke to the apparent tension stemming from network chiefs’ competing responsibilities as supervisors operating on the district’s behalf, on one hand, and as training and support providers to principals, on the other. One coach explained:

⁴⁵ Through the 2018-19 academic year, UChicago Impact contracted with schools in CPS to provide technical assistance through the organization’s *5Essentials* Professional

Learning programs. See <https://uchicagoimpact.org/our-offerings/5essentials> for further information about their support model.

“In a network position, there’s sort of a tenuous conflict of interest between being a coach, which [requires] you to really build trust with a partner, but also at the same time working for the network, which in the hierarchy, is effectively the boss of principals. And a lot of compliance can—and historically has—come down through the networks.”

This, he said, made it harder for chiefs “to coach in a way that [is] non-evaluative and really supportive of schools.” Other coaches suggested similarly that principals they worked with found it difficult to “ask for help” or show vulnerability with their network chiefs, knowing that what they said might negatively impact their evaluations.

As intermediaries between the district’s central office and schools, network chiefs serve a critical role in translating policy to practice. Though district leaders conceived of network chiefs as the major sources of guidance and support in practitioners’ efforts to utilize data from the *5Essentials*, evidence from schools suggests this was rarely the case. Accounts framed network chiefs as largely disengaged with the *5Essentials* as a source of insight into school improvement, and instead focused primarily on how results from the survey impacted schools’ performance ratings.

Schools lacked clear guidance from district in using data for improvement. In the absence of coherent guidance and support from the district’s central office or their network leaders, most schools constructed their own agendas and routines for using *5Essentials* data to guide action—to limited success. Apart from the survey’s widely cited role in school performance evaluations, school leaders understood broadly the expectation that data from the *5Essentials*—like that of other district-sanctioned accountability metrics—should be used to inform the goals outlined in their official Continuous Improvement Work Plans. Most principals took steps to engage their leadership teams in the process of interpretation and planning; those fortunate to have coaching relationships also derived support from them. Ultimately, though, principals and coaches both implied that *5Essentials* was frequently underutilized due, at least in part, to the effort and skill required to

derive actionable insights from the data. Even when the survey helped to identify or corroborate problems, schools faced constraints in resources (e.g., time, funding, community support, instructional capacity) that diminished their ability to act on the data.

District leaders acknowledged the need for greater consistency in support and messaging around the *5Essentials*’ intended use as a formative assessment tool for guiding practice. They depicted this as part of a broader push to reframe data’s role in continuous improvement. One official said, “We need to do more around helping [schools] to use data in a meaningful way, versus just for evaluative purposes.” She described the “mindset shift” she was working on to engender network leaders’ work with schools.

“One of the shifts I’m working on making with the network chiefs, and in general, trickling down to the school level, is to move away from the indicators that we always look at as outcome data and start evaluating... not only evaluating but capturing information about culture and climate practices [and processes]. And this is a hard shift because it’s a mindset shift—but it also requires some technical changes in the way folks operate: building processes that really focus on this, shifting (network) visits [to schools] that are [about] monitoring and accountability to [focus on] instructional rounds and examining practices. And this is one of the things I’m doing now with the network chiefs... trying to help them redirect and move [practice].”

By shifting network chiefs’ attention and support to processes and practice, CPS leadership hoped to mitigate what many people viewed as overemphasis on high-stakes performance metrics and school accountability at the district level. Though officers regarded accountability as crucial to ensuring equity in and across schools, they conceived of educational practice as the primary driver in reaching this goal. To achieve this shift in perspective would require a reframing of goals, protocols, and policies for using data in formative, rather than exclusively summative, ways. A central officer outlined the implications for network leaders’ work with principals, saying, “We need to build con-

fidence in school leaders to know that [ratings] change when you change practice and experience, the experiences of learners in your school.”

Based on our conversations with CPS leaders and goals set forth in the district’s five-year vision, a shift toward centering practice over performance had already begun. Amongst ongoing efforts, officials pointed to further articulation of a formal theory of action to guide schools in using performance data, like that from the *5Essentials*, in more formative and improvement-focused ways. An officer in strategic initiatives said, *“I think that [district leaders] are still continuing to get clear on our theory of action around the [5Essentials] data and research, and how that should and can support continuous improvement.”* They pointed to progress under the district’s current chief executive officer, Dr. Janice Jackson as indicative of developments to come. *“It’s been an evolution, and we’ve continued to get better each year. So, I do think we’ll see a bit more strategic use of things like the 5Essentials and other data points.”* Citing the unique potential for the *5Essentials* to shed light on “what’s

possible” as a “leading indicator”—as opposed to an “outcome measure”—the officer said, *“That’s something that we’re trying to figure out, with a lot of other things, like, ‘How do we know if we’re getting better before just the end of the year?’ And I see the 5Essentials being one of those [data sources] that we should be looking at.”*

Ultimately, district officials’ accounts validated many of the frustrations and challenges outlined by practitioners in schools—who struggled to make sense of and use *5Essentials* data in practicable ways. Central officers’ comments also hinted at a larger and more troubling paradox—in which schools were held responsible for using *5Essentials* data to guide improvement even as the district had yet to establish how these dynamics should unfold. Though the district’s agenda foregrounded the survey’s capacity as a formative assessment or “leading indicator” of school improvement, the data’s actual use signaled otherwise. At school, network, and district levels, the *5Essentials* functioned largely as a summative metric—used to evaluate and rate schools’ performance in decisive ways.

Pressure and Performance Under SQRP

The *5Essentials* Survey's association with accountability has strongly shaped CPS educators' relationship to the survey and the way they understand its value (see the box titled History of Ties to SQRP). In this chapter, we examine how school leaders and teachers leveraged the survey process, and engaged with survey results, within the context of its inclusion in SQRP.

Our findings show how pressure to manage school ratings undermined district and school leaders' goals for data use and diverted capacity away from improvement efforts. Though the *5Essentials* comprised a small percentage of school accountability ratings,⁴⁶ leaders often viewed the survey results as more “manageable” than outcomes associated with other performance metrics—justifying efforts to “move the numbers” and improve results. Messaging within schools further framed the survey's administration in terms of accountability, emphasizing the necessary compliance with district policy.

In addition to reports of calculated messaging and survey administration practices, teachers' accounts highlighted the ambivalence some felt about giving critical feedback on the survey due to the potential for results to negatively affect school ratings and reputation. Teachers also shared concerns about the data's confidentiality, despite assurances from the district and researchers regarding the anonymity of reported survey results, and the perceived risk of individual exposure and administrator retaliation allegedly deterred some teachers from submitting surveys. Across schools, practitioners' speculation about potential “gaming” of the *5Essentials* Survey by respondents who exploited or feared the implications of negative results bred mistrust and ambivalence toward the data, arguably detracting from its use.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that the potential for survey results to inform school improvement was overshadowed by the incentives and pressures created by the survey's inclusion in accountability policies.

History of Ties to SQRP

Many people we interviewed knew that the district's use of the *5Essentials* had changed in the nearly 20 years since the measure was first developed in CPS. Principals and teachers with years of experience in the district routinely noted that the *5Essentials* “wasn't always part of accountability.” Reports from district officers corroborated and contextualized how policy shifts affected implementation of the *5Essentials*.

According to a staff member in the district's measurement office, the decision to incorporate the survey in the official school quality and performance framework corresponded with the district's commitment to a multi-dimensional framing of educational outcomes. Before being tapped as part of the CPS school accountability framework, the *5Essentials* functioned as an optional assessment—administered and reported exclusively to schools whose principals volunteered to

participate. Dissemination and use of the data varied widely across schools, which district leaders viewed as problematic. “*There were some principals that were really good at sharing [the data] and there were some principals that weren't,*” explained a central officer, “*and that [became] an issue of equity in terms of, ‘What schools are really using [the data]?’*” During this time, she said, “*network chiefs and [district] leadership couldn't see the results... And so, it was really like, ‘Hey, this is a valuable source of information. We need to change this, so it becomes something useful.’*” The decision to fold the survey into SQRP followed this logic. “*SQRP shouldn't just be about objective standardized test scores and attendance [data],*” explained another network official. “*If [climate is] truly important to school performance, then yes, we should hold schools accountable for it.*”

Continued

⁴⁶ During the 2019-20 academic year, the *5Essentials* Survey made up 10 percent of SQRP ratings for elementary schools and 5 percent for high schools.

Officials credited the *5Essentials* as a unique part of school quality ratings. Said one, *“The 5Es offers this opportunity to understand not only the academic rigor that’s happening in a building, but the social support. Like, how nurturing of an environment is this? Are the teachers collaborating? Are the leaders effective?”* People within schools articulated similar convictions about the importance of recognizing qualitative and experiential aspects of school performance, though they were overwhelmingly critical of the manner in which the district achieved this goal. Of the 42 practitioners with whom we spoke, none vocalized support for including the *5Essentials* as part of SQRP.

District leaders acknowledged both sides of the debate and admitted that the *5Essentials’* ties to accountability added a layer of complexity for teachers in evaluating their schools. One officer whose position involved frequent contact with network (chiefs) and school leaders reported, *“[There’s] a tension between the teachers providing really honest and specific feedback but also knowing that [their responses] will impact the school quality rating. So, I can see in some instances—how folks can feel that is a challenge.”*

Another central officer pointed to a series of events they felt contributed to the misgivings some practitioners had about the *5Essentials’* role in school performance evaluations. Beginning in 2011, CPS moved to administer the *5Essentials* Survey in all public schools, on a yearly basis.^T That same year, the survey was launched online by UChicago Impact and reports of schools’ results became publicly available for the first time. Just two years later, CPS announced the closure of more than 50 schools in response to “underutilization”—sending shockwaves through the district and ushering in an era of high-stakes school accountability.^U In 2014, when the *5Essentials* was flagged for inclusion in the newly issued School Quality Rating Policy, schools’ engagement with the survey was once again redefined. Though the *5Essentials* Survey survived

these changes, an officer in data strategy suggested the survey’s public image had taken a hit, especially in the eyes of practitioners. They explained:

“I think the problem is just the historical context. [The survey] went public two years before the school closures and the school actions process. Then it went on SQRP, right? Had it gone public and there not been all of that other attention on the district, I don’t think it would’ve been as traumatizing because—it would’ve just been built into culture.”

Though the survey’s use in accountability frequently overshadowed the broader goals of the *5Essentials* use as a tool, district officers insisted that the *5Essentials* was an integral part of the district’s school quality framework. *“We’ve bought into the [5Essentials],”* said one leader, *“because... the 5Es is CPS. The 5Es was developed with CPS data.”* Inclusion of the *5Essentials* as an accountability metric was anything but accidental; instead it functioned as a tangible indicator of the district’s priorities and values. An official said:

“As a district that faces a lot of criticism about how (it) holds schools accountable, and [believes] that schools are more than just test scores, this [the 5Essentials] is what we can point to. This is how we can say, ‘Hey, we as a district get it. We care about it. We are invested in giving schools a tool to understand this.’”

More than five years after the debut of SQRP, repercussions of school closures and the tumultuous rollout of district accountability policies echoed in practitioners’ accounts of the *5Essentials*, compounded by more recent experiences of the survey’s implementation and use. Evidence from our interviews with school leaders and staff highlights how the threat of sanctions under school accountability continued to hinder meaningful engagement with the *5Essentials* in and across schools.

^T Prior to 2011, the *My Voice, My School* survey that came to be known as the *5Essentials* was administered as a paper survey in K-8 schools, on a bi-yearly basis.

^U See Gordon, de la Torre, Cowhy, Moore, Sartain, & Knight (2018) for a detailed account.

School leaders constructed priorities for data use to maximize SQRP ratings. Though CPS leaders conceived of the *5Essentials* as serving complementary functions as both a tool for guiding school improvement and metric for ensuring accountability, our findings highlight a tendency for the survey’s external stakes to determine how practitioners engaged with the measure and their results. School leaders, in particular, said the pressure associated with the district’s accountability policy defined their priorities for school improvement and directly influenced how they interacted with data from the *5Essentials*. Despite marked differences in context, the fact that leaders from all six schools framed their agendas for improvement in terms of the performance metrics associated with SQRP offered compelling evidence of how accountability had impacted the landscape of data use.

A leadership coach and former high school principal had witnessed firsthand how the district’s accountability framework informed, and sometimes distorted, leaders’ priorities and definitions of success. She said:

“We are in the system that requires movement. And when I say movement, I mean progress on key indicators. So, if [you] want to remain a level one-plus school, you have to meet certain requirements. There is a certain level of accountability that becomes a heavy pressure. It’s not necessarily a motivator to do what’s in the best interest of kids, even though that’s what the claim is. [Supposedly,] if you have all of these improvements on these indicators in the school quality rating policy, it indicates that you are meeting the needs of your young people well. But I’m like, ‘That’s not what’s [happening].’”

In this context, it becomes easier to understand how “moving the numbers”—a phrase employed by several leaders and coaches—became the focus of some schools’ improvement plans. For a number of school leaders, the

stakes of accountability justified diverting attention and effort away from other issues in order to enhance scores on “key performance indicators,” a term applied to the metrics encompassed by school quality ratings.

Even with leaders’ focus confined to “key indicators,” bandwidth and capacity for data use were often stretched thin in schools. Principals pointed to data overwhelm as diminishing the attention given to *5Essentials* results. Though leaders at all six schools attributed potential value to insights afforded by the *5Essentials* Survey, most conceded to underutilizing the data due to constraints in time, resources, and organizational capacity. One principal, who stated she forgot to share the results of the *5Essentials* with staff at back-to-school, said the overabundance of school performance data detracted from more purposeful engagement with the *5Essentials*. He acknowledged, “*I think the (5Essentials) data is—it’s good data. Do you know what I mean? We just haven’t been intentional. Because like I said, there (are) just so many other things to look at.*” Another principal conceded that he lacked the time to act upon the data in meaningful ways. “*I just think it comes down to—for me personally it comes down to a volume thing,*” he said, “*It’s just a matter [of]—how much time do I have? What should I spend it on?*” District officials acknowledged the potential for information to inundate school leaders. “*It’s a lot,*” said a senior network leader, “*and folks sort of tune out a little bit, because [otherwise] they can drown in it.*”

As one of more than a dozen metrics comprised by SQRP, the *5Essentials* received markedly less attention from school leaders than standardized test results or academic persistence rates. Competing demands for their attention impelled leaders to prioritize “moving” results on “top” SQRP metrics—namely those weighted most heavily in school ratings calculations.⁴⁷ Comprising just 5 to 10 percent of a school’s rating, the *5Essentials* was often eclipsed by larger metrics.⁴⁸ The interest and potential value individuals ascribed to

⁴⁷ For high schools, student academic growth metrics comprised approximately 30 percent of SQRP ratings; cohort graduation rates, college readiness indicators, and post-secondary enrollment and persistence rates made up another 35 percent. Freshman OnTrack and attendance rates represented 10 percent, each. The remaining 15 percent was comprised, equally, by each school’s Data Quality Index Score, drop out

rate, and results from the *5Essentials* Survey. See <https://www.cps.edu/about/district-data/metrics/sqrp/> for detailed information.

⁴⁸ Notably, the *5Essentials*’ weighting as a SQRP metric had been carefully considered by district officials who conjectured that maintaining lower stakes for the survey would preserve the data’s integrity and quality.

the *5Essentials* did little to offset these priorities. An elementary school leader said, “I wanna say the whole SQRP stuff is more or less the guideline in seeing, ‘Where do we need to focus our attention this year?’” A third year high school principal broke down his thinking in greater detail, saying:

“How [the metrics are] weighted in [SQRP]—if you take a look at the breakdown of percentage of weights, that’s how we invest our time... Forty percent is assessments and test schools and high stakes whatever, [so] that’s where forty percent of time is going, you know? I’d probably say more than ten percent of my time is going to Freshman on Track, although that is what it’s weighted as. But it’s a big one. And then there’s the graduation rate, Sophomore on Track, and Early College Credential and all that other kind of stuff. 5Essentials is in that kind of like, ‘Oh, and don’t forget about DQI, 5Essentials, and whatever else.’”

Such accounts illustrate plainly how SQRP shaped leaders’ priorities for and attention to data. Moreover, these examples suggest that the measure’s relatively small contribution to SQRP may have contributed to the underwhelming engagement many schools reported with the data.

School leaders depicted the pressure of accountability as justification for the strategic, if not opportunistic, attention paid to improving *5Essentials* results. Principals regarded the *5Essentials* as a “fairly small” but uniquely manipulable part of their overall SQRP rating, impressions that justified their targeted efforts to boost results on the survey. Four of the principals we interviewed referred to the malleability of survey data as a feature that influenced their interpretation and use of the results. A high school principal said, “There’s a lot of accountability right now around the *5Essentials* and that makes it hard. It’s part of SQRP, but it’s a piece of SQRP that’s relatively easy to manage.” Another principal attested to hearing similar claims from fellow school leaders. He said, “I know some of my principal friends, they’ll tell you, ‘Listen, I need those 5 percentage points.’”

An elementary school principal outlined a similar perspective and explained how the *5Essentials* fit into her goals for improving her school’s quality rating score.

“I worry about all data, and I’ll tell you why,” she said, “I’m a Level 2 school. In order for me to move up from being a Level 2 school, I’ve got to focus on what I can move. And [the *5Essentials*] is easier to move than my academic data.” Another school’s assistant principal contrasted the *5Essentials* with other SQRP indicators—such as attendance, which he implied were more difficult to influence. As school leaders, he explained, “You’re putting whatever efforts towards attendance, and just coming to the realization that parents are gonna do whatever they want. But knowing with our rating: What do we have control of? What can we do to fix the numbers to get us to a 1-Plus? And so, the survey falls in that [category].”

Valuations of the *5Essentials* as more manipulable than other SQRP metrics proved less flattering than comparisons which highlighted the survey’s “uniqueness” as a “qualitative” indicator and source of student voice. In this and several other cases, school leaders contrasted the formidable burden of raising academic achievement or incentivizing school attendance with the relative simplicity of “moving” teachers’ responses on a culture and climate survey. “Academic data is hard to move, [especially] when you’re talking about impoverished communities and kids who have not had the same support [as more advantaged children],” said one principal, “However, this [5Essentials] data, if teachers are honest, this data you can move.” Despite the *5Essentials* relatively minor contribution to SQRP, because the survey’s results were deemed more “manageable” than other performance metrics, school leaders did what they could to produce favorable outcomes.

Efforts to move and manage *5Essentials* data unfolded across schools in the weeks leading up to the survey’s annual administration window. Questionable tactics employed by leaders during this period reinforced problematic conceptions of the survey as a performance metric, and not a practical tool.

Messaging from administrators foregrounded

compliance over school improvement. School leaders said they tried to depict the *5Essentials* Survey in terms of its intended use as a tool for generating insight to guide improvement, while also reminding teachers and students of its significance in school quality ratings. They conceded, however, that messaging to

staff skewed heavily toward the latter and cited the district’s reporting requirements as a contributing factor. Administrators understood each school needed to reach a minimum response rate in order to “receive credit” on SQRP. They faced pressure, or what one called a “heavy push,” from the district’s central office “to get at least 50 percent of students and 50 percent of staff to complete [the survey].” According to several principals, failure to achieve the minimum response rate reflected poorly on their leadership and would detract from the overall rating the school received.⁴⁹

Communication about the *5Essentials*, unsurprisingly, peaked around the survey’s administration. Leaders articulated two goals behind their messaging to staff: ensuring that “all voices” in the school were reflected in the results and satisfying the district’s requirements for data reporting. One principal explained the struggle he faced in balancing the district’s policy with his desire for genuine participation. He said, “You almost have to push [the teachers] to take the survey. Like, ‘Please, I want your feedback—please be honest, and take the survey.’ I know some other principals that approach it differently. But for me, it’s always been, ‘Hey listen, it’s something that we have to do. It’s a part of our SQRP.’”

For some teachers, the relentless focus on response rates and the *5Essentials*’ ties to accountability cast survey administration and their participation in a negative light—as acts of compliance rather than opportunities to give feedback and inform decision-making at their schools. One teacher shared her impressions of messaging from school leaders. They said, “I don’t get that it’s, ‘We need you to complete the survey because we want feedback from you.’ It’s, ‘We need to complete the survey because we are told that we need to complete the survey and people are looking at how many people complete it.’” Accounts suggested some administrators depicted the survey even more categorically as an opportunity for staff to influence school ratings. A

high school teacher said, “[Our administrators] always encourage us to fill [the survey] out because they say it affects our school’s rating if we can get some points in key areas, like school culture and other things.”

Even amongst more subtle calls for participation, messaging around the survey consistently foregrounded priorities defined by compliance with district policy. The widely regarded stakes of accountability—and school leaders’ preoccupation with SQRP ratings—bred cynicism toward otherwise sincere interest in student and teacher voice.

Public survey results carried more risks than rewards for schools. Messaging in some schools also stressed the public visibility of *5Essentials* results, which practitioners depicted as an additional layer of accountability. Teachers at one elementary school said their principal had conveyed to them that low survey response rates would “reflect poorly” on the school community and might even deter families from enrolling their children there. Another school’s leaders told staff that “better data”—which many understood to mean higher scores—could improve their school’s SQRP rating and in turn attract “more” and “better students.” Leaders from four of the six schools said pressure to increase enrollment and attract high quality teaching staff exacerbated the threat imposed by SQRP.⁵⁰ The decision to publicly release *5Essentials* results served CPS as an example of the district’s transparency in reporting, and ostensibly facilitated families’ decision making in the context of school choice. Interestingly, our findings indicate the public nature of the data may have threatened the data’s credibility and usefulness, at least in the eyes of practitioners.

Teachers echoed their principals’ claims that CPS families used school performance data, including *5Essentials* results, to guide their enrollment decisions. Staff in schools that had previously faced potential

⁴⁹ A 50 percent response rate for both students and teachers is required for a school to receive a report of *5Essentials* results. In cases where schools fail to achieve the minimum response rate, the points typically assigned to *5Essentials* (between 5-10 percent of the total score) are redistributed to other SQRP metrics. See pages 12 and 14 of the CPS SQRP Handbook (<https://www.cps.edu/globalassets/cps-pages/about/district->

[data/metrics/school-quality-rating-policy-sqrp/sqrp-handbook.pdf](https://www.cps.edu/globalassets/cps-pages/about/district-data/metrics/school-quality-rating-policy-sqrp/sqrp-handbook.pdf)) for additional details on the reallocation of points.
⁵⁰ The district’s school choice policy, which appropriated funding on a per-pupil basis, meant that schools competed for students and the resources that followed them. Because ratings factor into many families’ school choice decisions, SQRP carried even greater significance and stakes.

school actions⁵¹ were acutely sensitive to the risks associated with underperformance and under-enrollment. For several, the threat of sanctions loomed large in ways that directly influenced their participation on the survey. Referring to anxiety stemming from the district's history of school closure, an ILT member explained:

"If I'm afraid that my doors of my school are gonna close and I'm gonna be out of a job, I'm gonna say what I need to say to make sure that my school stays open, especially when I know it's a part of my school's rating."

Although CPS issued clear directives which barred school leaders from engaging in explicit coercion, intimidation, or bribery to influence the results of the survey, several teachers questioned the appropriateness of tactics employed by their current or former school leaders. Among these were shrewd appeals to teachers' common interest in their schools' success. A high school teacher described the discursive strategies and coded language school leaders used in communications with staff, which conspicuously framed the survey as a valued source of insight while implicitly stressing its role in accountability. *"This is actually [school leaders'] signature move,"* she explained, *"[They'll say], 'Remember that we use this data to determine important things for our school, so your voice is very important. Also, it is something that we are judged on by CPS.'" She saw this as leaders' way of alluding to the survey's external stakes even as they claimed to value the information it produced. She went on, "So they're saying, 'We use this data and it's really helpful to us', and they're saying, 'Actually we need you just to do it.' But, of course, they don't say that. [It's] very coded language."* In cases like this, teachers' implicit knowledge of the stakes attached to school accountability imbued their leaders' comments with further meaning. References to SQRP signaled to many teachers that the *5Essentials'* primary role was in the external evaluation of school performance.

Schools conducted "mock surveys" to preview and redirect critical responses. Leaders in multiple schools administered unofficial interim surveys based on the *5Essentials* in order to preemptively surface and address negative feedback. Reports illustrated the sizable efforts undertaken by leaders to develop and administer these questionnaires themselves. Though several ILT members and at least two external leadership coaches cited these so-called "mock surveys"⁵² as examples of "progress monitoring" tools they devised to track changes in culture and climate in between official survey cycles, the prudent timing of these efforts—together with commentary from other teachers—suggest that internal surveys also functioned as performance rehearsals—allowing school leaders to identify and respond preemptively to concerns before their schools' evaluation on the "real survey." In most cases mock surveys took place just weeks before the actual *5Essentials* Survey. More than one principal gleaned insights from their schools' mock surveys that enabled them to solve a problem or clarify the meaning of particular survey items with staff, which otherwise may have lowered their schools' results. Due to the brief interlude between interim and actual surveys in several schools, most efforts appeared targeted at low-hanging fruit.

Teachers' feelings about these practice surveys were mixed, though the majority perceived them as a form of risk management by school leaders, aimed at increasing favorable ratings on the actual survey. A high school English teacher said, *"I felt like it [the rationale] was, 'We wanna get a good score, so let us know what you don't like, and we'll fix that by the time you take the real survey.'" The teacher pointed out that the practice survey was administered just "two weeks before" the actual survey administration window, suggesting that any changes taken in response were unlikely to address underlying climate issues or organizational conditions.*

Another teacher we interviewed showed disdain toward school leaders' decision to run a practice survey

⁵¹ School actions refer to school closures, consolidations, co-locations, and re-assignment boundary changes. See https://www.cps.edu/about/school-transitions/school-actions/#a_guidelines-for-school-actions for additional information.

⁵² Practitioners also referred to mock surveys as practice surveys and internal surveys.

at all. “They gave us a trial one, which I thought was totally against the rules,” the teacher explained. “We got a Google questionnaire that ha(d) the exact same questions (as the real survey). And it was like, ‘Hey, just let us know what you would give.’” These examples highlight the potential for practice surveys to be negatively received, and moreover, to cast doubt on the motives underlying leaders’ efforts.

One teacher recalled that the practice survey administered at her school included references to specific accomplishments and improvements that leaders deemed germane to individual survey questions. She explained:

“[T]here were some suggestions in the [practice] survey of—a perfect example is one of the things our principal added is this concept of Tuesday 20s. He has three slots every Tuesday of [twenty] minutes and hey, if you wanna talk about something, let’s talk about it. That is totally a big part of the survey. Is administration listening to teachers? And he put in one of the prompts, ‘When you’re taking it, you know we’ve changed some things from last year.’ Like, ‘Here are three examples of things I’m doing that are great, so you might wanna give me a higher score.’ It didn’t say that, but I found it very interesting that those things were added.”

A number of teachers voiced skepticism about their leaders’ intentions in administering mock surveys, which at least one believed had exposed the identities of respondents. To the extent that these surveys may have detracted energy and resources from other efforts to improve culture and climate, or raised doubts about the use of feedback, the short-term value associated with practice surveys may have come at the expense of the actual data’s use.

Schools designed student survey administration to promote favorable responses. Schools exercised greater control over coordination of the student survey than that administered to teachers and staff. It comes as little surprise, then, that the structures and strategies that defined these efforts reflected school leaders’ interests in engendering positive student reviews of organizational climate. Administrators deliberately

assigned survey proctors they believed would engender more favorable responses from students and took pains to ensure optimal conditions for survey completion.

At least two elementary school leaders said they felt compelled to administer the survey, personally, to all of their students, rather than handing off the responsibility to other staff, whom they suspected might not set the appropriate tone. Other leaders strategically identified teachers they trusted to carry out the task effectively, including staff they knew had positive relationships with students.

As with the teacher survey, school leaders voiced concern about reaching minimum response rates on the student survey while still preserving individuals’ rights to opt out. They explained:

“[The district] tells you that you can’t force a student to complete it. But you’re forced to get at least 50 percent, right? So, you kind of come up between—you don’t want to really force them and then do something that you shouldn’t do. But you understand that CPS requires us to get at least 50 percent of our students to complete it. And so, basically what you do is tell the teacher [who is administering the survey], ‘Take the kids in the lab,’ and a lot of times you’ll say, ‘Hey, there is a survey you got to complete.’”

School leaders took other steps to ensure successful completion of the student survey. One assistant principal summarized the instructions given to students, which noted the potential for the survey’s results to inform school practice while also emphasizing students’ role in determining the school’s SQRP rating. Though students were encouraged to provide “honest” and “real depictions” of their experiences, “whether good or bad,” according to the assistant principal, students also understood the broader stakes of the survey. They explained:

“We just kinda tell [the students] what it is, why it’s important, and why it’s important to be honest. [We say,] ‘If there’s something you don’t like, this is how it changes. If there’s something you think is great, this is how you get people to say, ‘Oh, hey, yeah, that’s working. We’re gonna keep doing that.’ I think our students are really aware of how much

of a role they've played in [our school being rated] Level 1 Plus. They know their test scores; they understand what they contribute to this school."

Bringing attention to the relationship between students' survey responses and the data's impact on school ratings effectively assigned personal responsibility to individuals for the consequences of survey results on SQR. In many ways, this mirrored the rhetoric of personal responsibility that emerged from school leaders' messaging to staff. Leaders at both the high school and elementary levels indicated they took deliberate steps to ensure respondents understood the context and potential implications of their participation in the *5Essentials* Survey.

Teachers omitted critical feedback to protect their schools' ratings. Incited by principals' admonitions or their personal experiences with SQR ratings, many teachers shared concerns about the potential for their responses on the *5Essentials* Survey to negatively affect their school ratings and reputations. Nearly a quarter of the teachers we interviewed suggested the data's public visibility and ties to SQR influenced their thinking and participation in the survey. Rather than helping to identify issues and areas in need of support, lower scores on the survey exposed defects that triggered external sanctions. A high school teacher explained, *"The fact that part is public, I feel pressures people to put happier answers than they actually feel."* A second grade teacher outlined the tension she felt in using the survey to evaluate culture and climate at her school, saying:

"I feel like an interesting dichotomy [plays out]. I mean, I love our school and I think our school is amazing, so I don't want our rating to get lowered because of things that I say. But I also want to be honest with feedback. So, I feel a little bit torn sometimes, because I honestly love working here. I love my school, but that doesn't mean it's perfect, right? I struggle between what to put [on the survey] because of that."

Teachers across several schools acknowledged similar ambivalence toward issuing critical feedback (i.e., negative responses) on the survey, even when they

believed improvements were warranted. A high school English teacher referred to "dissonance" she felt in simultaneously wanting to give honest feedback to improve her school's climate while protecting the school's rating. She said:

"I feel very connected to this school, and I know that in the past, the survey data has been used for some sort of rating that they gave us. I always feel some dissonance because I want other people to understand that [our school] is a great place, but I also want to hold people accountable for the ways in which they are detracting from our school environment. It's always really hard because I like the people that I work with. I like our admin on good days, but sometimes I feel as though it's a hard line to walk. I don't know how honest I want to be on that day [when I complete the survey] because I don't want it to reflect poorly on the school."

Though a handful of teachers corroborated the perception that some individuals may have used the survey to complain or disparage school leaders, teachers' accounts more often illustrated sympathy for school leaders. Notably, several teachers who reported positive relationships with their school leaders said they were inclined to share feedback and concerns directly with their leaders, as opposed to responding "honestly" on the survey. One elementary school teacher explained:

"I feel very comfortable with our administration and I feel like there are a lot of areas where they are so open to feedback, and I can just go talk with them about things. So, to be honest, I use that as my avenue to voice frustrations or criticisms rather than this survey, because I know that the survey is a big deal in our rating."

It stands to reason that teachers who perceive their leaders as receptive to feedback may be working in schools with higher levels of trust between administrators and staff. In such cases, giving constructive feedback directly to one's school leaders may well be more efficient than using the survey to assign indirect ratings that could reflect poorly on their schools. That said, teachers within the same school often reported

differing levels of amicability in their relationships with administrators, suggesting the survey still served an important function.

Even teachers who characterized their relationships with school administration as less harmonious were sometimes reluctant to use their survey responses to “complain” about climate and culture issues, because they understood doing so might negatively affect their school’s reputation and rating. Said one, *“What you do on that survey is a reflection that could hurt the school as a result. So, I mean, I’ve always said, ‘If you have a problem, you should go address it with the person, not take it out on a survey.’”* Regardless of individuals’ intent, the act of redirecting constructive feedback away from the *5Essentials* ultimately detracted from the survey’s capacity to inform improvement in some schools.

Concerns about data privacy and potential repercussions deter some teachers from completing the survey.

Beyond the threat posed by school ratings, suspicion surrounding the confidentiality of individuals’ survey data arose in several accounts. Teachers and administrators both cited examples of staff who refused to answer the survey out of fear that their administrators could see their responses.⁵³ Though teachers we interviewed seemed confident in the data’s security and the privacy of their responses, several admitted they were initially incredulous. More than one admitted to having given false responses to certain survey questions in order to mask their identity. Not surprisingly, such behaviors raised further questions about the credibility of individuals’ responses. In general, teachers suggested little came of the concerns their colleagues raised. One teacher said:

“Teachers always worry about confidentiality of a survey. They always wonder if they really can be authentic in the survey, because they don’t know if they’re really being tied to it or not. I know it says that [it’s anonymous], but it’s always this underlying tone, like ‘Can I really be honest? And if I’m honest, what will happen if I’m honest?’”

Leaders from all six schools said they reminded staff of the data’s confidentiality. An administrator recalled, *“I tell them, ‘It’s anonymous so it’s an excellent opportunity to actually share what you think without having to say your name.’”* Even so, several teachers pointed to colleagues who allegedly refused to take the survey out of fear of being identified by their responses. One teacher speculated on the imagined risks of voicing complaints on the survey. They said:

“You don’t wanna be the reason why somebody gets terminated because you had one opinion and somebody had another, or you don’t want the survey to be the reason why you were terminated, because you felt one way, or you felt that this particular thing wasn’t happened, and then now somebody’s in trouble. So, like talking to other teachers, my colleagues, [there’s] just that fear of confidentiality, worrying like is somebody really watching and reporting back?”

Teachers in smaller schools and those in specialized roles were especially sensitive to potential breaches of confidentiality. They sensed that the reporting of disaggregated data would single out their responses, even if identifiers were removed. An arts teacher at one school said, *“If you’re a departmental class (instructor), there’s only so many people who are departmental, okay? So, if you teach language arts in a small department, well, now it’s narrowed down to you. I’m what they would consider an elective or a specials⁵⁴ teacher, so there’s only four of us.”* The fact that few teachers had looked directly at their school reports, which do not disaggregate teachers/staff in any way, may have factored into these concerns. Their fears also underscore mistrust that remains despite repeated statements made by the district, school leaders and survey administration. Though not directly mentioned in these accounts, the fact that the administration takes place online may have furthered suspicions that individuals’ responses were visible to principals.

Notably, several teachers indicated their confidence in the survey’s anonymity had grown over time. They

⁵³ Individuals’ identities and responses are never shared with the district or with schools. All survey results are reported in aggregate.

⁵⁴ In CPS, “specials” classes include art, health, PE, STEM, and world languages.

cited consistent messaging from their principals as well as the absence of retaliatory action as contributing to their increased comfort with the survey. One explained:

“When I initially started teaching, I was very worried about filling it out. I didn’t wanna fill it out ‘cause I was afraid that the information would come back to me and get punished. So, I was initially wary about filling it out, but now I’m more comfortable. [I was worried that] [t]he information would be used if we said anything negative. I was worried about that. So, I’d change my gender or teaching role or number of years teaching to try to hide it. Now I’m more comfortable with the anonymity of it.”

The majority of teachers in our sample said they felt confident about the anonymity of survey responses, even amidst some speculation from their colleagues. It is important to acknowledge that teachers willing to participate in this study may also have been less concerned with confidentiality than their peers.

Data confidentiality was consistently depicted as critical to the survey’s legitimacy and integral to promoting participation and support for these teachers. *“I think we all have a genuine respect for the 5Essentials because we know that we don’t have to worry about [data privacy]. It’s all confidential.”* Despite these affirmations, lingering suspicion that some teachers opted out of completing the survey or responded in less than truthful ways to mask their identity or protect their schools’ performance ratings cast doubt on the quality and representativeness of the data produced by the *5Essentials*.

The *5Essentials*’ relationship to SQRP altered how practitioners engaged with the survey and colored their

perceptions of their schools’ results. Our findings indicate that schools’ engagement with the *5Essentials* in many ways corresponded with the overarching political context of school accountability in CPS. School leaders faced external pressure from their network chiefs and CPS leadership to “move numbers” and manage the results of measures bounded by SQRP. This pressure, in turn, led them to construct priorities that aligned with the weighted composition of school ratings, rendering the *5Essentials* to a largely peripheral position due to its relatively low weighted value. School leaders judiciously allocated much of their energy and attention to higher yield indicators.

With the residual capacity and resources given to the *5Essentials*, leadership teams focused on driving positive scores, enacting what some called “quick fixes” to “high leverage” issues in order to increase favorable ratings of culture and climate. Interviews highlight the tendency for leadership teams to pursue goals that would result in immediate positive gains on the survey, sometimes at the expense of more global climate improvement.

From the earliest phases of the survey’s administration through the sharing of results, efforts centered on improving scores, signaling to many that the goals of data use were performative and outcome-based. Though never explicitly acknowledged, activity around the *5Essentials* often implied that fostering meaningful changes in culture and climate came secondary to raising scores. Many of the practices that defined schools’ engagement with the *5Essentials* seemed to detract from the data’s credibility, which we speculate may have contributed to the underwhelming nature of its use in school improvement.

Evidence of Promising Data Use Practices

Across our sites, school leaders engaged a variety of strategies and supports in service of the data's interpretation and use. While evidence points to some as problematic (e.g., interrogating teacher-administrator trust concerns in staff meetings; administering mock surveys to preemptively identify and “fix” problems before the official survey) or ineffective (e.g., presenting survey results in a didactic presentation; discrediting negative feedback as wholly inaccurate), in this chapter, we highlight two conditions that helped schools to overcome barriers associated with using *5Essentials* data.

The first was the presence of leadership coaching and technical support from external organizations, which helped principals make sense of and respond to *5Essentials* results in more intentional and productive ways. Accounts from principals in multiple schools suggest their work with leadership coaches influenced the goals, processes, and outcomes of data use in positive ways. Even in cases where coaches offered little explicit guidance around *5Essentials* results specifically, some school leaders brought insights and strategies from coaching to their work with the survey data.

The second condition that school leaders found helpful in using survey data was strong collaboration with instructional leadership teams, characterized by shared commitment to improving practice, distributed responsibility, and a sense of mutual respect. Schools with collaborative leadership teams showed greater capacity for sensemaking and strategic action around culture and climate data. Principals in these schools benefited from processing the *5Essentials* results with members of their leadership teams because the data encompassed and often reflected teacher leaders' experiences as practitioners. They helped principals interpret the feedback received from teachers and students, construct and evaluate implications for action, and determine how the results would be shared with the broader school community.

These two conditions appeared to facilitate more successful engagement with the data and, in several cases, motivated changes in school policy and practice.

Coaches functioned as thought partners in processing complex data. Principals credited leadership coaches as key support figures who helped them process information, gain perspective, and work through challenges involving data. Coaches pushed leaders to attend to dimensions of school performance they might otherwise have overlooked or neglected due to competing demands for their attention. Principals valued the expertise and professional experience of leadership coaches, many of whom had formerly served as administrators in CPS and therefore had first-hand knowledge of the demands of principalship. Outlining ways her coach's qualifications benefited their work together, an elementary school principal said, *“He really [knows] his stuff. And he [can] really talk the talk and walk the walk. He [can] push my thinking. Whereas, lots of times people come in and they don't really know what they're talking about. They haven't led a school.”*

Compared to other technical assistance providers in schools, whose work targeted instructional practice, teachers' development, or program implementation, leadership coaches functioned primarily in service of supporting principals' success. Several principals described their coaches as valued “thought partners” in the work of school improvement. One explained:

“It helps to have sometimes an outside person... [Coaching] gives you a thought partner, somebody to help you balance your ideas or come up with different ways of looking at things. [So] it's not always just my one way of looking at it. [Coaching] gives me another person to bounce things off of.”

Another principal reported their coach encouraged them to attend to dimensions of school performance

they tended to dismiss, specifically organizational culture and climate. They said:

“[My coach] is a thought partner who really can push [me] a little further... [so it isn't] ‘I’m just here to run a school,’ but, ‘No, I have to look at the bigger picture of, you know, the climate around here and the culture around here. There’s a lot, but I really have to focus on [climate], ‘cause it’s just not my—it’s not in my nature to (think that way).”

Both of these leaders valued the complementary lenses and interpretations their coaches brought to problems of practice. Coaching also encouraged some leaders to expand their attention and efforts to improve culture and climate—which they suggested got lost in the work of managing day-to-day school operations.

One principal whose coaching relationship had recently ended due to programmatic changes shared her disappointment over the loss of support—which she specifically associated with using data from the *5Essentials*. She said, *“I just won’t have [my coach] as a sounding board, which I really loved having. I did, because I feel like he was really instrumental in getting my teachers to see things [differently] and helping me to frame [the survey results].”* These remarks speak to the breadth of support leaders derived from coaching, which in this case, encompassed the principal’s own sensemaking around data as well as translating evidence to practice for teachers. Of the principals with leadership coaches, all but one endorsed their partnerships as credible sources of support in their efforts to use data in school improvement.

District leaders also pointed to leadership coaches as assets in promoting data use amongst principals. One central officer reported seeing growth in schools’ capacity and use of *5Essentials* data when principals were paired with coaches whose work foregrounded culture and climate. From their observations, they perceived schools with such coaching as “more intentional, more in depth, and consistent” in their use of data to drive improvement. They explained, *“That just indicates to me that if we give the space, the attention, and the supports around this there can be a lot more [and] better use of the data.”*

Analogously, a leader in the district’s data strategy office reported seeing increased capacity for evidence-use

amongst school leaders who participated in a summer training institute focused on data analytics in strategic planning. Though our findings reflect the experiences of principals engaged in long-term partnerships with coaches, this official cited potential for other training and support channels to elevate data use as well.

Coaches provided analytic support for deriving understandings of survey data. Beyond the thought partnership coaching afforded, principals also turned to their coaches for support in analyzing and interpreting evidence from multiple sources, including the *5Essentials*. Of the two organizations that supplied coaching to principals in our schools, one explicitly framed the *5Essentials* as a cornerstone in their framework for school improvement. SSO1 coaches utilized schools’ survey results in the development of their coaching support plans. A coach explained his approach:

“The first thing we [do] is we just kind of look at their 5Essentials report. We try to take a broad view and then sort of narrow the focus. And when taking the broad view, you’re looking for overall trends; what are opportunities for growth within it? Then I’ll ask questions: ‘Given your opportunities for growth, let’s think about pairing this with other school priorities you have.’ [The school’s] CIWP is an obvious place to go to see, ‘Have (leaders) clearly articulated the strategies that (they) need to focus on?’ And if (so), let’s look at the 5Essentials, measures—[for] convergence and alignment [with those goals]. So, if we really focus on this measure, it will help us execute and see success around whatever particular strategy [they’re] targeting.”

He shared an example of a school that had identified as goals “increasing the level of cognitive ask in classroom instruction” and promoting greater “intellectual risk-taking” by students. *“But we also noticed that [the] Student-Teacher Trust [score on the 5Essentials] was incredibly low,”* he explained, *“So, that led to conversations about, ‘What kind of intellectual risk-taking can kids really engage in if they don’t have a trusting relationship with their teacher?’”* Ultimately, coaching plans for the school focused on improving trust between teachers and students as a means to creating environments where

Coaches Guide Supplemental Inquiry

In contrast to the “mock surveys” some principals administered to generate interim feedback from teachers and students (see Chapter 3), leaders in two schools developed alternative, open-ended questionnaires to gain qualitative insights into issues raised in official survey results. Though also referred to as “practice surveys” by several teachers, these open-ended questionnaires differed in important ways from mock surveys—which staff viewed as efforts to preempt or redirect complaints and norm responses on the actual survey. Beyond their differing formats (open ended questions vs. scaled responses modeled off of the survey), the two strategies pursued different ends: the former sought to generate qualitative information used to contextualize individuals’ perceptions, while the latter was designed to bring consensus to respondents’ understandings of survey items in order to produce more “accurate” or favorable results. Given their disparate motives, it follows that open-ended questionnaires were helpful in providing additional context and details to support making sense of *5Essentials* results.

Coaches we interviewed said they not only condoned but initiated the implementation of similar measures in their work with principals. A coach from SSO1 pointed to the questionnaires as an example of the “tools” developed in partnership with school leaders to “dig deeper” into questions raised by *5Essentials* results and “monitor progress” toward improvement. He explained, “We built some pretty simple, open-ended questions around student-teacher relationships that we gave kids, analyzed, shared, and had staff reflect on.” In contrast to the “mock surveys” used by some leaders, he described open-ended questionnaires as a

source of complementary qualitative evidence used to contextualize individuals’ perceptions.

Teachers whose school leaders administered supplemental questionnaires, like those the coach described, shared mixed perceptions. At one school, multiple staff said they were skeptical of their principal’s motives and worried the questionnaire responses would be used to identify and target individuals who were critical of school leadership. On the other hand, one of their colleagues said she appreciated the opportunity to tease apart some of the issues that had shown up on the survey. As an active member of the ILT, this teacher felt the questionnaire provided useful guidance to school leaders. She explained:

“This (was) our first year actually doing the practice survey; we hadn’t done it in the past. I thought it was good. It was really helpful (and) we actually discussed those results within ILT as well. I thought it was helpful. It’s not like it really changes anything (on the actual survey). But it was helpful just to see where people are at and then adjust a couple of things.”

She also commented that the questionnaire presented an opportunity for her to give more “honest” feedback that she would not have included on the “real” *5Essentials* Survey. “Yeah, I did feel that we could be a little more honest on that one,” she said, referring to her school’s internal questionnaire. Like several teachers we interviewed, she acknowledged reservations about issuing critical feedback on the *5Essentials* out of concern for their schools’ ratings.

students felt safer to take intellectual risks. In this way, data from the *5Essentials* helped school leaders chart a course for improvement that aligned with their stated goals through response to underlying climate issues.

Though the coaching model of SSO2 lacked SSO1’s explicit focus on use of *5Essentials* data, both organizations foregrounded culture and climate as integral to the work of school improvement. Even though SSO2’s coaches were less likely to depict the *5Essentials* as a foundational element in their work with principals, all four spoke of the survey as a valued source of insight into organizational conditions that they periodically referenced in their work with schools.

Principals credited leadership coaches from both organizations with sharing tools and protocols that facilitated their analysis of *5Essentials* data and helped to bring greater meaning to the results. Coach interviews revealed that most, if not all, believed supplemental inquiry and self-reflection were integral to utilizing data from the *5Essentials* to guide decision-making and practice. Several interviewees shared the impression that “the (*5Essentials*) data don’t speak for themselves.” In at least two of our schools, coaches facilitated activities to guide leaders through the process of reflection aimed at identifying root causes of issues raised by the survey. These types of in-depth analysis were deemed

critical to focusing improvement efforts at the source of problems, rather than addressing superficial manifestations or “symptoms” of larger issues.

One analytic strategy coaches used to “go beyond the surface level” in reviewing data involved a series of “why” questions aimed at deconstructing responses to individual survey items, which were reported in aggregate. Part of the process of “root cause analysis” included examining the distribution of responses with an eye toward sources of variation in individuals’ perceptions, which helped leaders understand the range and significance of viewpoints reflected on the survey. Another analytic approach was to look for trends over time and then ask leaders to reflect on how patterns in the data “align(ed) with overall school improvement efforts. A third strategy involved reviewing disaggregated data to examine differences in student survey responses by subgroup.⁵⁵ For example, one school leader reported breaking down the data “by grade level and by race” to understand how differences in individual students’ experiences may have shaped their perceptions of culture and climate.

These analytic strategies spoke to three of the larger issues associated with interpretation of *5Essentials* data. Root cause analysis responded to a persistent critique of the data as inadequate in identifying the underlying source of issues. Looking at trends in a school’s *5Essentials* performance over time sought to attenuate the concern that each year’s results reflected a single point in time—which may or may not represent stable opinions of culture and climate. Lastly, breaking results down by subgroups shed light on the breadth and depth of specific concerns across the school. Coaches’ efforts to facilitate principal sensemaking around the *5Essentials* were beneficial in developing more nuanced understandings of the data and providing leaders with analytic tools and strategies they brought to data use, more broadly.

Coaches bring intentionality and reduce reactivity in responses to data. While principals consistently pointed to their coaches as thought partners and resource providers, our conversations with seven coaches from SSO1 and SSO2 shed light on an additional role many played in the data use process. Like many of the principals they served, coaches framed the context of data use in schools as one erected in the shadow of the district’s accountability policy. Amidst the “culture of accountability” several interviewees attributed to CPS’ School Quality Rating Policy, data use derived meaning and intent from the stakes associated with schools’ performance on indicators that factored into SQRP ratings. In this environment, coaches said, school leaders struggled to set and uphold meaningful intentions for their work with data due to competing priorities and the pressure they faced to demonstrate growth in their scores. An SSO2 coach explained, “*Data in general, as a culture, is about accountability, and that has been translated as ‘gotchas.’ So, it’s not necessarily about building capacity.*” She continued, “*And this is, in large part, how teachers perceive data’s use as coming from the district. [For people in schools], it feels like, you know, ‘it’s red, yellow, or green,’⁵⁶ right? So, you don’t approach data in a way where it’s about growth. [Instead] it’s about, ‘Why the heck aren’t you [performing]?’*”

Such comments suggested that some schools’ responses to data were guided less by goals of improvement than by fear of sanctions and public censure. Coaches said they sought to bring perspective and intentionality to school leaders’ work with data—particularly in constructing implications for action. One explained, “*I [ask] people, ‘Is it Targeted Urgency or is it Frantic Urgency? The way data is often used is [reflective of] Frantic Urgency, which is not productive at all. It doesn’t get you to target what you can actually look at and move in students.’*” Further, she suggested, due to “the historical way [data] ha[d] been used” in CPS, some

⁵⁵ Prior to 2020, *5Essentials* school reports provided student responses disaggregated by students’ grade, gender, and race/ethnicity if there were at least 10 students per category to protect confidentiality. As of 2020, additional breakdowns were added: students with and without individualized education plans, English language learners and non-ELL, and

students receiving free and reduced-price lunch. Teacher responses are never disaggregated

⁵⁶ Schools’ performance ratings and scores were frequently represented along a color-coded continuum, with red at the negative end of the spectrum and green at the positive end.

practitioners were not only fearful but opposed to producing data that might be used in accountability. She asked, “*Why would you want to open your classroom to any data if you feel like it’s gonna be a ‘gotcha’? You can’t build trust around those things.*”

Another coach spoke in analogous terms about school leaders’ engagement with data as compelled by urgency under the demands of accountability. They cited their observations as evidence of how this stress manifested in principals’ decision making and communication around data use, the quality of which suffered under pressure. They said:

“The district needs numbers to move in a certain way in a certain amount of time. And that leads to a lot of time pressure on the principals, and therefore on others in the school... I can definitely think of examples of principals who communicated to their staff, ‘We need to hit this metric, because the network said we do. And if we don’t, they’re going to—the network is going to come in here and crack down on us.’ But even for principals who don’t communicate [that] directly, I think there’s temptation to make quick decisions or—to just change things quickly that [we as] coaches would always be pushing against.”

Reports from several coaches illustrated a common goal of bringing intentionality and focus to data use, so as to offset some of “frantic urgency” principals faced to “move data” under accountability.

Though leaders in four of the six schools credited coaching as a source of support, such relationships are by no means a panacea. For one thing, not all of the school leaders working with coaches derived the same benefits from these relationships; of course—some were more targeted around data use than others—and different coaching models engaged different strategies for using this evidence to guide practice. In addition, though four of our six schools had coaching relationships, this reflected our interest in support for school leaders, and atypical of the distribution of coaches in CPS schools. In general, only a small percentage of schools maintain coaching partnerships like the ones described here. Thus, while coaching can certainly play an important role in providing support for data use for schools with

access to it, external partnerships can’t be deployed as the only strategy to support more robust use of climate data.

Leadership team members offered valuable interpretations of 5Essentials results. Principals said they derived value from alternative perspectives in parsing the data, particularly when survey results conflicted with leaders’ own beliefs and perceptions. By virtue of their proximal engagement with students, teacher leaders shed light on the student experience and helped principals hold space for individuals and groups whose voices might otherwise be marginalized. Especially in larger schools, where teachers reported more contact with their department leaders than with their principals or other administrators, ILT members often had unique insight into the dynamics of culture and climate at the department level. In at least two cases where principals struggled to understand or accept the findings of the survey, members of their ILT helped to contextualize and validate the perceptions of students and staff.

By involving ILT members in the early stages of sensemaking around the data, administrators leveraged the capacity and expertise of individual team members to connect the survey results to organizational conditions and practices with enough time to inform planning for the following year. This approach also invited teacher leaders and other administrators to take “ownership” of specific findings related to their role and responsibilities. Individuals’ in-depth knowledge of their disciplinary areas, departments, and grade levels facilitated more nuanced readings of the 5Essentials results. Because, in most schools, ILTs engaged on a fairly regular basis in collaborative sensemaking around data use, teams often developed norms, routines, and processes they brought to bear on different types of data, including the 5Essentials.

Administrators at two different schools also leveraged the positionality and expertise of ILT members in sharing the data with staff. At one high school, administrators recognized the potential for the survey results to engender uncomfortable conversations, particularly in cases where the data reflected negative or controversial appraisals of teachers and leaders. A school leader offered her experience as an example:

“I know last year we had some kind of unfortunate results [on the survey], and we had issues [during] my first year here... And so, it’s like, we do want to make sure we share [the results] in a way that people can really lean into it, even if it doesn’t seem to ... line up with what they thought that they said, or ... what they expected from their peers.”

As her account implies, leaders understood the importance of framing the survey’s results in ways that facilitated positive and productive engagement by staff.

Several schools’ administrators said they relied on their teacher leaders for guidance in these matters. For example, an assistant principal at one high school outlined their ILT’s goals and processes for narrowing the scope of data shared with the entire staff. They said:

“The ILT helped design how we would go about [presenting the data]—what sections we’d share as opposed to like printing out the, you know, the 50-page report... We chose three to four categories to look at [and generated] questions for the small groups of teacher teams to discuss. The ILT helped develop that protocol and offered suggestions on what they believed played into positive results [or] what may be detracting from us reaching positive results. We did a big poster; small groups worked together and then posted their suggestions. And then we did a gallery walk and collected those to inform how we thought about some of our planning.”

In this case, ILT members helped administrators narrow the presentation’s focus, and then facilitated small group discussions with other teachers at the meeting. Though administrators at the six sites credited their leadership teams with varying levels of support in the data use process, more than half acknowledged that ILT members were uniquely and valuably positioned to contribute to sensemaking and strategic planning.

Leadership teams increased capacity for constructive inquiry. Though nearly every principal encountered evidence from the survey that they initially rebuffed or discounted as inconsistent with their own perceptions, those working closely with their ILTs were able to

engage team members in further inquiry and problem solving to interrogate their assumptions and identify blind spots in their own thinking. Effective leadership teams increased administrators’ capacity to delve more deeply into issues raised by the survey. In at least two cases, leadership teams conducted supplemental inquiry—collecting new data in order to contextualize results from the survey and develop strategic response plans.

For example, at one high school, results showed perceptions of safety amongst students that were lower than school administrators and staff had expected. Accounts from the principal and several members of the school’s ILT revealed that the team had initially struggled to accept the data as accurately reflecting conditions at the school. An ILT member acknowledged the results had come as a shock, recalling, *“I said, ‘What do you mean? What are you talking about?’ I have never felt unsafe in this school.”* An administrator characterized the issue similarly, saying, *“I know what an unsafe school building [is]. And [this school] is not it. We don’t have any real violence in here.”* Their comments suggested the leadership team’s negative reactions to the survey results stemmed, at least in part, from their own conceptions of school safety and the dismissal of students’ concerns as unfounded.

Despite their initial skepticism, reports showed the leadership team persisted in efforts to understand the so-called “root cause” of students’ perceptions of school safety. The process of collaborative inquiry often involved multiple sources of evidence, such as informal staff conversations and meetings with students. Through a series of “small focus group” discussions and informal meetings with student representatives, the school’s leadership team determined that students’ concerns stemmed not from a global threat but from specific conditions and situations they encountered on campus. A department leader at the school recalled, *“The biggest complaint was students giving really low scores for safety in the hallways, and it was all because there’s not enough room. Their number one [concern] was that it’s congested.”* An administrator said students also voiced concern over the state of the bathrooms in the school, which leaders had not considered. She explained, *“A lot of [the students] said they didn’t feel safe because of the bathrooms, and... that never would have occurred me.”*

Targeted conversations with students pushed the school's assistant principal to reconsider her initial perceptions of the data and motivated the leadership team to actively address safety concerns through facilities renovations and increased hallway supervision. *"The bathrooms [were] gross,"* she acknowledged, *"The ceiling was falling in before the renovation, so [the concerns students shared were] actually kind of logical, but there's no way I would have gotten to it."* The AP credited the *5Essentials* results with prompting further inquiry and noted the improvements might not have happened had leaders not *"dug a little deeper through the survey."*

Examples like this speak to the benefit some school leaders derived from working closely with their ILTs to understand and act on the results of the *5Essentials*. By setting aside their initial reactions to the data and "digging into" complementary sources of evidence, practitioners at the school were able to identify under-

lying issues and take concrete steps to address students' concerns around safety. This example, while not typical of the dynamics and outcomes of data use we observed across schools, was one of several cases in which leadership teams derived more substantive meaning from their *5Essentials* data through focused inquiry. ILT members at two other schools in our sample described analyzing *5Essentials* results alongside data from other school performance metrics. They suggested triangulating evidence helped them contextualize issues highlighted in the survey. Along with the open-ended climate questionnaires administered at two schools, school leaders and coaches also named disciplinary data, attendance records, student focus groups, and classroom observations as other sources of information that rounded out interpretations of *5Essentials* results. Ultimately, school leaders' success in acting upon the survey results speaks to potential—largely unactualized—for *5Essentials* data to inform practice in schools.



Interpretive Summary

As school districts across the country lead efforts to collect and report evidence from climate surveys, questions of how these data can and should be used to both evaluate school performance and improve practice loom large. At the local level, expanded implementation of the *5Essentials* Survey⁵⁷ along with its inclusion into Chicago’s district-wide school accountability policies prompted local stakeholders to ask how these changes may have influenced the survey’s performance or colored insights derived from survey results. Our recent quantitative companion study⁵⁸ showed that, even in the face of concerns tied to accountability and potential “gaming” of the survey results, the *5Essentials* Survey continues to be predictive of school-wide student outcomes such as attendance, grades, test scores, Freshman OnTrack rates and college enrollment. These quantitative findings indicate that survey responses, on the whole, accurately reflect teachers’ and students’ assessments of their schools--and thus provide rich data to inform improvement efforts.

While obviously reassuring, the continued validity of the *5Essentials* Survey, as a measure of school organization, accounts for only part of its intended use in CPS. District policy endorses and situates the *5Essentials* as a practical tool for guiding improvement within schools. The present qualitative study was designed to shed light on the conditions and dynamics of practitioners’ engagement with the survey in this capacity. Our findings demonstrate how the *5Essentials*’ ties to school ratings—and misconceptions about those ties—engendered fear, anxiety, and mistrust around the survey’s administration and results. Inadequate guidance and support from district and network administrators exacerbated the barriers schools encountered in deriving actionable insights from survey results. Ultimately, findings speak to the largely unrealized potential of

the *5Essentials* Survey to meaningfully inform schools’ improvement efforts and highlight opportunities for policy and practice to (re)establish the survey’s intended use as a practical tool. We offer the following points for consideration, in the hope that this report may inform current and future use of the *5Essentials* Survey in Chicago, and similar climate measures in other K-12 districts, as resources for guiding school improvement:

Both school and district use of climate data relies on school districts’ ability to define and communicate a coherent theory of action that maps the interpretation of *5Essentials* results to specific resources, activities, and supports dedicated to furthering school improvement. Though CPS leadership conceived of the *5Essentials* as both a performance metric and practical tool, findings consistently revealed ways in which accountability functioned as the foremost, if not only, driver of its use within schools. Given accounts from multiple district sources that CPS had yet to fully articulate its own theory of action for how data from performance assessments should inform school improvement plans, such findings are perhaps not surprising. Our findings point to an inherent tension between the evaluative and informative functions assigned to the *5Essentials* results, and given that the bulk of policy, implementation structures, and downstream messaging in CPS focused on evaluation (i.e., the data’s role in SQR), the reality that schools disproportionately targeted efforts to “moving” and “managing” survey results seems both rational and strategic. The aphorism “what gets measured gets managed” certainly bore out in our data, though “managing” the survey seemed to divert energy away from more substantive improvement efforts.

If the *5Essentials* and other climate surveys are to serve multiple measurement functions, these efforts

⁵⁷ Beginning in 2011, administration of the *5Essentials* Survey in CPS widened to include high schools.

⁵⁸ Hart et al. (2020).

must be evenly backed by guidance, resources, and responsive support. A comprehensive theory of action that articulates the relationship between the intended use(s) of *5Essentials* results for improvement by schools, specific structures enacted to support that use, and measurable outcomes could facilitate more purposeful engagement and data use by schools and the district alike. Currently, schools alone bear responsibility for responding to *5Essentials* results; there exist no metrics for evaluating the performance, support capacity, or improvement trajectories of networks or the district more broadly. A theory of action could acknowledge the role of broader structures and systems in school success by clarifying the expectations and responsibilities of district offices, not just those assigned to schools. Such a model would denote, as a precondition, facilitative relationships between network chiefs and principals in which chiefs provide explicit, consistent, and non-evaluative leadership training for data use (further discussion follows in the next section). We would also expect to see a clear connection between the resources and support mechanisms available to network chiefs from district offices. Lastly, the theory of action would make visible the intended outcomes of school, network, and district-level engagement with the *5Essentials*.

Schools need training, resources, and sustained support for using school climate data to guide changes in practice. How people access, understand, and utilize evidence is as important as the information itself. While most forms of data require interpretation in order to guide action, this is especially true of school climate data—which scholars have suggested differs from academic achievement data in important ways.⁵⁹ Nearly twenty years after NCLB, schools and districts are still developing the tools, strategies, and supports for using academic performance data to guide improvement. Models for engaging climate data in schoolwide improvement and accountability, specifically, are even less well established—having gained traction more recently under federal policy (e.g., ESSA). Our findings

illustrated some of the unique challenges associated with interpreting and acting on school climate data. Notably, school climate encompasses complex interpersonal and organizational dynamics, embodying perceptions of leadership, collegiality, and workplace commitment—facets of professional practice for which educators and school leaders rarely receive formal training.

Given the distinctly “personal” nature of the *5Essentials* results for school leaders and the challenges many faced engaging productively with critical feedback, non-evaluative support is crucial to practitioners’ success with this data. In particular, we saw again and again that working with external leadership coaches and collaborating closely with leadership teams elevated the processes and outcomes of data use by extending leaders’ capacity and distributing responsibility for problem solving and action. Structured analytic protocols and growth-oriented coaching strategies helped teams hold space for differing perspectives and elicited alternate interpretations of the data. It is important to note that these advantages accrued only in spaces where principals felt safe and supported by their coaches and teams. The competing supervisory and support functions of network chiefs, combined with the scope of network leaders’ responsibilities across numerous school sites, limited their contributions to the data use process.

Currently, CPS heralds school autonomy as a cornerstone of its overarching improvement strategy. This system places considerable responsibility on school leaders to chart the course for data’s interpretation and use in school improvement. While there is evidence that this approach has served schools, and the district, well in some cases,⁶⁰ our findings indicate it has not facilitated productive engagement with the *5Essentials* as a tool for guiding improvement within schools. Ultimately, it seems many schools lacked the combination of impetus, capacity, and resources to go further in using their *5Essentials* results to guide organizational change. Certainly, providing all schools with the levels of support attributed to dedicated leadership coaches and collaborative ILTs would require a major shift in

59 Jordan & Hamilton (2020); Schweig et al. (2019); Wang & Degol (2016).

60 Purkey & Smith (1983).

strategy and district-wide resource allocation. Without thoughtful investments in additional training, resources, and sustained support for *5Essentials*' use, however, there is little reason to believe schools' engagement with the survey can or will be used district-wide to create meaningful changes in schools.

By aligning communications and messaging around the survey, districts can provide stakeholders with a more accurate understanding of what the survey is and how data from it should be used to promote school improvement. Although recent empirical evidence from the UChicago Consortium's companion study affirms the *5Essentials*' strength as a valid measure of organizational conditions and school capacity,⁶¹ the survey's relationship to school accountability and its history of use in CPS have created doubts about the data's authenticity that must be categorically addressed to build system-wide trust in the *5Essentials*' credibility. District leaders and survey administrators at UChicago Impact and the UChicago Consortium need to take steps to proactively dispel myths and suspicions about the survey's confidentiality, the data's legitimacy, and the survey's capacity to cause harm to school ratings and reputations.

To this end, the survey's relationship to SQRP and its role as a performance indicator warrant reconsideration and clarification by CPS leadership for the data's various audiences. School leaders and practitioners seeking to utilize the *5Essentials* as a tool need clear understandings of how each of the essentials contribute to student and school success. How can results be used to develop a plan for schoolwide improvement? The overarching theory of action guiding the *5Essentials*' use should provide many of the answers to these questions; gaps may reflect misalignment between the measure's intended and actual usage.

We found that many teachers had limited knowledge of the aims of *5Essentials* implementation, apart from the data's ties to SQRP. Within schools, uneven communication about the survey's multiple purposes and the ways

data had been used to inform internal practice left teachers with the impression that results had been ignored by their leaders. Practitioners and district leaders working together to co-construct objectives for the reporting and use of climate data within schools might better ensure that external use of the data (e.g., public sharing of results, use in school leadership evaluation) complements these aims. Stakeholders, particularly those charged with use of the data, need common understandings of the goals and expectations for climate data's use.

More research is needed to provide evidence-based recommendations for using school climate data to further school improvement. Though research consistently finds relationships between school climate and student learning, how and why organizational conditions change remains less firmly established. What, specifically, does school climate signify about a school's capacity and/or performance trajectory? Moreover, despite frenzied interest in evaluating and monitoring school climate, few if any evidence-based recommendations have been issued for using these data to guide action and reflection in practice. Ultimately, the validity and reliability of measures like the *5Essentials* justifies their use but not necessarily their usefulness for practice. A number of authors have speculated that school climate data could present unique challenges to practical use.⁶² School climate surveys, in particular, account for processes, relationships, and outcomes only obliquely encompassed by academic performance metrics. It stands to reason that the tools and strategies practitioners bring to the use of standardized test score data would afford little insight into staff members' perceptions of interpersonal trust. Analogously, while educators and school leaders are specifically trained to distill instructional implications from academic performance measures, most receive little or no preparation for interpreting and acting upon low ratings of "school commitment" by staff.⁶³ Future research should do more to understand and inform the processes of climate data use by practitioners and school districts.

⁶¹ Hart et al. (2020).

⁶² Toch & Miller (2018).

⁶³ School Commitment is a measure of Collaborative Teaching on the *5Essentials* Survey. In schools with strong School Commitment ratings, teachers are deeply committed to the school, as defined by survey items shown in Appendix D.

Conclusion

Given increased focus on the use of school climate data in school accountability and improvement, now is a critical moment to reimagine the *5Essentials*' role in local policy and practice, and to develop plans for furthering its use as a practical tool. Findings from this study indicate that the two aims of accountability and school improvement are not equally served by existing structures. District expectations of schools'

engagement with the *5Essentials* exceed what is viable and equitable given the level of resources currently allocated to supporting the data's use. Ultimately, our work suggests the *5Essentials* can play an important role in expanding and promoting a more holistic definition of school success, one that builds upon multiple dimensions of organizational capacity and recognizes the importance of relationships in teaching and learning.

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Appendix A

Method

We designed this qualitative study to gain insight into how people within schools interact with and construct understandings of the *5Essentials* Survey. Given the organizational and political context in which the *5Essentials* is situated, we wanted to characterize and contrast the perspectives of stakeholders whose experiences with the survey spoke to different institutional and district roles. Specifically, we recruited interview participants from three groups: teachers and school leaders (i.e., practitioners), technical assistance providers who support principals (i.e., leadership coaches), and administrators from the school district's central office (i.e., central officers). The design of this *basic qualitative study*⁶⁴ reflects our goal of understanding the meaning individuals and groups attribute to their lived experiences of the survey and its implementation in schools.

Procedure

In order to examine the ways schools experience and utilize the *5Essentials* Survey, we conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with school administrators (i.e., principals, APs) and instructional staff at six district-run public schools. We conducted interviews with school staff at two timepoints in order to elicit evidence from their experiences and observations at different stages in the annual cycle of administration and reporting for the *5Essentials* Survey. We also interviewed leadership coaches from two technical assistance organizations to gain insights into how schools access and leverage support around their use of data in the improvement process. To establish a three-dimensional account of activity around the *5Essentials* Survey, we lastly conducted interviews with school district leaders in three departments whose work directly intersects with policies and practices related to the measure and its use.

Sampling & Rationale

To study schools' engagement with the *5Essentials* Survey, we identified and recruited six district-run, traditional public schools in CPS. Following site selection, we utilized criterion-based sampling to identify and recruit interview participants within each school. We conducted initial interviews with a total of 36 principals, assistant principals, and teachers during the spring of SY 2018-19 and returned for follow up interviews in the fall of SY 2019-20. To further contextualize practitioners' accounts of data use, we interviewed leadership coaches from two school support organizations who provided technical assistance to schools, as well as CPS officials with knowledge of the district's agenda for implementation of the *5Essentials*.

School Selection

We sampled six schools from the population of more than 500 district-run, traditional public schools in CPS.⁶⁵ Given our interest in how schools leveraged support for data use from district and external sources, we purposively sampled from a subset of schools identified as partnership sites to one of two technical assistance providers, hereafter *School Support Organization 1 (SSO1)* and *School Support Organization 2 (SSO2)*. Our final sample included a total of three high schools and three elementary schools, four of whom had coaching relationships, and two of whom had no formal ties to coaching organizations.

To investigate the relationship between leadership development and school improvement, we strategically focused on schools reporting low to moderate assessments of leader effectiveness (as defined by a *5Essentials* score of 1-60 on a 1-99 scale on domains assessing Instructional Leaders and Collaborative Teachers). To

⁶⁴ Merriam (2009).

⁶⁵ <https://www.cps.edu/about/stats-facts/>

account for the motives, implementation, and outcomes of school leaders' responses to the *5Essentials*, we chose to exclude schools where the principal had not been in their position for at least three years.

We also chose to limit our sample to traditional public schools, thereby excluding charter schools, AUSL-managed schools,⁶⁶ and schools receiving intensive support through CPS' Office of Strategic Support Services.⁶⁷ To account for demographic patterns in CPS and the surrounding community, we intentionally recruited schools that were representative of the racial and economic stratification of the city of Chicago. Ultimately, three of the participating schools had predominantly Black/African American student populations, while the other three had majority Latinx student

populations. We also sought geographic heterogeneity in our sampling; the six participating schools were located in different neighborhoods throughout Chicago, representing five different CPS Networks.

After narrowing the overall population of schools according to the specified criteria (see **Table A.2**), we randomly selected from the pool of eligible schools to produce a sample of six schools in which three had current or recent partnerships with SSO1, two with SSO2, and two were without a relationship to either organization. Due to our interest in school leadership engagement with the *5Essentials*, only schools with principals who agreed to participate in the study were included.

Table A.1 summarizes characteristics of the six schools in our sample.

TABLE A.1
Descriptive Summary of Participating Schools, 2018–2019

	E1	E2	E3	H1	H2	H3	District Average
Type	Elementary	Elementary	Elementary	High School	High School	High School	N/A
Coaching Partner	SSO1	SSO1	N/A	SSO1, SSO2	SSO2	N/A	N/A
Number of Students	200–400	400–600	200–400	1200–1400	600–800	1400–1600	N/A
% Black	90–100%	0–10%	90–100%	10–20%	90–100%	10–20%	37%
% Latinx	0–10%	70–80%	0–10%	70–80%	0–10%	80–90%	47%
% FRL	90–100%	80–90%	90–100%	70–80%	90–100%	90–100%	77%
% ELL	0–10%	30–40%	N/A	0–10%	0–10%	20–30%	19%
% SPED	10–20%	20–30%	10–20%	10–20%	20–30%	20–30%	14%
SQRP Rating 2018–2019	Level 2	Level 2+	Level 1+	Level 2+	Level 2	Level 2	N/A
<i>5Essentials</i> Score 2018–2019	Partially Organized 2	Organized 4	Well Organized 5	Partially Organized 2	Moderately Organized 3	Organized 4	N/A

Note: Enrollment figures and percentages are expressed in ranges rather than exact numbers so as not to identify schools. SQRP rating is on a 5 point scale ranging from a high rating of 1 to low of 3: 1+, 1, 2+, 2, 3. *5Essentials* overall rating is also on a 5 point scale: well-organized, organized, moderately organized, partially organized, not yet organized.

⁶⁶ <https://www.auslchicago.org/>

⁶⁷ See https://www.cpsboe.org/content/documents/office_of_strategic_school_support_services_-_os4_-_reinvesting_in_our_neighborhood_schools.pdf

TABLE A.2

Sampling Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria for Schools

Criteria:	Inclusion:	Excluded:
School Governance	District-Run Public Schools (Traditional)	AUSL Managed Charter Selective Enrollment OS4
5Essentials Leadership Scores / Ratings	Schools with low-to-moderate scores (i.e., 1-60) on Instructional Leaders and Collaborative Teachers measures (1-99 scale)	Schools with high scores (i.e., 61 and above) on Instructional Leaders and Collaborative Teachers measures (1-99 scale)
Demographics	Comparable to district averages for school type(s) and locations	
Location	Distributed across geographic regions, as defined by CPS networks	
Leadership Coaching Affiliation	2 Schools: SSO1 (plus 1 school with prior SSO 1 affiliation) 2 Schools: SSO2 2 Schools: no affiliation	

Participant Selection

Principals and Teachers

In addition to the principal, we recruited assistant principal(s) and full-time instructional staff at each school to participate in this study. Our sampling design included one assistant principal and at least four teachers from each school. To facilitate recruitment, each principal who agreed to participate in this study provided contact information for at least one assistant principal.⁶⁸

Principals also provided a list of teachers and teacher leaders in their school.⁶⁹ Because teacher leaders are uniquely positioned to collaborate more directly with school administrators on matters of school improvement, we wanted their perspectives on using the *5Essentials* data as an instrument for change. The majority of principals provided staff rosters identifying their school’s ILT members. In high schools, principals also flagged select committee and department leads. From these lists, we randomly selected and recruited a combination of teacher leaders and other full-time teachers/instructional

staff. We recruited continuously until we reached the minimum sample criteria⁷⁰ within each school.

The final sample included six principals, six assistant principals, and thirty teachers, as represented in **Table A.3**.

Leadership Coaches

We also recruited providers from two technical assistance organizations to participate in this study to understand the types of support available to school leaders in using data to guide improvement. We selected organizations based on two criteria, specifically, both coaching models involved direct support to school leaders and consideration of school climate as a factor in school improvement. Two organizations, School Support Organizations (SSOs) 1 and 2, met both criteria. From each of the organizations, we requested rosters of coaches who worked directly with school leaders. We then recruited coaches, individually, to participate in interviews. Of the seven coaches we contacted, all agreed to participate in this study.

⁶⁸ Only one assistant principal served in each of the elementary schools. In high schools, we asked principals to recommend the assistant principal whose work most directly related to school climate and culture.

⁶⁹ The term teacher leader refers to full-time instructional staff who also served in a leadership or administrative capacity

within their schools, such as grade level teams, department leads, ILT members, or committee leads (e.g., climate and culture, social emotional learning).

⁷⁰ Minimum sample criteria: principal (1), assistant principal (1), full-time instructional staff (4, includes teacher leaders)

TABLE A.3
Research Sample Overview

	Initial Interviews	Follow-Up Interviews (School Staff Only)
Principals	6	6
Assistant Principals	6*	5
Teachers/Instructional Staff	30**	19
Leadership Coaches (A)	3	—
Leadership Coaches (B)	4	—
School District Officers	3	—

* - At T1, one school had an acting AP who had not been formally instated in the role; by T2, the individual had been officially appointed to the position.

** - At T1 (spring 2019), 24 teachers participated in initial interviews; at T2 (fall 2019), 6 additional teachers were recruited to participate in initial interviews in response to inconsistencies in data quality.

Notably, though individual coaches worked concurrently with leaders at different schools, out of concern for the privacy of those partners and our research participants, coaches were not asked to disclose the names of schools or the identities of leaders with whom they worked.

School District Officials

To gain insight into the school district’s agenda and support for implementation of the *5Essentials* Survey, we interviewed three CPS officials who served in departmental leadership positions in the district’s central office. Each represented a different office whose work intersected with policy and practice around the *5Essentials* Survey and/or data use efforts in schools.

Data Collection and Protocols

We developed semi-structured interview protocols to elicit the perspectives and experiences of three groups: school personnel (teachers and administrators), leadership coaches (i.e., technical assistance providers) and school district officers.⁷¹

We conducted two rounds of interviews in schools to document practitioners’ accounts at different stages of the survey administration and reporting cycle associated with the *5Essentials* Survey. The initial interview protocol was designed to establish rich descriptions of individuals’ experiences with the survey and their perceptions of the implementation process and sharing of results. Other questions targeted understandings of the survey’s purpose, support schools received for interpreting the

data, and use of the results to guide improvement.

School administrators and teachers participated in initial interviews during the spring of 2019 (T1) to coincide with the end of survey administration. Follow-up interviews were conducted during the fall of 2019 (T2) with 79 percent of the teachers who had participated in initial interviews at T1. The follow-up interview protocol consisted of questions aimed at uncovering individuals’ definitions of school climate, priorities for school improvement, and perceptions of organizational factors that contribute to school success. Separate protocols were developed to account for the distinct roles and responsibilities of school leaders (including principals and assistant principals), compared to those of teacher leaders and other instructional staff.

Following preliminary coding and analysis of T1 interview data, the research team identified data quality issues with several teacher interviews. To address these concerns, we recruited an additional six teachers (at three sites) to participate in initial interviews at T2. We conducted interviews with a total of seven leadership coaches (three from School Support Organization 1, four from School Support Organization 2) during the summer of 2019. We developed protocols to explore coaches’ familiarity and experiences with the *5Essentials* Survey, to understand the process and goals of their leadership coaching models, and to surface their impressions of data use by school leaders in the school improvement process.

⁷¹ Interview protocols are included in Appendix B.

Lastly, we conducted interviews with officers in three departments at CPS Central Office to gain historical context for the district’s implementation of the *5Essentials*, and to establish a clearer understanding of leaders’ goals for engagement and use of the *5Essentials* Survey within schools and across the district. We also invited officers’ feedback on obstacles they associated with the survey’s use and asked them to respond to key issues and concerns raised by practitioners.

Analysis

Audio files of participant interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service. These transcripts were then reviewed for accuracy and conditioned (i.e., reformatted and anonymized) prior to being uploaded for preliminary coding and analysis in NVivo, a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) platform. Post-interview memos and other field notes were digitized, processed, and analyzed to inform the development of the initial coding frame.⁷² Coding of initial teacher and principal interviews was carried out concurrently to the development of follow-up interview protocols, and also informed revisions to the district and leadership coach protocols.

Following first-cycle coding of data from practitioner interviews conducted at T1, the research team engaged in extensive second-cycle analysis of thematically coded data to condense coded data around categories,

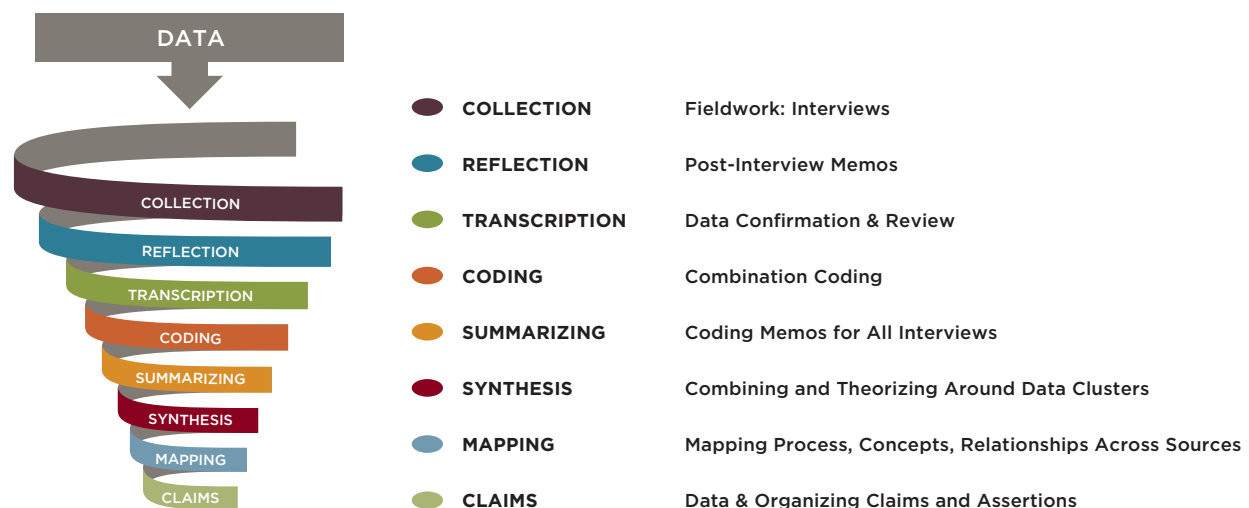
themes, and constructs. Data clustered around individual patterns were reviewed and annotated systematically in order to generate syntheses for each of the data clusters, or nodes. These node syntheses were then subjected to interrater review to confirm the first analysts’ claims and highlight alternative interpretations.

After node syntheses were reviewed by all members of the research team, we triangulated raw transcript data, post-interview memos, and coding cover sheets to address conflicting statements or discordant interpretations. Using site-level summaries and participant profiles we updated throughout data collection and analysis, we also conducted within-case comparisons to analyze and interpret parallel accounts of critical incidents or notable routines from different actors within a school.

We developed matrix displays to organize the vast array of condensed material into a readable format for further analysis and verification of patterns and observations. Members of the research team functioned as an interpretive community throughout data collection and analysis. We used analytic memos and discussions to record and reach consensus around emergent theories, concepts, and assertions.⁷³ Assertions and propositions, then, formed the basis of findings presented in this report.

Figure A.1 illustrates the iterative and cyclical approach we used to analyze interview data and data artifacts (i.e., post-interview memos, field notes, syntheses) produced for this study.

FIGURE A.1
A Framework of Five Essential Supports



⁷² Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2014).

⁷³ Saldaña (2015).

Appendix B

Interview Protocols

Principal/Assistant Principal Interview Protocol (T1)

Introduction

Tell me a little bit about yourself and your background as a principal/administrator.

- *What did you do before you were a principal/assistant principal?*

Survey Administration Process

What is your overall impression of the survey administration process?

- *Can you tell me a little about the process here?*
- *What works well during the survey administration? What could be improved?*

Processing Results

When did you first see your school's results for the 5Essentials Surveys this past year?

What was your overall impression of the results from the 5Essentials Survey that you received this past year?

- *What did you look at first?*
- *What, if anything, was confusing about interpreting your results?*

Overall, do you feel the results accurately reflected the quality of school climate?

- *Was there anything about last year's results that surprised you?*
- *Which area of the survey do you find most closely matches your own observations?*

Sharing of Results

Can you walk me through how you communicated about the survey results with your

- *Leadership team?*
- *Staff?*
- *Network chief/leaders?*
- *Students?*
- *Families?*

Actions Taken in Response to Data

What role has 5Essential data played in your actions or plans as principal/assistant principal this year?

- *How have you adjusted any of the school's goals/priorities based on the 5Essentials data?*
- *How have the 5Essentials played a role in the types of supports or PD offered to staff?*

Data Use Support

What other sources of support, if any, did you receive in understanding and using the 5Essentials data this year?

- *What other support(s) do you wish you had in using the data?*

For Schools With Coaching Partnerships Only

Tell me a little about your work with (COACHING ORGANIZATION).

- *How does your coach use data in their work with you?*

Wrap Up & Conclusion

What is your overall impression of the 5Essentials Survey as a whole?

- *What, if any, other kinds of data/evidence do you collect about your school's organizational culture besides the 5Essentials?*
- *What aspects of the 5Essentials could be clearer for you?*

Do you have anything else you would like to add?

Teacher Interview Protocol (T1)

Introduction

To begin, I'd like to know a little more about yourself and your background.

- How long have you been a teacher overall?
How long have you been teaching in this school?
- What subjects do you teach?
- Do you have any school-wide leadership roles in your school (e.g., ILT)?

How familiar are you with the *5Essentials* Survey (aka *My School, My Voice*)?

- *What's your understanding of the purpose of the 5Essentials survey?*

Survey Administration/Experiences With Survey

What is it like for you to take the teacher survey?

- *What do you like/not like about it?*
- *Tell me a bit about your principal/assistant principal's role in the process, if any?*

Do you administer the student survey?
If yes, what's your process like?

- *Is there anything you make sure to communicate to students?*

Receiving & Processing Results

When did you first see last year's *5Essentials* results?

- *Can you tell me a little more about that?*

How do you talk about the survey results (both formally and informally) with your:

- *Principal/AP?*
- *Other Teachers?*
- *Students/Families?*

What was your overall impression of the results from the *5Essentials* Survey that you received this past year?

Overall, do you feel the results accurately reflected your school's climate?

- Is there anything about last year's results that surprised you?
- Which area of the survey do you find most closely matches your own observations? Which don't?

Perceptions of Data Use in Practice

What role has the *5Essential* data played in the actions or plans your school took or made this year?

- *How has the 5Essentials played a role in the types of support offered to staff?*
- *How is your teaching influenced by the 5Essentials?*

How useful would you say the *5Essentials* results are, overall?

Support Needs

What support, if any, do you wish you had in using or understanding the *5Essential* survey results?

Wrap up

Is there anything else you would like to add about the *5Essentials*?

Principal Interview Protocol (T2)

Introduction

Can you tell me a little about how things are going so far this year?

- *Have there been any big changes at the school since we last spoke/since your interview last spring?*

Can you tell me a little about the back to school / professional development meetings with teachers last month? What did you focus on?

5Essentials Results Sharing

When did you receive the most recent 5Essentials report for your school?

- *How did you feel about the results?*
- *Did anything about the results surprise you? Can you tell me more about that?*

What role did the 5Essentials results play in the beginning of the year meetings?

- *How did you decide which findings to share with the staff?*
- *What was your goal in sharing that information?*

Priorities for School Improvement

What would you say are your top 2-3 priorities or goals for this school year?

Collaboration & Support

What has your work with your ILT / leadership team been like so far this year?

For Schools With Coaching Partnerships

What support have you gotten from your [coaching organization] leadership coach(es) this year?

District Support & Priorities for School Improvement

Can you tell me a little about the most recent contact you've had with your network chief?

Based on your conversations/communication you've received, what's your sense of the district's priorities for this year?

Continuing Efforts

Last time we spoke, you mentioned (X CHALLENGE/OBSTACLE/ISSUE). Can you share any updates on that? How have things changed?

How do you feel like that was that reflected in the 5Essentials results from last year?

Needs

What is one thing that you'd like district leaders to know about improvement at this school?

If you could get support or resources in any area, what would it be?

Wrap up

Is there anything you'd like to share that I haven't asked about?

Teacher Interview Protocol (T2)

Introduction

To get started, is there anything that's changed about your role here since your interview last spring?

Back to School/5Essentials Reporting

Can you tell me a little about the back-to-school PD/beginning of the year staff meetings in September? What stood out to you as the focus of those sessions?

Were the 5Essentials results shared as part of the beginning of the year meetings?

If results were shared:

- *How were the results shared with you?*
- *What did you take away from results?*
- *Were you surprised by any of the results?*

If results were not shared:

- *Have you seen your school's results from last year's survey?*
- *What did you think of the results?*

School Improvement Priorities

Based on what you've seen so far, what would you say are your leaders' priorities for this year?

- *How have those been conveyed to you?*

SQRP

How familiar would you say you are with the different measures or scores that factor into your school's rating?

- *Do you find any of those data or metrics especially useful to your teaching? Or are there ways that they influence your day-to-day work?*

So, if I looked at your school's report card or rating, what would I miss? What aspects of this school's performance aren't reflected in the data?

Wrap Up

Is there anything you'd like to share that I haven't asked about?

Leadership Coach Interview Protocol

Introduction

Tell me a little bit about yourself and your background.

How long have you been a coach at [NAME OF ORGANIZATION]?

Can you tell me a bit about [NAME OF ORGANIZATION]'s coaching model?

Coaching Example

I'd like to talk about a specific example from your work with schools; can you tell me about a school that was struggling with some aspect of principal leadership?

- *Tell me a little about the school.*

When you first started working with the school, how did you determine the focus for your work with leadership?

What sources of information did you use?

What did you choose to focus on? Why?

What measurable goals had you identified for those efforts?

What were the steps you outlined to reach those goals?

Did things go as planned?

Patterns Across Schools

What commonalities do you see in the schools you're supporting, in terms of their challenges/needs?

5Essentials Survey

How familiar would you say you are with the 5Essentials Survey or the results that schools receive?

- *Can you tell me more about that?*

How (and in what context) have you encountered the 5Essentials?

What stands out to you about the survey/results, if anything?

Thinking about the schools you've worked with over the last few years, do you recall any conversations about the 5Essentials Survey or results?

Given what you know about the 5Essentials, how well do 5Essentials results align with your observations of schools?

As a tool for guiding school improvement, how well do you think the 5Essentials Survey provides actionable information?

Are there any changes to the 5Essentials that you think would improve a school's ability to use the data?

Are there aspects of the 5Essentials that schools find confusing or unclear?

Wrap Up

Do you have any questions for me or are there any things you'd like to add that I didn't ask you about?

District Leader Interview Protocol

Introduction

To get started, can you tell me about (your office/ department) and role in CPS?

How would you say this office works with other teams/departments in using data for school improvement?

What would you say is the district's primary objective in terms of the *5Essentials* Survey?

Do you have a sense of why the *5Essentials*, specifically, was selected as the measure used by CPS?

Theory of Action—*5Essentials* Use by Schools

I'd like to get a bit more specific about the district's expectations with respect to how schools interact with the *5Essentials* data and results.

What does the district envision as the process schools should follow when they receive their results?

- *Okay, so imagining a school followed that course of action to a T: what would you expect to see change?*

Accountability & Priorities for Data Use in Schools

Thinking about the other pieces of information that get thrown at schools, where would you say the *5Essentials* falls in terms of priority or people's engagement levels?

What's your sense of how the *5Essentials'* ties to accountability shape schools' thinking around the data?

Support for Data Use in School Improvement

Is your office involved in providing any direct support to schools based on the results of their performance metrics?

How involved is the district in school-level improvement efforts?

- *Which offices / departments are part of this work?*

Apart from the reports that go to each school showing their results, does your office do anything else with the *5Essentials* results?

How useful are the *5Essentials* results to you in the work you're doing with network chiefs and school leaders?

Wrap Up

From where you stand, what would you like to see happen with the survey?

Before we wrap up, were there any questions you had for me or things you wanted to say that I didn't ask you about?

Appendix C

Principal-Teacher Trust and Instructional Leadership Measures

Essential Support: Effective Leaders/Measure: Teacher-Principal Trust

Teacher-Principal Trust reflects the degree to which teachers feel their principal respects and supports them. High levels of Teacher-Principal Trust indicate that the teachers share deep mutual trust and respect with the principal.

Items

To what extent do you feel respected by your principal?

1 NOT AT ALL 2 A LITTLE 3 SOME 4 TO A GREAT EXTENT

Please indicate the extent to which you disagree or agree with each of the following:

1 STRONGLY DISAGREE 2 DISAGREE 3 AGREE 4 STRONGLY AGREE

- 01 The principal has confidence in the expertise of the teachers.
- 02 I trust the principal at his or her word.
- 03 It's OK in this school to discuss feelings, worries, and frustrations with the principal.
- 04 The principal takes a personal interest in the professional development of teachers.
- 05 The principal looks out for the personal welfare of the faculty members.
- 06 The principal places the needs of children ahead of personal and political interests.
- 07 The principal at this school is an effective manager who makes the school run smoothly.

Essential Support: Effective Leaders/Measure: Principal Instructional Leadership

Instructional Leadership reflects the degree to which teachers see the school leadership team as instructional leaders. High levels of Instructional Leadership indicate that the teachers view the school leadership team as very involved in classroom instruction.

Items

The next set of questions will ask about the leadership in your school.

Please indicate the extent to which you disagree or agree with each of the following:

A member of the school leadership team...

1 STRONGLY DISAGREE 2 DISAGREE 3 AGREE 4 STRONGLY AGREE

- 01 Makes clear to the staff the leadership's expectations for meeting instructional goals.
- 02 Communicates a clear vision for our school.
- 03 Presses teachers to implement what they have learned in professional development.
- 04 Knows what's going on in my classroom.
- 05 Provides me with useful feedback to improve my teaching.
- 06 Has provided me with the support I need to improve my teaching.

Appendix D

School Commitment Measure

Essential Support: Collaborative Teachers/Measure: School Commitment

Teacher-Principal Trust reflects the degree to which teachers feel their principal respects and supports them. High levels of Teacher-Principal Trust indicate that the teachers share deep mutual trust and respect with the principal.

Items

Please indicate the extent to which you disagree or agree with each of the following:

1 STRONGLY DISAGREE **2** DISAGREE **3** AGREE **4** STRONGLY AGREE

- 01 I usually look forward to each working day at this school.
- 02 I wouldn't want to work in any other school.
- 03 I feel loyal to this school.
- 04 I would recommend this school to parents seeking a place for their child.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

LAURA DAVIS is a Senior Research Analyst at the UChicago Consortium. Laura's research centers broadly on the production of inequality in education, targeting intersections between teacher development, teacher practice, and the schooling experiences of students from marginalized and historically underserved communities. She is currently co-PI on a longitudinal study examining the college and career development trajectories of first-generation students from structurally disadvantaged backgrounds. Prior to joining the UChicago Consortium, Laura served as the Assistant Director of New York University's Center for Research on Higher Education Outcomes. She worked previously as an elementary classroom teacher in Los Angeles and now teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy, language development, and social foundations of education. She earned a BA from the University of Southern California, a master's in education from Antioch University Los Angeles, and a PhD in Teaching and Learning from New York University.

ANDRIA SHYJKA is a Survey specialist and Qualitative Researcher at the UChicago Consortium. In this position she works on a variety of research projects which examine equitable learning and development and how schools and teachers use data for improvement. She believes her decade of teaching experience provides a valuable background to research of teacher improvement via formal evaluation, professional development and student feedback, assessment of school culture and climate, and organizational change. Daughter of a teacher, Andria grew up immersed in learning and still enjoys opportunities to work with aspiring teachers and school leaders as she pursues a doctorate in policy studies in urban education with a concentration in educational organization and leadership at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

HOLLY HART is currently Survey Director at the UChicago Consortium. In this position she oversees survey content development and research on *5Essentials* and *Early Education Essentials* Surveys. Holly is a mixed-methods researcher with a background in psychology and adult development. Before joining the UChicago Consortium, Holly oversaw survey research on a variety of topics at the

Survey Research Lab at UIC. As a Senior Research Associate at the UChicago Consortium, she has conducted a number of studies focused on teachers and principals at different points of their careers. Her teacher-focused work has included studies of teacher training and coaching by the Urban Teacher Education Program and the Chicago New Teacher Center. She has also studied Chicago's REACH teacher evaluation system. Her research on principals ranges from principal preparation in Chicago and Illinois, to an Institute of Education Sciences study of the key mechanisms through which school leaders influence student achievement.

VANESSA GUTIÉRREZ is a Research Analyst and contributes her qualitative skills and background to work on teacher evaluation and improvement. Before coming to the UChicago Consortium, Vanessa had a range of experiences teaching sociology and conducting qualitative research on various topics such as youth development programs and racial microaggressions. She has published her work on issues of culture and bias in youth programs and immigrant Latinx parent's perspectives on cultural socialization. She is deeply interested in how our systems and institutions have constructed racial-cultural inequities and how these systems and institutions continue to reproduce, perpetuate, and sustain this inequity. She is interested in how historically marginalized communities and people resist, heal, and thrive in the U.S. and all over the world.

NAUREEN KHERAJ is an Associate at the Chicago Public Education Fund and works on The Chicago Principal Partnership, a first of its kind collaborative across Chicago which aims to increase the number of qualified and diverse candidates ready for the principalship. Prior to her current role, she was a Research Analyst at the UChicago Consortium, where she worked closely with senior researchers to manage and support studies. Naureen's research interests include better understanding the experiences of school leaders, and how leaders shape academic and social-emotional outcomes for disenfranchised student populations. Naureen has also previously worked as a research assistant at the UChicago Consortium, a policy intern at Chicago Public Schools' Office of Social and Emotional Learning, and a teaching assistant at Wadsworth Elementary School in Chicago.

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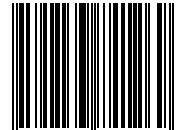
OUR MISSION With the goal of supporting stronger and more equitable educational outcomes for students, the UChicago Consortium conducts research of high technical quality that informs and assesses policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools. We seek to expand communication among researchers, policymakers, practitioners, families, and communities as we support the search for solutions to the challenge of transforming schools. We encourage the use of research in policy action and practice but do not advocate for particular policies or programs. Rather, we help to build capacity for systemic school improvement by identifying what matters most for student success, creating critical indicators to chart progress, and conducting theory-driven evaluation to identify how programs and policies are working.



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