Contextualizing Research Use:
Problems and Decisions in Schools

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Introduction

Eligibility for Federal Title I funding requires schools to engage in evidence-based decision making, and efforts to promote access to high quality research have abounded over the last two decades (e.g. the What Works Clearinghouse). However, we have very little understanding of the availability and relevance of research addressing the most urgent problems facing school decision makers (West & Rhoton, 1994; Supovitz & Klein, 2003; Hemsley-Brown, 2009), in part due to limited information about those problems and decisions. In an effort to close the gap between researchers and decision makers, this study looks to address the following questions: (a) *What types of problems are schools addressing?* and (b) *What types of decisions are being made to address them?*

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Policy Context

With the inception of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and its predecessor, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the requirement for schools to use evidence based interventions has been codified into law (ESSA. 2015; NCLB, 2002). This has provided a catalyst for significant investment in knowledge utilization research in the field of education over the last two decades, including the creation of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) whose mission is to "provide scientific evidence on which to ground education practice and policy and to share this information in formats that are useful and accessible to educators, parents, policymakers, researchers, and the public" (Institute of Education Sciences, n.d.). Despite this increased focus and investment, and the large body of empirical work that has come from it, there are still areas within the field that require further study. The direct investigation to the types of problems school-based practitioners face, and the types of decisions that are made in order to address these problems, is one such area.

High quality studies of decision-making processes in schools and districts (Coburn, Toure, & Yamashita, 2009; Farley-Ripple, 2012), and investigations into the types of resources that practitioners find useful for informing their practice (Penuel, Briggs, Davidson, Herlihy, Sherer, Hill, & Allen, 2016) have been published and provide helpful insights into the issues schools are working to solve. A longitudinal case study of one urban school district identified and examined 23 decisions related to instruction that occurred over a three-year period. The researchers found that identified decisions included those about "curriculum adoptions, the design of coaching, the

focus of professional development, the structure of compensation for professional development, homework policy, and the development of curriculum frameworks in math and literacy," (Coburn, Toure, & Yamashita, 2009, p. 1122). While the decisions were limited to those related to instruction, and the specific problems motivating the decisions were not directly studied, inferences can be made regarding the types of problems the district likely faced.

Research conducted at the National Center for Research in Policy and Practice, one of two IES-funded knowledge utilization centers, also produced findings that can provide insight into the problems and decisions schools face. While the study did not directly inquire about the types of problems respondents were facing, findings from a survey of over 700 school principals and district leaders, with some inference, can reveal information about the types of problems and decisions occurring (Penuel, et al., 2016). Results from survey items asking respondents about the resources that they find the most useful reveal research focused on "instructional practices and learning in the classroom" and "learning in specific subject matter content areas" as the most frequently cited (Penuel, et al., 2016, p. 5). These findings may suggest that the most common problem these schools are facing, at least at the administrator level, relate to effective instructional practices to promote student achievement in particular content areas.

While the research discussed above is helpful, there are limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn about problems and decisions in schools based on its findings. The Coburn, Touré, & Yamashita (2009) work is a case study of one school district in an urban context. While the longitudinal case study methodology allows for in-depth investigation, the findings represent only one context and therefore conclusions drawn about problems and decisions are also limited to that context. Additionally, this study included only decisions related to instruction in its investigation, not allowing for the full range of

decision types (and subsequently, problem types) to be represented. The NCRPP study surveyed principals and district leaders, not classroom teachers or other instructional staff, so inferences made about problems and decisions based on these findings are limited to problems and decisions experienced by these groups. It is important to note, there are limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn about problems and decisions in schools from these studies because investigating school-based problems and decisions was not the purpose for the studies. These studies, like many other in the field of knowledge utilization, can give us some clues but they do not directly investigate and attempt to classify the types of problems and decisions school-based practitioners face.

Considering the lack of direct research on the types of problems schools face and the types of decisions they engage in to address them, it may not be surprising the relevance of research can be a barrier to research use (Farley-Ripple, Tilley, Shewchuck, & Sheridan, 2020). The current study begins to address this gap in the literature by contributing findings from a direct investigation into school-based problems and decisions. By gaining a better understanding of the types of issues schools are dealing with, and the types of actions that they take in order to resolve them, researchers can ensure that their work focuses on real problems of practice.

Methods & Data Sources

This paper draws on the qualitative analysis of a two-part open-ended question at the start of the *Survey of Evidence in Education – Schools (SEE-S)*, which asked educators to provide information regarding a specific organizational decision, and the problem that motivated it, in their school or district in the past two years that affected large numbers of teachers and/or students (see Figure 1 for survey item).

Data were collected in field trial administration of the survey which took place during the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 school years. Respondents included instructional staff from 154 schools across the United

States. Elementary, middle, and high schools were included in the sample, as well as schools representing urban, suburban, and rural contexts. In total, 1275 educators responded to this item and provided usable information about problems and decisions.

Data Analysis

To analyze the qualitative data produced by the open-ended survey item, the team developed a coding framework. Due to the lack of existing literature on types of problems and decisions in schools, no a priori framework was identified, and instead the team established an iterative process for coding the data using an emergent thematic approach. Initially individual responses were reviewed, and the research team engaged in categorizing the content and types through iterative discussion in which different

Figure 1. Illustrative examples of codes

themes were created, tested with sample responses, and modified. Through this process the team was able to identify multiple categories and subcategories of problems and decisions (see Appendix Table 1 & 2 for full description).

We found that problems could be classified as pertaining to academic performance, non-academic issues, instruction, curriculum (including programs and interventions), community, systemic issues,
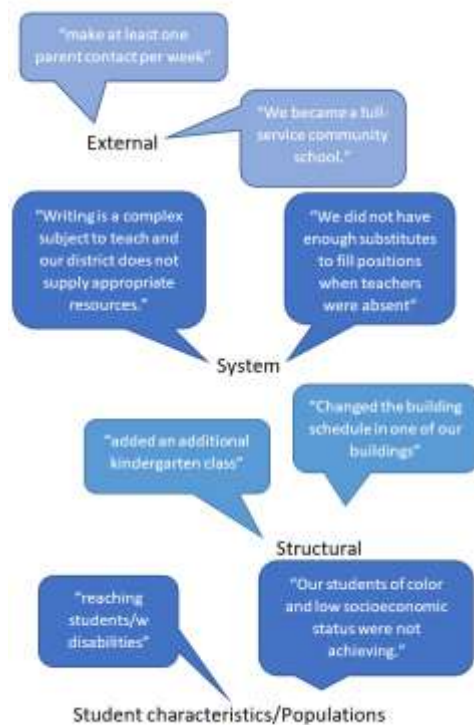
student characteristics/populations, and federal/state/local mandates. Decisions observed fell into ten categories: adoption, structural change, professional development, implementation, creating/modifying policy, human resources, designing/creating solutions, external action, discontinuing program/policy/practice, and decisions to take no action (maintain status quo despite the identified problem). This paper presents the descriptive results for the frequency of these codes to surface the range of problems schools face and decisions in which school-based educators engage.
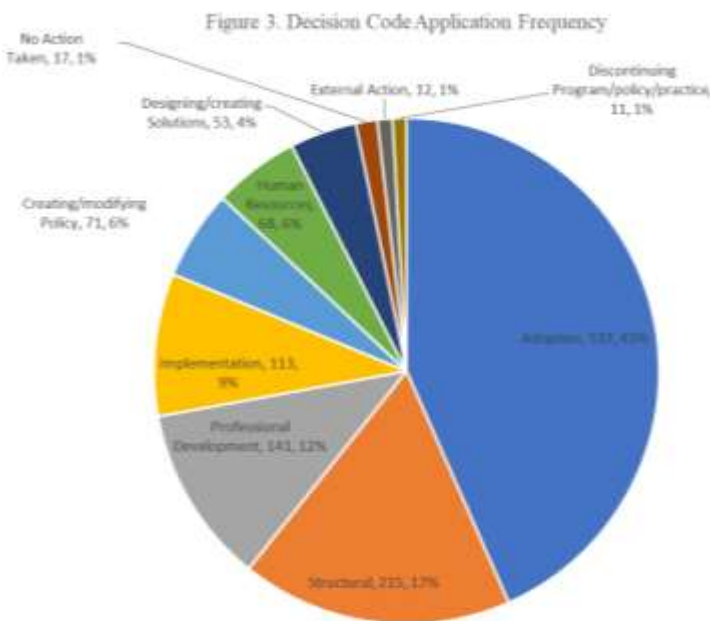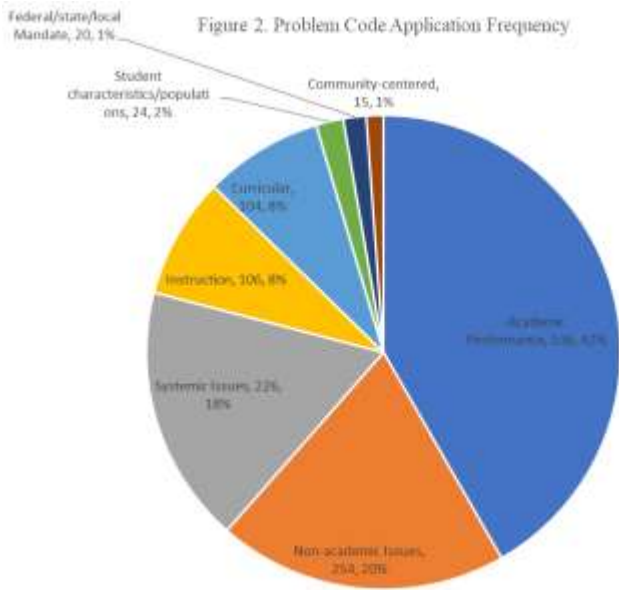
Results

Analysis revealed academic performance (40%), non-academic issues (19%), and systemic issues (17%) were the most frequently reported categories of problems. Reported decisions were most frequently categorized as adoption of something new (e.g., a curriculum, program, initiative) (43%), structural changes (17%), and professional development (12%). Figures 2 and 3 below show the frequency of application for each code. While it is unsurprising that the most commonly reported problems relate to academic performance and that the most frequently reported decisions relate to professional development and adoption of programs, findings suggest a much more expansive set of school issues for which questions of research relevance and availability are pertinent.

In addition to examining the frequency of code application to learn about the prevalence of various problems, we can look to patterns in the co-occurrence of problem codes and decision codes to try to gain a deeper understanding of what is happening in schools, and how research may be able to play a role. Code co-occurrence analyses provide information about the frequencies for code paring across the full dataset in a symmetric, code by code matrix. The display can reveal both expected and unexpected patterns in which two codes were used together (Dedoose, n.d.). In considering whether patterns in our data are expected or unexpected we

Figure 2. Problem Code Application Frequency

Federal/state/local Mandate, 20, 1%
Student characteristics/populations, 24, 2%
Community-centered, 15, 1%
Curricular, 104, 8%
Instruction, 106, 8%
Systemic Issues, 226, 18%
Academic Performance, 596, 47%
Non-academic Issues, 254, 20%

Figure 3. Decision Code Application Frequency

No Action Taken, 17, 1%
External Action, 12, 1%
Discontinuing Program/policy/practice, 11, 1%
Designing/creating Solutions, 53, 4%
Creating/modifying Policy, 71, 6%
Human Resources, 68, 6%
Implementation, 113, 9%
Professional Development, 141, 12%
Adoption, 537, 43%
Structural, 215, 17%

must think about theories of change. In other words, the theory for how/why the proposed solution (decision) addresses the problem described (Farley-Ripple, Tilley, Sheridan, & Gallimore, 2020). In some responses the theory of change is rather clear. For example, a response that describes the decision to adopt a new math intervention in response to the problem of low math scores. In some responses it is more difficult to grasp how the solution reported

addresses the problem described. Broadly defined problems are sometimes linked to broadly defined and difficult to interpret theories of change. For example, one respondent described a challenge their school faced as "failure rate, student engagement" and the decision made was "implementation of 1:1 technology initiative." This is not to suggest that this decision could not address the problem at hand, but the theory of change is less apparent, and more detail may be required to understand the relationship.

The code co-occurrence analysis of the problem and decision data reveals both expected and unexpected patterns, linked to more clear and less clear theories of action. As expected, there is a high co-occurrence of the problem code "academic performance" applied with the decision code "adoption." This pattern is expected not only because these two codes were each the most prevalent in their category (problem and decision), but because the theory of action for adopting a new program, intervention, curriculum, etc. when faced with a problem related to academic performance seems intuitively logical. Similarly, adoption decisions are also frequently made in response to non-academic issues, where the use of a new program or intervention makes sense. Another expected pattern is the high co-occurrence of the decision code "professional development" in response to problems coded as "instructional." The "instructional" problem code focuses on issues with the delivery of instruction or professional practices of educators, so it follows that decisions to provide professional development training of some sort would be made in response.

An unexpected pattern that emerged is a high level of code co-occurrence for "academic performance" problems and "structural" decisions. Structural decisions are those related adding a new, or modifying an existing, structure in the school, including school-level schedule changes and changes to the use of physical space. While there could certainly be logic behind this combination of problem and decision, such as the decision to "implement all-day kindergarten" in response to the problem of "poor

student performance, especially in reading," the theory of change for structural decisions impacting academic problems is less intuitive and we did not expect to see high code co-occurrence here. In addition to considering unexpectedly high levels of code co-occurrence, it is also important to look for patterns where code co-occurrence is lower than expected. For example, while "adoption" and "implementation" decisions were frequently made in response to "curricular" problems, the code co-occurrence was slightly lower than expected. Problems were coded as "curricular" if they described an issue with inadequate, missing, unaligned, or otherwise defective curriculums, programs, and interventions. In response to such problems, we would expect to see decisions to adopt something new to replace the ineffective material, or to make modifications to implementation in an effort to improve the material's effectiveness. Again, while we do see this expected co-occurrence of codes, there were also a considerable number of "professional development," "structural," and "designing/creating solutions" decisions made in response to curricular problems.

The analysis of these data reveals two major findings: 1) schools are struggling to solve a wide array of problems in their schools, above and beyond those related to academic performance, 2) schools are making many different types of decisions in order to address these challenges, and they often do so in unexpected ways. Schools are frequently making decisions to adopt something new (programs, curriculums, interventions, etc.), often to address academic or behavioral challenges, but there is much more going on. If research is to be relevant and useful in helping schools to address these problems, the research community having an understanding of the various types of problems experienced and the many different types of decisions they make to address them, is crucial.

Implications

Considering historically weak ties existing between the research and practice communities (Broekkamp & van Hout-Walters, 2007; Davies & Nutley, 2008), and the absence of mechanisms through which practice can systematically inform research (National Research Council, 2012), it is unclear if and how real problems of practice are informing research, despite expectations for research use.

It is important to consider how researchers develop their research questions, and the role that incentives and funding play in that process. That is, although researchers may set their own research agenda to a point, they cannot research just anything. Research takes people and funding, and the funding for research comes from outside sources. The research agenda may be significantly influenced by the goals and beliefs of those who are doling out the funding, rather than the needs of practice (Åkerlind, 2008; Auranen & Nieminen, 2010). Even with the diverse funding mechanisms that exist, and the problems that are being researched fitting into many of the broader categories that the CRUE data represent, there may be many opportunities that are left on the table which could alleviate real issues in schools and make both teaching and learning more effective.

Both public and private funding agencies offer money to those projects meant to benefit education. This is a tremendously difficult task given the breadth of schooling and the overwhelming number of stakeholders within the system. We believe that research mostly addresses problems that exist in schools. However, the data suggest that there is a diverse array of problems which exist on a classroom, school, and district level, some that may not get much recognition from researchers and funders. These problems are very real to the practitioners and create barriers to effective school administration, teaching and ultimately student learning. Yet, despite the mandatory use of evidence-based solutions in addressing these issues, the research may be spotty or not exist at all (Penuel, Briggs, Davidson, Herlihy, Sherer, Hill, & Allen, 2016).

The IES and its sub-organizations were created to focus funding, and therefore research, on areas that

are problematic. In looking at the types of publications that come from IES, the focus of many studies does seem to align with the major issues that we see in our data, i.e. academic performance. However, there are another 60% of problems that aren't directly related to academic performance. Some of the topics mentioned by respondents - community issues, budgets, mental health, and others that greatly impact students may, in fact, have funding streams from other federal departments beyond education, as well as other non-governmental agencies and foundations. The data from the current study points to the diversity of issues school-based practitioners face, as well as an indication of how pervasive some of these problems are. Considering these findings, it becomes evident that there is a need for funds to be directed from the variety of funding streams to address the needs of those learning and working in schools.

Beyond examining the diverse range of problems that schools are working to solve, when we consider the types of decisions that are made to address these problems, we can learn even more. This study reveals that, not only do schools make a wide variety of types of decisions, but sometimes the theory of action between the problem faced and the decision made is less than clear. As discussed in the previous section, this study found patterns of code co-occurrence that were consistent with what was expected, as well as patterns that were not. These unexpected patterns provide evidence that school decision-making is complex and may occur in unanticipated ways. Decisions are not always as simple as adoption of a new program but are also rarely as complex as designing or creating an in-house solution (e.g., program or curriculum developed in house by members of the school). The data suggest that it may be the case that an academic performance problem can be solved with a structural decision, or a curricular problem could be addressed through professional development. Generally, these findings point to a need to broaden understandings of appropriate or effective ways to address problems in schools.

An expected code co-occurrence pattern that was confirmed through this analysis is the co-occurrence of academic and non-academic problems and adoption decisions. The theory of action for this code co-occurrence is intuitively logical, and also well-aligned with current federal efforts to facilitate research use in education. The high number of adoption decisions in general speaks to the notion that practitioners are interested in accessing interventions that have been vetted and are sort of "prepackaged." Which, when we think of the amount of effort that goes in to identifying, accessing, interpreting, evaluating, and reconciling contradictions in empirical literature bases, makes sense (Davies & Nutley, 2008). The What Works Clearinghouse, for example, offers this type of vetted, packaged information to practitioners; so similar efforts to facilitate research use may be on the right track, but perhaps the available evidence is not yet broad enough. For instance, there is a wealth of evidence and interventions to address early literacy development and phonics, but similar types of evidence on community-based problems, for example, may not be as widely available.

While the findings from these data are valuable and fascinating on their own, there are many more questions to be answered. Why do some schools facing the same type of problem, ultimately make different types of decisions? Why do some schools facing the same type of problem, and making the same type of decision, engage with research so differently? How does problem-framing, or how decision-makers understand the causes of the problem, impact engagement with research use? What can we learn by looking at the specific types of information used to inform different types of decisions? Fortunately, the SEE-S collects data on many of these aspects of decision-making, and by linking the findings from the current analysis with additional SEE-S data, we can begin to answer these questions.

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The Center for Research Use in Education is "Rethinking Research for Schools" (R4S). Our mission is to expand the study of research use and produce a more holistic picture of what drives it, from the production of knowledge by researchers **to the** application of research in schools**. We also seek to identify** strategies that can make research more meaningful to classroom practice**. At our center, we believe that education research is an important part of the educational process. We further believe that** rigorous evidence, whether qualitative or quantitative**, can foster better opportunities and outcomes for children by** empowering educators, families, and communities **with additional knowledge to inform better decision-making. For this reason, we seek to support strong ties between research and practice.**

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Appendix

Table 1. Problem codes and illustrative examples

Code	Child Codes	Definition	Example Problems
System	-Budget -Schedule -Transportation -Enrollment -Access (to resources, etc.) -Grade reporting -Staffing	Focuses on issues related to finances, space, time, staffing, organizational structure, etc.	"Finding time for staff to meet for PLC." "Grades were not standardized across the district." "Orchestra teacher had to go to 9 schools." "Congestion with traffic in front of the school."
Academic Performance	-Math -Language Arts -Science -Tracking/grouping students -Life skills -Social-emotional skills	Focuses specifically on issues related to student learning & performance.	"…problem of low reading achievement by students." "Low math scores." "High failure rate and retention of 9th graders." "Reading test scores were lower than district wanted."
Non-academic	-Behavior -Drop-out -Attendance -Engagement -School culture -Mental health -Physical health	Focuses on issues of school climate & culture, including school discipline, engagement, & mental health.	"…surveys that indicated that students did not feel connected with the staff or school." "Our 9th grade students have an extremely high failure & dropout rate." "School attendance & tardiness." "Misbehaving students."
Community	-Parental engagement -Community engagement -Communications	Focuses on issues related to community, including building trust, gaining parent and community engagement.	"Meeting the needs of ESL students and parents." "No longer Team concept which caused breakdown of communication between parents and teachers." "…give parents more frequent feedback on their child's progress."
Curricular	-Standards alignment -Curriculum/program/intervention alignment -Curriculum/program/intervention adequacy	Focuses on issues related to curriculums, programs, interventions, and assessments including alignment with common core standards, use of interventions, etc.	"Our reading curriculum didn't address the CCSS adequately or appropriately." "Curriculum not being uniform across elementary levels." "Lack of a unified writing program for the district." "Common assessments needed to be updated to reflect CCSS."
Instruction	-Instructional improvement -Professional development -Professional practice -Technology integration -Intervention implementation	Focuses on issues related to educators' professional practice.	"[need for] Professional development collaboration & application in the class." "PD is still not meaningful enough." "Hold teachers accountable." "Document compliance for DESE."
Federal/state / local mandate	N/A	Focuses on, or frames the problem as being related to the implementation of a federal, state, or local mandate.	"Marjory Stoneman Douglas Act" "District mandated all schools implement a one-size-fits-all assessment schedule." "District mandated." "It was mandated by the state."
Student characteristics/ populations	N/A	Focuses on, or frames the problem as being related to student characteristics or special populations such as low-SES, English Language learners, etc.	"Our students of color and low socioeconomic backgrounds are not achieving." "Address a racial gap." "…serve at-risk students and students with high levels of ACEs (adverse childhood experiences)." "…reaching students with disabilities." "…increase the level of support we give our Gifted & Talented scholars."

Table 2. Decision codes and illustrative examples

Code	Child Codes	Definition	Example Decisions
Adoption	-New curriculum -New intervention -New assessment -New initiative/ approach -New technology/resource -New program	Decision focuses on adopting a **new** program, intervention, strategy, etc. (Not if they designed/created their own new program/strategy/etc.)	"Instituted a PBIS." "...we are starting a new reading program - Bookworms." "Begin using Schoology for classroom grades/instruction." "The district adopted a new curriculum for math." "Implementing the DIBELS assessment."
Implementation	-Standardized assessments -Standardize instruction -Modify use of tools/resources -Modify intervention implementation	Decision focuses on reinforcing, standardizing, monitoring, supporting, or modifying implementation of an earlier adopted program. This does not include modifications to school policies, which are captured in a different code specifically related to policies.	"Mandatory RTI instruction using a specific manual and script." "A decision was made to standardize grading ratios across the building and eventually across the district." "Systematic use of Schoology and Google Apps." "...make assessments and instruction more uniform."
Professional Development	-Provide specific PD workshop/training -establishing/creating PLC's/grade-level/content-area teams -leveraging teams for educator learning	Decision focuses on professional development and training of educators.	"A small group of teachers were trained in notice and note for a year or so and then those teachers trained the rest of the staff through morning meetings, book study and a professional development day with the authors." "District-wide in-service on recognizing warning signs and activating our suicide protocol." "The district decided to adopt and train its staff to use Learning Focused Solutions, or LFS."
Structural	-Schedule change -Change to physical structure or use of space -New academic program/structure	Decision focuses on changing or adding a structure in the school, including the schedule and the use of physical space.	"Full Day Kindergarten for all students entering the district." "A writing block was added to the daily curriculum." "Creating an isolated 9th Grade Academy with students teamed (most students have the same teachers)." "The district was split into two K-2 buildings and two 3-5th buildings." "Created Instructional Data Team time each week out of teacher duty periods."
Creating/modifying Policy	N/A	An in house policy is created, or an existing policy modified, to address the problem. Grading and report cards are included in this category as well, as they are tied to policy (e.g. "changing the report card" or "moving to standards-based grading" would be examples of policy modifications).	"Change of policy, including PD for all staff, that a student or student's belongings (bookbags, etc.) will not be searched with prior parent notice." "Change the grading policy. Students not just need to be evaluated on test or quizzes. Now, they are evaluated on their performance in the classroom." In response to a "safety" problem… "no bathroom passes...no phones...make sure that teacher has proper penmanship when signing in at department meeting...no fly list" In response to the problem "students on their phones in class" ... "no phones or electronic devices in school"

Table 2, continued.

Code	Child Codes	Definition	Example Decisions
Designing/creating Solutions	N/A	The decision is to create/design their own, in-house solution to the problem. **Must be explicit language** indicating that this solution was designed/created in house. If this is not evident, then this code may not be applied.	"A committee was created to review the students who were having difficulty either coming to school on time or attending at all. Each student was given a contract based on individual needs." "To create a remediation course." "Create a group of district teachers to "write" the new math curriculum." "The district created pacing guides, in all subject areas, along with rubrics for report card grading."
External Action	-communication forms/frequency -community resources/partnerships	Decision focuses on communications or engagement with the community or individuals outside of the school.	"We are planning for the parents [of ELL students] to have a separate back-to-school to spend more time and have interpreters." "Parents/caregivers were given the opportunity to respond to their students' progress..."
Discontinuing policy /program/practice	N/A	Decision focuses on discontinuation of a program, policy, practice, approach, strategy, etc. This should be explicit in the response that the primary decision was to get rid of or stop something. This code should not be applied if discontinuation is a secondary consequence of a decision.	"Discontinuing ABE program." "Intermediate schools were abolished for Elementary and Middle Schools." "The district decided not to bus 6th graders to after school band/orchestra." "Our school decided to not hold intervention classes during the first semester."
Human Resources	-Redistribution of staff -Hiring additional staff -Reducing staff -Changing staff role/responsibilities	Decision focuses on a change related to staffing.	"Reading interventionist and technology teachers were cut from the budget." "An SRBI coordinator was hired." "Staff was shuffled within and among buildings to accommodate the vacancy left when the principal resigned."
No Action Taken	N/A	The decision is to maintain the status quo despite an identified problem. Often a decision to continue using a curriculum, intervention, or program.	"To **continue** using the Eureka Math Curriculum." "To continue with the same reading curriculum as the past." "Problem: Discipline is not being addressed consistently. Decision: Teachers tried to ask for support for admin, but the teachers were just told to write less referrals. No real help or support was given."