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Is "Option B" a Viable Plan B? School Counselors' Sensemaking of a Dual Enrollment Policy in Georgia

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Abstract
Leveraging the state's dual enrollment program, Georgia policymakers introduced a novel postsecondary pathway called "Option B" that allows students to bypass many traditional high school graduation requirements by completing sub-baccalaureate credentials for career and technical education instead. Given the distinctiveness of this policy, high school counselors play an important role in its implementation as "street-level bureaucrats." Drawing on sensemaking theory, this qualitative study examines how counselors consider the feasibility of the new pathway and for whom it serves best. Results suggest that there is disagreement between policymakers and street-level bureaucrats regarding the appropriate extent of postsecondary expansion for high school students.

Keywords Dual enrollment · Career and technical education · State policies · Postsecondary degree completion · Inequality

Introduction

In recent decades, a widespread belief in the value of higher education has facilitated substantial efforts to improve college access and readiness. As an increasingly common accelerated learning program, dual enrollment (DE) uniquely offers multiple curricular options for high school students to take supplemental coursework in academic or technical fields of study to simultaneously earn credits toward graduation and a postsecondary credential. Many states have introduced policies to govern several aspects of DE including admissions and eligibility requirements, recruitment, and the regulation of course content, among other concerns (Borden et al., 2013). In this effort, state policymakers use policies to create new pathways to program par-

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ticipation, and stakeholders on the ground are tasked with promoting such opportunities to their students. But the extent of stakeholder effort in implementing state-level DE policies may largely depend on their perceptions of who is best served by such opportunities and why.

A recent initiative regarding DE in Georgia presents an important case of how and to what extent innovative educational policy efforts are implemented and carried out as intended. DE programs typically serve the role of curricular intensification—emphasizing the completion of high school requirements while facilitating early exposure to higher education, academic preparation for college, and timely degree completion. But DE in Georgia also provides students with the unique opportunity to graduate from high school through an alternative route referred to as High School Graduation Option B (henceforth referred to as Option B) (Option B, 2015). By leveraging the state's DE program as a vehicle to ensure early labor market success through career and technical education (CTE), Option B allows students to bypass many of the traditional high school graduation requirements by completing either an associate degree program or two technical college certificates at a local two-year college (Georgia Department of Education, 2021). While this accelerated pathway to sub-baccalaureate credentials received significant bipartisan support when introduced, few students across Georgia have participated in or completed the Option B pathway.[1] Despite enthusiasm surrounding this early postsecondary initiative, a lack of participation suggests that the policy has yet to materialize as intended.

Although high school counselors do not participate in the process of creating policies, they are at the "front lines" of policy implementation as they interpret and enact legislation within schools. As "street-level bureaucrats" (Lipsky, 2010), counselors arguably hold discretionary power in the implementation of educational policy. This role is particularly important when considering their gatekeeping function – the ability to provide or inhibit access to knowledge and resources that can limit or expand access to postsecondary opportunities (McDonough, 2005; Woods & Domina, 2014). Given their unique role, we believe much can be learned from school counselors about the implementation of educational policy.

In this study, we employ sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) to answer the following research question: *How do secondary school counselors make sense of Option B, and how does this shape their implementation of the policy?* Through our investigation of the Option B pathway, we build on the work of prior scholarship regarding the role of school officials in the implementation of DE and how their perceptions may affect this effort (Barnett & Kim, 2014; Garcia et al., 2020; Hanson et al., 2015; Martinez et al., 2017; Witkowsky & Clayton, 2020; Wozniak & Palmer, 2013). Specifically, the purpose of our study is to gain a deeper understanding of how school counselors exercise their agency in decision-making as street-level bureaucrats and gatekeepers on policies that are meant to increase opportunities for early postsecondary access. Though unique, Option B is an example of the larger national shift toward CTE-focused DE programs and higher education workforce development. Within the

[1] Neither the Governor's Office of Student Achievement nor the Georgia Department of Education disaggregate Option B students from those taking other CTE courses, data indicate that the total number of students is "too few to count."

broader, national context, our findings illustrate the ways counselors' interpretations and enactment of state-level policy are shaped by local context, existing policies, knowledge of structural inequities, and the landscape of CTE and DE learning opportunities. Thus, the findings and implications of this research on Option B reach well beyond Georgia, wherein we set our scene.

The Georgia Policy Context

Like many states, Georgia's economy is shifting to include more jobs requiring a postsecondary credential and training, thus presenting a need for a more educated workforce (Carnevale et al., 2018). In response, Georgia policymakers have been actively engaged in introducing new DE and CTE initiatives to improve statewide degree attainment and address gaps in the workforce (Rubin & Hearn, 2018). Aligning with national trends, the focus on expanding access to postsecondary and career pathways has led to an increase in participation in dual enrollment and CTE programs, both independently and in combination (Griffin & McGuire, 2018).

In Georgia, the state's dual enrollment program is one of the most popular policy efforts to emerge in recent years. In 2015, the legislature passed the Move on When Ready (MOWR) Act (2015), which merged three dual enrollment programs into one state-funded program for DE that provided a no-cost structure for students and multiple course modality options (Rauschenberg & Chalasani, 2017). Prior to its enactment, the suite of DE programs in Georgia varied significantly, from the state agency responsible with program administration to the types of courses available for students (e.g., CTE and Core) to the funding source (e.g., state funds, lottery-based, and local school funds) (Griffin & McGuire, 2018). The MOWR program provided significant funding and reduced common barriers to dual enrollment participation in Georgia, leading to a boom in DE participation.

As a complement to the new MOWR program, policymakers introduced Senate Bill 2 in 2015, which leveraged DE to bolster early postsecondary attainment in a novel way. The legislation, which came to be known as "Option B," emerged to delineate this new pathway from the typical DE program (renamed "Option A"). Rather than allow students to earn some college credits while fulfilling high school graduation requirements, Option B creates a new pathway for high school completion in which postsecondary credentials in CTE now supplant most traditional secondary education requirements for graduation. In other words, although Option B promotes sub-baccalaureate credentials as a worthy investment, it renders the student ineligible for the standard high school diploma. Table 1 summarizes how Option B differs from traditional graduation requirements, demonstrating that nearly half of the coursework needed to graduate under Option B occurs at the college level and shifts away from traditional subjects to emphasize a greater number of CTE courses. As Georgia policymakers have made clear, the explicit intention of Option B is to facilitate access to high-wage careers by providing high schools students with an option for early access to a postsecondary credential.

But while the Option B policy encouraged early degree completion, additional state legislation simultaneously limited the affordability for many students to do so.

Table 1 A Comparison of Standard Versus Option B High School Graduation Requirements

Subject Requirements	Standard Graduation	Option B Graduation
1. English/Language Arts	4 Units	2 Units
2. Mathematics	4 Units	2 Units
3. Science	4 Units	2 Units
4. Social Studies	3 Units	0 Units
5. Health and Physical Education	1 Unit	0 Units
6. Electives	4 Units	
7. CTAE, Fine Arts, and/or Modern Language/Latin	3 Units (in a coherent sequence)	1 Associate Degree 1 Technical Diploma 2 Technical Certificates

The massification of DE participation in Georgia (primarily through Option A) led to program costs that were viewed by policymakers as unsustainable. To address the cost growth, lawmakers passed House Bill 444 in 2020, which limited the number of college credits a student could earn cost free through dual enrollment to 30 h and largely restricted the program to 11th and 12th grade students. As a result, the guardrails placed on the program severely limited the possibility for students to obtain an associate degree through Option A or B without enduring personal costs.

Background and Literature Review

Because of Option B's emphasis on expanding early workforce development, we begin by providing background pertaining to CTE in high school, discussing the change in curricular goals broadly, and how CTE functions in postsecondary partnerships such as dual enrollment programs. We then turn to the literature regarding the implementation of DE programs by secondary school administrators, focusing on school counselors and their dual roles in supporting the postsecondary preparation efforts of individual students coupled with their role in policy implementation.

Curricular Stratification in High School

The value of public education has been long debated as needing to meet the academic and civic needs of individual students on the one hand, while also providing the pragmatic training for the workforce on the other hand (Dougherty & Lombardi, 2016). This tension resulted in the creation of varied educational tracks in which "vocational education" was intended to serve students with an interest in trades (Dougherty, 2016). But over time, vocational education was perceived to be the least optimal curricular pathway compared to college-preparatory tracks—suitable primarily for students with lower academic achievement and motivation (Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Kelly & Price, 2009). Above and beyond the curricular differences, research shows that the tracking system resulted in inequitable educational experiences in which those in the vocational track were disadvantaged relative to their peers regarding allo-

cated resources, teacher quality, and postsecondary outcomes (Domina et al., 2017; Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Oakes, 1983).

In response to the harm brought forth by the legacy of tracking, vocational education has been replaced by CTE to offer higher-quality programs intended to be integrated with the standard curriculum and align with nationally recognized high-demand careers (Blissett, 2020). Though some scholars have concluded that there is limited evidence of "tracking" under this modern model (Dougherty, 2016), disparities across historically advantaged and disadvantaged groups have emerged in new ways in which CTE students are more likely to be male and come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Giani, 2019a). Furthermore, participation across CTE varies considerably across groups such that White and Asian CTE students are most likely to concentrate in fields such as STEM, information technology, finance, and health, while Latino students are more likely to concentrate in fields such as manufacturing, transportation, architecture, and construction (Dougherty, 2016; Giani, 2019b). This growing body of evidence demonstrates that while traditional forms of tracking practices may have diminished, stratification in secondary educational opportunities continues to persist in subtle ways. Still unclear, however, is whether differences across groups in CTE participation is also a concern when combined with accelerated learning opportunities such as dual enrollment.

CTE and Dual Enrollment

Dual enrollment (DE) is perhaps one of the most popular accelerated learning programs designed to ensure that students can earn credits for a postsecondary credential while completing their graduation requirements. The program has grown considerably in recent years as one recently published study has found that by 2015, 70% of traditional public high schools nationwide offered DE, and nearly a third of ninth graders from 2009 were found to participate (Spencer & Maldonaldo, 2021). Yet, we know very little about differences between academic- versus CTE-related course-taking. There are only a limited number of studies examining the effects of DE among students taking CTE coursework, which show that program participants are more likely to enroll in a two-year college following high school (Dougherty, 2016) but not four-year institutions (Cellini, 2006; Dougherty, 2016). Further, the number of students in the CTE pathway for DE appears to be small relative to the academic pathway. Research of the program in Texas found that only 7–12% of DE participants completed CTE courses, and compared to those who took academic coursework for DE, these students were more likely to come from racially minoritized backgrounds (Ryu et al., 2023). This coincides with research from Tennessee, which shows that offering CTE-related coursework in high schools helped to expand participation in DE by allowing students the opportunity to explore fields of study unknown to them and have access to postsecondary opportunities that better align with their interests; however, the authors also found that many students were unable to successfully pass the required end-of-course exams (Hemelt & Swiderski, 2022). For these reasons, many questions remain about how high school students are generally made aware of DE, how they are supported if they participate, and how they are counseled to

consider the implications of the academic versus vocational coursework options: all factors that are affected by how DE programs are implemented.

Dual Enrollment Perceptions and Implementation

Given the inherent separations between secondary and postsecondary entities, a considerable amount of effort is required to ensure that DE programs are successfully implemented. In part, state-level policies mandating cross-sector collaborations is found to be positively associated with DE participation at the school-level (Spencer & Maldonaldo, 2021). But in addition to macro-level policy initiatives, DE implementation efforts are also subject to the commitment of actors at the micro-level. Secondary school teachers, administrators, and staff all play an important role in facilitating student access to advanced, postsecondary course-taking opportunities such as DE. Their role in the implementation of DE is crucial given the "need to navigate and resolve differences between high school and collegiate expectations" (Hemelt & Swiderski, 2022, p. 5), so their perceptions of the program matter considerably.

Only a handful of studies to date have examined how school officials view DE programs. Hanson and colleagues (2015) surveyed 150 officials across 35 schools in Iowa and found that most had a positive view of the impact these programs have on their schools and students. A positive disposition of DE may be related to the efforts of school leaders. Findings from qualitative research of school administrators in Tennessee and Texas demonstrate that the leadership of district and school administrators is especially important to making sure that DE programs were successfully implemented (Barnett & Kim. 2014; Martinez et al., 2017).

Still, some research suggests that broad support for DE does not necessarily mean that stakeholders will support all components or iterations of the program delivery. One study using survey data found that school agents may recognize the benefits of DE but are also cognizant of barriers, particularly for students from historically marginalized backgrounds, that may exist with certain aspects of the program (Garcia et al., 2020). In a study surveying 411 high school and college stakeholders in Michigan, Wozniak and Palmer (2013) found that program expansion, including options for CTE, was shared as a priority among most administrators; but the notion of increasing counseling services was only moderately supported by high school officials. Aside from disagreement with program components, Duncheon and Relles (2020) found that the complexity of these school-college partnerships can complicate how school officials, namely teachers, make sense of the expectations for implementing DE coursework. In this small but growing body of literature, the findings collectively suggest that the success of DE implementation, and the extent to which it affects student participation and their experience in the program, may be dependent, in part, on the perceptions and actions of stakeholders on the ground.

The Dual Role of School Counselors

Notwithstanding the importance of other secondary school officials, perhaps none are more important to the successful implementation of DE programs than high school counselors. In most public schools, school counselors serve an important function

in guiding students' curricular pathways in high schools and connecting them to postsecondary opportunities. We frame counselors' specific administrative duties as constituting their dual roles as both *street-level bureaucrats* and *gatekeepers*. As administrative leaders, school counselors are *street-level bureaucrats* that must implement policies and other initiatives in schools. Lipsky (2010) defined street-level bureaucrats as "public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work" (p. 3). Lipsky argued that street-level bureaucrats, such as teachers, principals, and counselors, hold a significant amount of discretionary power in the implementation of public policy and, thus, are the actual policymakers and policy implementers. But despite the critical roles played by counselors, little empirical work has been conducted on how they specifically interpret, translate, and implement policies (Coburn, 2005).

The function of school counselors in policy implementation is also especially important given their direct impact and influence on students as *gatekeepers*. Counselors manage student course-taking requirements and work to oversee their college choice and career planning (McKillip et al., 2012). Existing literature highlights the critical gatekeeping role of school counselors in providing students with access to knowledge, information and resources that can function to narrow or broaden access to postsecondary opportunities (McDonough, 2005; Woods & Domina, 2014). For instance, in a two-year case study of an under-resourced, CTE high school, Bettencourt and colleagues (2021) found that the guidance counselor did not facilitate widespread dissemination of information about DE, which resulted in only a few students participating in the program.

As key gatekeepers and street-level bureaucrats in their school contexts, counselors are critical actors in the implementation of macro-level education policies—particularly those that shape students' postsecondary pathways. Both roles may inform the perceptions that school counselors develop regarding different curricular opportunities and which students are best suited for them. In a recent study of 15 high school counselors in Colorado, Witkowsky & Clayton (2020) found that these administrators had positive perceptions of DE as a mechanism to facilitate college and career readiness, but also held conflicting views regarding which students they would identify to participate. These views may inadvertently manifest in ways that perpetuate inequality via personal biases and assumptions about students, particularly based on ascriptive characteristics (McDonough, 2005).

Theoretical Framework

In this study, we draw on sensemaking theory to better understand how and to what extent counselors make sense of and implement Option B within their respective schools (Weick, 1995). Weick (1995) described sensemaking theory as a process-oriented approach that involves retrospective reflection, ongoing enactment, social interaction, identity construction, plausibility testing, and ongoing revision of understanding in response to changing circumstances. Sensemaking assumes that organizations are complex social systems in which individuals use information to understand, interpret, and make sense of ambiguous issues, events, and contexts. It provides a

framework to understand how school counselors are constantly constructing meaning and taking action in complex and uncertain situations, which can involve interpreting confusing policies, navigating complex bureaucracies, working with diverse stakeholders, and adapting to changing circumstances.

We use sensemaking theory to examine how school counselors in Georgia made sense of Option B and developed strategies to implement the new policy based upon individual and collective understandings of the policy goals, expectations, and their discretion (Spillane et al., 2002). In Georgia, school counselors assume a critical, street-level bureaucrat position in the implementation of dual enrollment and CTE policies, with their role mentioned directly in official documents from K-12 and higher education stakeholders. In this role, counselors are making sense of ever-changing state laws, postsecondary policies, Georgia Department of Education policies and regulations, and district- and school-level policies on dual enrollment—all relative to their own beliefs, the students they serve, and the context in which they work (Spillane et al., 2002; Weick, 1995). They are the primary gatekeeper of participation, providing information to students and families, managing the process, and submitting funding applications for students (McKillip et al., 2012). As such, counselors' individual and collective sensemaking can help us understand how policies become practice.

By understanding the interplay between a counselor's sensemaking and role as a street-level bureaucrat, one can illuminate the individual, social, and structural contexts shaping a counselor's interpretation, translation, and implementation of dual enrollment and CTE policies (Coburn, 2005; Rifelj & Kuttner, 2020; Spillane et al., 2002). For instance, a school counselor may see a CTE pathway as an opportunity for students to gain valuable work experience and skills, leading them to promote the policy. Another school counselor may see it as a challenge due to limited opportunities and potential stigma associated with non-academic pathways to graduation. Others may avoid implementing the policy due to the novelty of the policy, a lack of information, or limited resources. Sensemaking and implementation are not static processes. A counselor's implementation of Option B will shift over time as they continue to make sense of policy changes to dual enrollment, student experiences with the program, and expectations from external actors, among other factors. Taken together, school counselors play a pivotal role in connecting policy adopted in state capitols to applied contexts in dual enrollment and CTE, even as their application may differ from the intentions of lawmakers.

Research Design

This "basic qualitative research" study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was guided by a constructivist epistemology that assumes knowledge is co-created between the knower and what can be known. Unlike researchers guided by post-positivist assumptions, we were not seeking to identify one objective truth but were interested in the complex and varied sensemaking across participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To position the authors relative to the design, carrying out, and analysis of this study, we believe that educational policy can provide greater access for educational opportunities while also reproducing existing class and racial inequality. As a team, we entered

this project knowing that very few students were participating in Option B and this knowledge shaped our views. By practicing reflexivity throughout this project, we aimed to challenge our existing assumptions and seek out alternative explanations before drawing conclusions.

During the summer of 2021, and following the approval of IRB, researchers employed semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 12 school counselors from 10 school districts across the state of Georgia (see Table 2). Criteria for participant selection was limited to job status and location (participants needed to be in current positions as high school counselors within the state of Georgia). We also aimed to include participants from across the state working within different schools, districts, and regions serving diverse student populations. With the help of a known contact working with public schools across Georgia, recruitment of participants was facilitated by one researcher using a purposeful "network method" for sampling, which Roulston (2022) argues is a more appropriate term for what many qualitative researchers call snowball sampling. The semi-structured, open-ended nature of interviews best allowed researchers to explore counselors' understanding and perceptions of Option B, as well as the ways in which Option B was enacted by counselors within their schools (Roulston, 2022; Weick, 1995). The literature on access to dual enrollment opportunities, school counselors, street-level bureaucrats, and sensemaking provided the basis for our interview protocol. Questions elicited background information about counselors and their perceptions of and engagement with Option B (e.g., knowledge of the policy, limitations, and benefits of policy, how and to what extent they promote Option B and to whom). Because this research was conducted during a global pandemic, all interviews were conducted and audio-recorded via Zoom. Notably, virtual interviewing has become increasingly common following the pandemic and has been

Table 2 Participant Information and School-Level Data

Counselor (Pseudonym)	Years in Profession	*District	*School	FRPL Eligible (%)	BIPOC Students (%)	Grad Rate	*HOPE Eligible
Lily	19	1	A	45%	43%	84%	46%
Jennifer	1	1	B	28%	55%	89%	42%
Christine	31	2	C	60%	33%	97%	46%
Ashley	19	3	D	11%	14%	98%	75%
Samantha	6	4	E	53%	74%	83%	36%
Eliza	1	4	F	67%	96%	77%	36%
Terrence	29	5	G	32%	24%	92%	33%
Henry	8	6	H	49%	45%	90%	46%
Victoria	16	7	I	100%	98%	84%	53%
Mary	16	8	J	77%	79%		
Joy	16	9	K	95%	82%	86%	42%
Grace	21	10	L	3%	35%	96%	53%

**Source*: School Data from Governor's Office of Student Achievement Report Card, 2019–2020

**Note*: HOPE eligibility refers to Georgia's merit-based HOPE Scholarship. Eligibility requirements include Georgia residency and at least a 3.00 grade point average upon graduation from high school

**Note*: Districts have been coded with numbers and schools coded with letters to further protect identities of participants

found to be more flexible, cost effective, and can provide greater security/privacy for the discussion of sensitive topics (Oliffe et al., 2021). On average, our Zoom interviews lasted approximately 60 min.

As a supplement to individual interviews, researchers also collected and analyzed relevant documents, including publicly available flyers, articles from news outlets, information sheets, and policy documents on Option B. Documents provided context for interview data and allowed researchers to better understand the ways Option B was discussed and promoted at varying contextual levels.

To enhance the credibility of findings, researchers engaged in reflexive practices throughout the study via team discussion (talk and written communication) and a rigorous peer debriefing process of coding procedures (Miles et al., 2019). The initial stage of analysis included two researchers listening to each interview/cleaning transcripts while recording analytic memos and creating an initial code list that included deductive codes informed by sensemaking theory, as well as emergent inductive codes (Miles et al., 2019). The researchers uploaded transcripts to MAXQDA and coded one interview together while revising and defining initial codes and categories. Researchers then independently coded the next five interviews, recording additional analytic memos and refining codes and categories. For example, one category included "Option B for Whom?" with underlying in vivo codes "Very Specific Case," "Not My Students," and "Best Fit." Another category included "Perceptions of Dual Enrollment Students" and underlying codes included "Negative Perceptions of Student" (e.g., instances when counselors identified Option B students in particular as "lazy," "does not have initiative"). Researchers then came together again to conduct intercoder agreement in MAXQDA. Finally, the researchers independently coded the remaining interviews using the final list before meeting again to discuss thematic findings.

Although we aimed to include a diverse range of voices from across schools, districts, and areas of the state, our study is limited to 10 of roughly 181 districts. Further, Option B is a policy that is unique to the state of Georgia. The policy itself has distinctive qualities and Georgia is a distinctive context with its own set of sociopolitical forces driving decision-making in education.

Findings

Thematic findings presented below provide insight into how counselors, as individuals situated within school contexts, made sense of Option B largely as a "policy without options" that many believed could cause more harm than good for most of *their* students. Though somewhat nuanced by shared, context-specific sensemaking, findings provide greater insight into how and why Option B seems to be as limited as the number of students it serves.

A Policy Without Options?

Across the schools and districts represented in the study, counselors were generally wary of Option B and expressed several concerns surrounding the program's

significant limitations, including requiring students to make an early decision that would lock them into a specific technical career (e.g., welding) without allowing for future career shifts or additional postsecondary credentials. For example, Lily, a seasoned counselor with more than 19 years in the profession, asserted that she is "real cautious about it [Option B]." She explained: "I had a student this year that was really interested, but he was also a really stellar student academically. And then when we talked through it, I met with his parents and he decided he didn't want to do it because he wanted to make sure he had full options right after high school." Lily is representative of counselors in the study who identified a complicated set of concerns that begin with the early decision to move into the Option B pathway, not only locking students into a specific technical career but potentially locking them out of future opportunities. Through conversations with several counselors, it became clear that some of the limitations are the result of unrealistic expectations that do not play out on the ground the way policymakers intended. Lily further explained:

> One of the challenges, especially in terms of that associate's option, is that they cut the number of hours that students can complete dual enrollment to 30. And you can't complete an associate's degree with 30 hours realistically because of the courses that are required and pacing and like and all that stuff. *So that's not really an option*. The certificate diplomas would be a more realistic option, but I'm not a fan of it, because unless a student is absolutely certain that they want to go into that career field forever and ever and ever and ever...

Lily's distaste for Option B is demonstrated by policy-related restrictions to attaining an associate's degree, or what might be considered a more viable option for students who may change their minds after graduating high school. Because counselors view the pathway through Option B as one that does not actually allow students to "realistically" complete the number of dual enrollment courses required for an associate's degree, Option B is largely perceived as a policy without options.

Samantha expressed similar concerns surrounding the early decision that ultimately locks students out of future opportunities, adding another critical limiting factor – students graduate without the type of high school credential needed to facilitate future transitions to postsecondary education. Samantha stated: "They do get a high school diploma. But it's not a standard diploma, a Georgia diploma. …So, there's a lot of potential that if they change their mind and they want to go back to school, they actually don't have the high school credential as a foundation for that." If, for example, a student attains a diploma via Option B and a postsecondary certificate in welding, that diploma and certificate will not fulfill future postsecondary admissions requirements. Thus, the student is limited to welding, a choice made well before the age of 18. For Terrence, another veteran counselor, this is particularly true for students later interested in pursuing a four-year degree. Terrence stressed that he "seldom ever used Senate Bill 2" because "they're [students] not going to get everything they need in order to get into a four-year college. They're not going to have all the math. They're not going to have all the English courses, the foreign languages." Grace, another seasoned counselor with 20+years in the profession also expressed frustration with her understanding of recent changes to dual enrollment policy:

> So, yeah, with Option B, I think they were still limited under the 30-hour credit. And I don't know if that covers everything that they need to do [to get the degree]. *And so it's almost like a moot point*, like why are you going to encourage these kids to do this, but they can't even graduate and they're gonna have to pay out of pocket?

For counselors in the study, not only do the requirements to course pacing and taking restrict the attainment of an associate's degree, students have been further burdened by dual enrollment policy decisions (e.g., HB 444) that limited the number of credit hours a student could attempt through the DE programs; these changes effectively shifted the costs of dual enrollment to students after 30 h.

Promoting Option B: "A Moot Point?"

As school counselors, the individuals in this study are responsible for promoting and identifying which students might be best suited to Option B. Because most counselors communicated considerable apprehension, most expressed corresponding concerns surrounding the promotion of Option B to their students. These overwhelming concerns shape the ways in which counselors interpret and implement the policy. As Grace mentioned above, "it's almost like a moot point" to encourage students to consider Option B. Other counselors described "glossing over" the policy in their orientation presentations to seemingly fulfill requirements or expectations from the state while sending a message to students and parents that Option B is not a viable option for most. As representative of others in the study, Ashley, an experienced counselor serving students from the most racially and socioeconomically privileged backgrounds in the study reflected, "I think it has been kind of a brush over…Like I said, I don't know that we focus on that a ton…It is kind of just glossed over." Joy, an experienced counselor working at a school serving predominantly low-income students of color, expressed similar feelings of apprehension, but mentioned her ethical responsibility to provide information for "isolated" student cases:

> It's not one that I push very often [Option B]. That one is strictly a case by case. If you have a student who is, I think, good with their hands… if we got a kid sitting out there that that program could be beneficial to, it is our job to present it. Now, do we have a lot of kids who latch on? No, we don't. Because you have those parents who want their kids to have the true high school experience. But then we have those isolated cases where this may be the environment for the kid. So, ethically, it's our responsibility to present it all.

Counselors in this study largely interpreted Option B as a policy without options, or one that consequentially limits future options. Viewed in this way, often with frustration, confusion or a sense of obligation, counselors demonstrate the ways interpretation shapes the enactment of Option B at the school level and for whom.

Option B for Whom?

Whether a lack of counselor enthusiasm influenced students' decisions not to pursue Option B, most counselors were unable to identify a single student who ultimately selected or completed Option B. Because of this, many counselors were asked to imagine the type of student who would choose and benefit from this pathway. Most envisioned a very specific or "isolated" student case as described above by Joy. Similarly, Samantha provided an example of a student hoping to continue working on this family's farm: "…if this is really what the family wants to do long term, then maybe SB2 [Option B] is a good option for them, but that is so hugely specific." Samantha went on to say that it gives her "pause to kind of advertise the program a little bit more widely to students. Because it's ultimately not going to be a great fit for most students." Not unlike Joy and Samantha, other counselors described Option B as an option for a very particular type of student – one committed to taking over a family business or one who expresses early interest in a particular trade. While the type of student described by counselors seems to be in the minority, a greater number of students characterized as "at risk of dropout" seem to be the primary target of the policy. This characterization is also reflected in the larger discourse surrounding Option B. For example, documents analyzed for this study include a recent news article on a particular Georgia high school serving students who have "fallen behind or struggled in a traditional learning environment" that will offer Option B to prevent dropout (McCray, 2022).

This "drop-out" discourse also manifested in interviews with counselors. As Terrence directly communicated, "Senate Bill 2 was created to keep that dropout rate from happening." Other counselors described the "typical" Option B student as someone "at risk of dropout." Closer attention to the words and phrases used to describe the "typical" Option B student suggests counselors' perceptions mirror the codified, deficit-centered language used to describe students sorted into the "low" vocational track in early tracking literature (Oakes, 1983). Some counselors portrayed Option B students as "disengaged," "twiddling their thumbs," those with "discipline issues," students who "don't like high school," or those who "don't have much money." In fact, Henry, the one major proponent of Option B among those in the study, likened the policy to "a throwback to when we had tech prep versus college prep." Use of the word "versus" is particularly important to existing educational schemas that link particular types of students and dispositions to vocational knowledge may work to generate particular interpretations of Option B and Option B students against Option A. Schemas are a particularly powerful cognitive element involved in making sense of, in this case, for whom Option B is appropriate or beneficial.

Relatedly, across districts and schools, counselors consistently stressed that Option B was not necessarily an option for *their* students. Though counselors did suggest that Option B has potential for some, it was also made clear that this policy would not benefit students in *their* schools. For example, Grace asserted that although it might be "useful for someone, it's not perfect for anyone in *my* school." Christina also noted, "Option B seems very slim to meet the needs of *our* students." With few exceptions, counselors seemed to interpret Option B as a policy requiring great caution—one that may have potential for some students somewhere else, but not at their

own institutions. In addition to the individual-level factors that shape one's interpretation and implementation of policy (e.g., preexisting knowledge or experience with similar types of policy), where one is located within the state context and the shared meanings made within those localized spaces, matter a great deal.

Collective Perception and Contextual Matters

Across the larger state context, a sense of confusion and admitted lack of clear understanding of Option B surfaced during conversations that seemed to contribute to the general sense that Option B is not a viable option for most students. This is perhaps not surprising given the general lack of promotion and interest in disseminating information to students at most schools in the study, as well as what seems to be a corresponding lack of interest from most students. For example, Ashley communicated a shared perspective of this lack of understanding using "we" and placing emphasis on the need to check with other stakeholders at the regional and state level:

> I think we've only had one student maybe to do that in our entire time, my entire time here. …I do know that we do rely heavily on the college to help make sure we're navigating that correctly and that they're taking the correct courses there and finishing their pathways…We have to go back and read it every time we get a student just to make sure we're on top of that. And I think we've even called the state to make sure that we're following the correct protocol with that.

As indicated here, perceptions of Option B, which lead to the implementation or subversion of the policy within particular schools, were often communicated through a collective or group-level perception. Not unlike other counselors in the study that remained wary of Option B, Ashely demonstrates a shared commitment to making sure that any student interested in Option B receives accurate information. Grace also presented a shared understanding of Option B – her team taking cues from state-level administration and acting accordingly within their respective school:

> I've never had a single student express any interest in doing Option B. So, we present it as a slide in our dual enrollment presentations and that's it. And I think when I talk to the person who is overall dual enrollment for the entire state of Georgia, because about two years ago, she said in the entire state, there were only about 40-something kids from every single high school in all Georgia who were doing Option B. So, yeah, we present it, talk about for about 30 seconds, then we move on.

Similarly, Lily mentions the state-level "push" for Option B as "filtered" through the district-level dual enrollment coordinator: "…we have a dual enrollment coordinator at the district who kind of works closely with [a local two-year college] and she filters information. She sends a lot of information about Option B and there seems to be a push for it. But I think all the counselors are pretty much on the same page, that it's just not a good option for most people." Despite the state-level push, Lily acknowledged the collective understanding among counselors in and out of her own district

that Option B is to be enacted with caution and sparingly, if at all. Although the majority of counselors were wary of Option B, Henry, a dual-enrollment counselor working within a school and district that worked to "heavily" promote Option B was one exception. Henry had already seen at least one student through to completion and celebrated this pathway as a viable option for students in the local area. In this case, Henry's school provided him with messaging that differed significantly from other counselors in the study, which seems to translate into practice:

> We're all very familiar with it as a school, our administrators are really excited about it as an option for some of our students that, they're like, traditional high school is not for you. This is an option, you know. So, it's well promoted. We have one student who graduated this year, and it was just a fluke that all came out. I was like, you qualify for this, you failed English 1101, let's Option B you. He wants to be a welder, so it's perfect.

In Henry's case, he was also able to experience what he perceived to be the real value of Option B for a student who as Henry described, was "at risk of dropout" and wanted to be a welder. Through conversations with the student and his mother, Henry was able to place the student on an Option B trajectory, which resulted in postsecondary credentials rather than leaving high school without a diploma. Henry also discussed the real value in trade work – that "these trades are needed" and that they "fill a need in the community." In Henry's case, his positive experience, positive shared messaging within the school, and needs within the local community seem to contribute to the implementation of Option B within this particular context. It is important to note that Henry also acknowledged major limitations while still placing emphasis on the great potential of Option B for students in his school. In our interview, Henry focused on the policy's growth and how they would likely have even more students interested in this trajectory if there were a greater number of programs. Currently, welding is the only real opportunity available to students in nearby two-year colleges.

Discussion and Conclusions

Georgia's Option B policy complicates typical notions of college readiness and worthiness given the innovation of the policy's graduation requirements. Option B essentially forgoes the need for most traditional high school courses and fast-tracks students to the requirements for a postsecondary credential almost entirely. Notwithstanding the innovation of this accelerated educational pathway, Option B may be especially complicated to implement for three reasons. First, the target population for this opportunity is unclear. This determination is especially important as there are numerous restrictions regarding eligibility for DE in the state (e.g., grade level, academic achievement standards, etc.). Second, the enactment of HB 444, which placed a funding cap of 30 credit hours on all dual enrollment students, severely limits the viability of an Option B student completing the associate degree without incurring significant costs. School counselors were hesitant to see Option B as an option for their students, given that the associate degree is the only postsecondary credential

providing students a pathway to a traditional high school diploma among the three options. Third, administrators face various *known* challenges in implementing dual enrollment policies, which range from establishing cross-sector partnerships with local postsecondary institutions, helping students to navigate the admission process, and overcoming numerous logistical hurdles (e.g., transportation, costs, etc.) that may impede student participation (An & Taylor, 2019).

But above and beyond what is known, much is also *unknown* about how administrators make sense of no longer requiring foundational secondary coursework, which may affect students' access to and readiness for postsecondary opportunities. Therein lies the challenge for high school counselors who are implicitly expected as street-level bureaucrats to implement the vision of policymakers. However, as gatekeepers, counselors must also ponder two critical questions: *Is Option B actually a viable "Plan B"? And if so, for whom?*

As suggested by sensemaking theory, individual interpretations and practices relative to policy are shaped by several factors, including pre-existing knowledge and experiences, policy signals, and contextual factors. As street-level bureaucrats, counselors in this study made sense of Option B through their own individual knowledge of the students they serve, their interpretation of the state policies, and their experiences with similar academic policies and practices within their own schools. Consistent with sensemaking theory and research that has employed sensemaking (Coburn, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002), counselors also made sense of Option B with and against other stakeholders. Some counselors made sense of the dual enrollment policies with other school staff or filtered through district-level administrators. Although Option B was introduced at the state-level with significant bipartisan support and some counselors communicated the state-level push to implement, most counselors used their own discretion by "glossing over" the policy or discouraging students from selecting into Option B within their own schools. The lack of interest in advocating for Option B was exacerbated when lawmakers imposed restrictions that would make acquiring an associate degree nearly impossible without incurring significant costs. Counselors made sense of how the sweeping state policy change impacted the Option B pathway for students. As largely perceived to limit students' future opportunities, Option B, even as a "plan b" for those at risk of dropout, was overwhelmingly deemed unviable.

Thus, for many counselors, the implementation of Option B diverged from the original intent of the state legislature for several reasons, including, but not limited to filtered messaging through the district, real structural barriers presented in context, and shared perceptions based upon pre-existing schemas about for whom the policy is best suited. These findings echo other studies that have examined the sensemaking of key stakeholders relative to policy implementation (Coburn, 2005; Stein & Brown, 1997; Sutherland, 2022). It should be noted that all counselors, including Henry—the one real advocate for Option B at his own institution—were motivated by what they believed to be best for their students. Counselors were well-meaning and protective of their students as they made sense of Option B, whether to promote it and to whom they should encourage to pursue this pathway.

Given their unique role as gatekeepers, findings have significant implications for students and for larger conversations surrounding access to accelerated postsecond-

ary learning opportunities. For many, counselors' perceptions and interpretations of Option B harken back to early tracking literature on the "low" or vocational track – one that is associated with low-achieving, disengaged students in need of a "plan b." However, there is also a clear and important distinction between our findings and earlier studies on what was an explicitly bifurcated tracking structure (Gamoran & Mare, 1989). Although counselors stressed the limitations of this vocational track and what it would mean for students' futures, they also emphasized that Option A for DE in Georgia includes similar vocational opportunities without giving up a more traditional high school diploma. In this study, counselors ultimately restricted access to Option B for their students and their families to provide what were perceived to be better options for all. Considering some of the real structural limitations that could prevent students from accessing future opportunities in higher education, even in places where Option B is widely promoted (e.g., Henry's district), counselors may be contributing to efforts to resist the reproductive features of the education system. These findings add nuance to prior research that emphasized the way counselors' perceptions of students inadvertently perpetuated inequality (McDonough, 2005).

Outside of Georgia, high school counselors are making sense of ever-changing state laws, policies, and district- and school-level policies relative to their own beliefs, the students they serve, and the context in which they work. As our study and prior literature illuminate, counselors can function as critical actors in the implementation of policies—particularly those that shape students' postsecondary pathways. Thus, counselors' sensemaking of different curricular opportunities and which students they perceive as ready or right for those opportunities can either facilitate or impede access, leading to greater or lesser equality of opportunity. Given historical and contemporary equity issues surrounding curricular tracking (Domina et al., 2017; Oakes, 1983) and national policy trends that emphasize CTE and postsecondary workforce development via DE, better understanding the sensemaking of street-level bureaucrats not only illuminates how policy becomes (or does not become) effective practice but can help policymakers to identify and rectify the unintended consequences of policies meant to increase access to postsecondary opportunities. Moving forward, more research is needed on the role of counselors and other street-level bureaucrats in policy implementation, specifically those aiming to provide greater access to postsecondary learning opportunities. Research that incorporates the insights of street-level bureaucrats seems best positioned to inform policy *before* it meets practice.

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Declarations

Conflicts and Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests. The authors also certify that they have no affiliations with or involving any organizations or institutions that have financial interest in the subject matter of the study, nor the results. The authors also have no fiscal or proprietary interest in the material discussed in this study.

Declaration of Ethics
This study was approved by the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board and was performed in accordance with the ethical standards as laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments.

Contributions The first author led the project by conceptualizing the research question, assisting in collecting and analyzing the data, and writing the manuscript. The second author assisted in all areas, particularly with the literature review and writing of the manuscript. The third author assisted in all areas, with major involvement in conducting data collection and analysis. The fourth author assisted in the writing of the theory and overall manuscript.

Source Georgia Department of Education (2020) and Georgia Code § 20-2-149.2.

Notes Specific coursework may be designated to fulfill certain subject area requirements (e.g., Biology must be taken for the Science requirement, etc.). Coursework taken through dual enrollment may be used to complete some subject requirements but not all.

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