

Federal v. State Policy Implementation and School Board Accountability

Chelsea Singlehurst

The Johns Hopkins University

Federal Policy Making and State Policy Implementation

For education policy to take effect, it goes through many channels before arriving at the classrooms that it is effecting, and the students who are benefitting from it. For the past few decades, state and local boards of education have faced a major turning point. While public schools are seeing the effects of decisions made by state and local policy-makers, those policies are often created and controlled from a the federal level. Del Stover's article (2009) on out of control state level board of education members sheds light on the possibility of negative effects that state-level decision makers can have on the education system. In Stover's article, he notes that "evidence shows that most of the nation's nearly 14,900 school boards are successful and play crucial roles in helping to improve student achievement. Yes, some fall short—and a few fail spectacularly".

As a teacher, I feel the effects of the trickle down of policy making and often feel frustrated that there is little that I can do about it. Though I have only been in the classroom for the past two years, I have experienced a sharp learning curve in how I react to and work with the policies that are implemented. The most notable is that of the common core standards. Many parents often voice their concerns about the shift from past standards to common core, claiming that they don't approve of them. While I have grown to appreciate common core standards, I do echo parents' thoughts and those of the population that is opposed to common core, mostly because I felt that the decision process was very hasty with very little input from other standard possibilities. As a teacher, and as parents and students, we just had to accept them, implement them, and hope for the best. I hear these sentiments of being left out echoed from my principal, and the superintendent in my district. As it stands, the federal government is making many of the

end all be all decisions for the various departments of education across the country, but at the same time those decisions are often being implemented and funded at the state level. The decisions of the federal government need to be taking into account the needs of the state level districts. If the federal government could have a more effective way of funding the needs of every student across the nation, and have state-level administrators who can carry out the policy implementation, and do it successfully, then state boards of education would be a more functional option.

Bipartisan Policy Making and the Flux of Policy Implementation

According to Kaestle's 2007 article, "as education issues have risen in priority at both the state and federal levels, tensions have flared about the relative roles that state and federal governments should play in education. Some people argue that states are now central players and that they are more capable. Other people believe that many states still lack the capacity needed for new, demanding, outcome-oriented school reforms. In either case, the state-federal relationship is in flux, with much at stake for the education polity in the U.S. federal system" (pg. 35). This article discusses how there is a large-scale flux and constant directional change of the way that policy implementation has been going.

The republican agenda can often have a different direction. In a 2004 Encyclopedia entry by Steven Hoenisch, he writes that "The party, however, began its early years by backing federal educational assistance -- in fact, Republicans were among the first U.S. politicians to propose significant federal aid for education. But by the 20th century, the party had shifted its position to a general skepticism that at times gave way to limited support". We see this limited support today with conservatives traditionally wanting to pull out of education involvement. President

George W. Bush's platform for education reforms in were that he wanted to Shrink federal programs into five flexible grants, expand choice by increasing the number of charter schools, and expanding education savings accounts, but also that the according to the GOP National Convention, the 2004 republican platform's opinion on education was that "the role of the federal government must be limited as we return control to parents, teachers, and school boards. We defend the option for home schooling and call for enforcement of laws to protect family privacy. We will work for the return of voluntary school prayer and will strongly enforce legislation that guarantees equal access to school facilities by student religious groups".

By contrast, with a more liberal regime of policy makers, we see increased government involvement. According to the Session 7 Presentation for the Politics of Education course at Johns Hopkins University, "over the last twenty years, states have become strong agents of federal education policy. President Obama's Race to the Top only furthered the push to the policy situation begun under Clinton and Bush. In fact, the federal government funds over 40% of the state education agency budgets (Manna, 2012). States manage federal funds for school accountability and standards. They also develop the local regulations and instruments for assessments. States must also manage the growing racial and economic diversity in their constituencies". These policy decisions are popular amongst liberal agendas, where the federal government works to set in place standards and policies that are implemented across the country, and allow states to individually work to implement these changes. This increased involvement in education allows for the federal government to support states at a more equal level. The 2000 democratic platform for education promotes accountability and federal government involvement. According to the Democratic National Convention, via ontheissues.org, "accountability means

we will no longer tolerate mediocrity. Accountability applies to states, districts, schools, teachers, students, and parents. Consistently bad schools should be shut down. Students in those schools should get first priority in transferring to a better-performing public school. Teaching contracts should not be an automatic lifetime job guarantee. The federal government needs to be held accountable”. Democratic parties traditionally believe in increased government involvement and accountability, and through this we have seen implementation of national standards, and more funding for education through Obama’s terms.

I do not point this out to criticize or praise either party, so much as to point out the naturally partisan points of view of the different parties. The flux that Kaestle talks about will be seen for as long as our nation remains so strongly partisan, and because of that the states have little choice but to play along.

State Boards of Education, Accountability, and Policy Implementation

The debate between an elected versus an appointed board of education has been going strong for at least 30 years now. A New York Times article from 1988 outlines the debate that was happening over how to choose a new board of education for New Jersey. According to the article, “Proponents of the elective process say it is more democratic and prompts citizens to take a greater interest in their schools. They also contend that elections shield schools from municipal politics and allow board members to act independently and in the best interests of the schools.” (Van Tassel 1988). While it is true that this process is more democratic, it also requires that the board members work on raising funds for campaigning, and as many of them work other jobs in the community, they would also have to take time from their other jobs. While it is important that there be a balance between the democratic process and choosing officials who are qualified

for their jobs, it is also important to take into account the community contributions of those officials. On the other hand, “Those favoring appointed boards say that many qualified individuals are reluctant to subject themselves to the difficulties and expense of an election campaign. They also say there is more accountability in the system, because the mayor can be held responsible for the integrity of school board members and for any misuse of the schools”. This is the most important part of the process, that there is accountability. When decisions are made, and schools are required to implement certain policies, there needs to be a degree of accountability, and while “a number of national studies that indicate that no one system produces a stronger school board than the other. Rather, the studies say that it is the community's attitude toward its schools, as measured by its interest, responsiveness, enthusiasm and pride, that largely determines how effective a board will be”. Accountability matters in terms of the effect that a school board has on its constituents.

Board of Education in Hawaii and Accountability

In Hawaii, we have an appointed board of education. All 11 sitting members of our board were appointed by the mayor to fulfill their various roles. Within the board of education, members sit on sub committees that consist of Student Achievement, Finance and Infrastructure, Human Resources, and Audit. This last section, the audit section, was the turning point in my opinion of our board of education. Prior to looking into our board further, I was generally disappointed with the process of appointing CEOs and bankers to run our board of education, but through a stronger understanding of that appointment process and the audit process, came to understand that there is accountability for our board members, and the decisions that they make. The superintendent and state librarian are required to post monthly updates on the goings on of

the education policy decisions made in Hawaii. In addition to this, the public has access to the policy audits performed to analyze the purpose and effectiveness of the policies that the board is passing. While reviewing the most recent audit notes, I was excited to see an audit done on the school climate and discipline policy proposal. This proposal outlines that “Schools shall identify school climate goals that complement the school’s academic goals. A critical component of a strong and positive climate is a school-wide discipline policy that sets high expectations for behavior and provides clear, developmentally appropriate, and proportional consequences for misbehavior”, and in the audit comments was written “Initial draft of new policy to reduce/avoid criminalization of students and promote positive discipline and support practices to keep students in school”. The presence of these comments, these proposed policies, and the student-centered nature of the decisions, discussions, and commentary, showed the board’s commitment to transparency and maintaining a student-centered model of education in Hawai’i.

On a larger scale, whether a school board is appointed or elected, there needs to be a strong level of accountability in order to ensure success. These board members are responsible for deciding on and implementing policies that are made at both the federal and state level, and need to be well versed in the needs of the schools and the needs of the students in their areas. As a teacher, the effects of federal decisions are felt on a daily basis, but it is the state’s decisions of what to implement and how to implement them that are felt most by the students. While the federal government could implement a national acceptance and implementation of common core standards, it is then up to the states and the schools to decide what system they want to use to implement those, whether it’s Springboard, teacher created material, Engage New York, or other curriculum. School boards and teachers need to make sure that they are working together to meet

the needs of the students. In Stover's article, one of the board members concludes with the sentiment that "When you come on a school board, you must realize that you work for the children. We as board members must focus on staying straight and positive and doing what's right," these words still ring true. Board members, teachers, and federal policy makers must make sure that they are constantly doing what is right for the people that they work for, but also for the kids.

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