

THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION: A COMMENTARY AND ACTION AGENDA*

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Abstract

Policies adopted by legislators impact the future of public and higher education. Unfortunately, educators and legislators are often in disagreement about what constitutes best practices. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of issues and challenges associated with governmental mandates and suggest an action agenda for educators to influence the attendant politics. More specifically, current trends in administrative licensure and preparation programs exemplify the negative ramifications of legislative policy on higher education while professional opinion on school reform initiatives illustrates the effects on K-12 education.



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1 Introduction

Who is responsible for shaping educational policy? Traditionally, the responsibility has belonged to the states and local school districts. Nonetheless, the federal government assumed an expanded role in 1979 when Congress approved legislation establishing a cabinet-level Department of Education administered by a Presidentially-appointed Secretary of Education. Washington's political power persists, as evidenced by the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001. States, too, have intensified their involvement.

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¹<http://ijelp.expressacademic.org>

Understandably, political leaders have legitimate concerns for furthering the value of America's educational institutions. However, the well-intended efforts to improve, reform, and regulate education have increased to the point that every level of government, as well as private groups with a legislative stamp of approval, compete to exert influence.

An analysis of the current state of affairs of educational policymaking illustrates the negative consequences of politics on public and higher education. This article examines this contention in light of express policies and educators' perceptions. Specifically, professional preparation and licensure of administrators and principals' opinions concerning K-12 school reform initiatives are considered.

2 Professional Preparation and Licensure of Administrators

In an assumed effort to better prepare education leaders, significant changes in administrative preparation programs have increased in recent years and have altered the landscape of college/university departments of education. Revised state regulations include restructuring existing programs, sanctioning private approaches to providing leadership training, and alternative licensing routes for administrators.

State policy leaders are key players in reforming administrative preparation programs; they exercise immense control as a result of their duty to validate and accredit college and university programs. The majority of states require, at a minimum, the successful completion of prescribed credit hours in an approved graduate curriculum in administration to obtain licensing and certification. For these reasons, college/university departments of education have little to no discretion concerning coursework offered in such programs.

Beginning in the early 1990s, states targeted leadership preparation programs as key reform initiatives. Not only did the structure and content of the programs change, the basics of how and where to train leaders were transformed by state mandates. Because of each state's control, common factors in the programs are lacking, and dissimilarities thrive between and among them. Moreover, the policy reform processes themselves, with each state selecting its procedure for restructuring, contribute to the lack of continuity. For instance, the state legislature initiated the process in North Carolina through rigorous program review leading to the elimination of some programs. By contrast, in Mississippi, the State Superintendent of Education served as the reform catalyst. Previously, the Institutions of Higher Learning in Mississippi had jurisdiction over university programs. A new body was created to oversee criteria for the State Board of Education, the Commission on Teacher and Administrator Education, Licensure, and Development (Hale & Moorman, 2003). In addition to North Carolina and Mississippi, Delaware, Georgia, Iowa, Massachusetts, and Tennessee have markedly revamped existing leadership preparation programs.

States too have developed their own mechanisms for training administrators. As of 2001, 25 states offer statewide leadership academies (Hess, 2003) affording "organizations other than state-sanctioned universities to provide administrator preparation" (Hess & Kelly, 2005, p. 160). The most celebrated of these include the Ohio Principals Leadership Academy and the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (Hess & Kelly, 2005). Although these endeavors frequently involve schools of education as partners, many academies do not.

Additionally, private organizations train education leaders and offer non-traditional paths to administrator candidates. As an example, New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS), a non-profit organization begun in 2000, instructs and places administrators in public schools. Claiming that it "has attracted, prepared, and supported outstanding individuals to become the next generation of school leaders in response to the immense need for exceptional principals in our nation's urban public schools," NLNS principals in 2007-08 operated public and charter schools in Chicago, New York, Memphis, and California (www.nlns.org²). Similarly, the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), funded by the non-profit KIPP Foundation, "focuses its efforts on recruiting, training, and supporting outstanding leaders to open new, locally run KIPP schools in high-need communities" (www.kipp.org³). Thus far, approximately 70 KIPP public schools currently serve more than 16,000 students in 19 states and the District of Columbia. These alternative approaches prepare school leaders for administrative positions while bypassing traditional university programs.

²<http://www.nlns.org/>

³<http://www.kipp.org/>

Another trend serving as a means of eliminating university-based leadership preparation programs is the hiring of superintendents from fields other than education who lack formal educational credentials. Manifesting itself most profoundly today in urban school districts, the practice thus far has resulted in approximately two dozen of the nation's largest districts employing superintendents from the ranks of business, industry, finance, government, law, academia, and the military. "Cities are seeking out such leaders for their assumed independence, management expertise, and decision-making abilities, judging these attributes more important than professional training and experience in public education" (Eisinger & Hula, 2003, p. 623). The effort receives backing from organizations including the Broad Foundation through its Superintendents Academy. Created in 2001, the Academy consists of a 10-month training program and boasts that "more Academy alumni today work as superintendents of large urban districts than graduates of any university's educational leadership program" (Quinn, 2007, p. 54). The practice of hiring nontraditional top managers clearly suggests that schools of education fail to prepare professionals adequately as superintendents and that skills acquired through teaching and educational administration are ineffective. Not surprisingly, though, the same school districts hiring nontraditional superintendents are increasingly employing a trained educator as the chief academic officer whose responsibility it is to improve the schools (Matthews, 2001); thus, negating the premise that university educational leadership preparation programs produce inept administrators.

In like manner, administrative licensure has caught the attention of the public and politicians. A recent appeal for national deregulation of administrative licensure is set out in a publication sponsored by the Broad Foundation and Thomas B. Fordham Institute entitled *Better Leaders for America's Schools: A Manifesto*. Authored by Lawrence Meyer and Emily Feistritzer, the work summarizes state certification practices and describes university-based preparation programs and state licensing standards as "meaningless hoops, hurdles and regulatory hassles" (Meyer & Feistritzer, 2003, p. 31). Through a survey of state certification officials, the study found that 11 states offer alternate routes, generally excluding university programs, for both principals and superintendents (California, Idaho, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Hampshire, Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas); three states have no alternative routes but do provide programs for nontraditional candidates to enter administration (New Jersey, New York, and Oregon); and four states allow alternative routes for superintendents but not for principals (Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, and Kansas) (Meyer & Feistritzer, 2003). Furthermore, other states express apprehension concerning the quality of current administrators, causing them to consider alternate licensing routes as well as hiring nontraditional candidates as principals and superintendents.

What do these trends suggest? Educational policymaking too frequently is mired in politics, with little or no consideration given to its outcomes. Accordingly, the hasty implementation of policies may actually become an impediment to educational reform. Regardless of the proposals advocated, their effects are widely felt by the educational community.

3 Administrators' Perceptions of K-12 School Reform Initiatives

When asked their opinions concerning school reform and the status of today's education, principals and superintendents criticized a variety of regulations. In a 2003 survey conducted by the Colorado Association of School Executives, superintendents identified state and federal mandates in the top five factors inhibiting their effectiveness (Colorado Association of School Executives, 2003). District leaders charged that, "un-aligned mandates often led to a disjointed approach to student learning and teaching, multiple reporting requirements, and seemingly endless hours of paperwork" (Colorado Association of School Executives, p. 4).

Similarly, in a survey of public school principals and superintendents taken by Public Agenda, state and federal mandates constituted the greatest complaint (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2001). Though the survey identified a litany of items related to legislative directives, specifically the costs and magnitude as well as the overregulation at the state and local levels created the majority of vilification (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett). Participants mentioned NCLB and special education laws most often. One superintendent summed up the frustration by stating that, "Some items are well intended, [but] most of the lawmakers don't have a clue what the unintended consequences of their laws will be . . . I really don't think they read most of them" (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2001, p. 12). School leaders further emphasized that the laws are, "too complex and

cumbersome,” that federal regulations often conflict with state and local ones, that they detract from the goals of public education, and ultimately the system fails (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2001, p. 13).

In the same vein, a study that examined six state accountability systems found that rushed implementation by state policymakers impeded educational reform (Southeastern Regional Vision for Education, 1994). The report investigated accountability practices in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina, focusing on the impact on low-performing school districts, and ascribed the push for educational reform to set the pace instead of, “clear and complete definitions of what is expected of learners” (Southeastern Regional Vision for Education, p. 5).

4 Recommendations

On the practical plane, a new era emerges with a change in national presidential leadership and consequent political appointments with the power to shape education. It is hoped that politicians will assess the actual effects of established policy, as well as the concerns of educators, and realize that mandates, whether promulgated by state or federal governments, require and deserve more careful and balanced attention and research than what policymakers have previously produced.

Furthermore, it is vital for educators to partner with politicians to create a carefully tailored approach for future legislative mandates and to turn the tide and influence policymaking. With the understanding that a political divide underlies much of the strain and discord between professional educators and politicians, an aggressive agenda, including the following recommendations, affords educators the opportunity to alleviate, in part, the disconnect:

1. Understand the political movement and arena;
2. Determine the major actors in the politics of education and the constraints they place on education;
3. Identify problems relevant to recruitment, preparation, and licensure of teachers and administrators and assist in framing the issues appropriately and in formulating policy decisions based on evidence instead of raw politics and emotions;
4. Take a proactive posture as reformers, especially in planning, implementing, and assessing programs;
5. Lobby state and federal legislators in areas critical to educational improvement;
6. Obtain information from all levels of government on issues directly impacting education and, if necessary, resort to states’ public records laws;
7. Plan political action that communicates your concerns;
8. Act individually, expand circles of influence, and link those networks with fellow educators to effect change;
9. Conduct appropriate research concerning states’ initiatives, including their effectiveness and results, and share the data with policymakers; and
10. Meet with government officials and legislators to discuss key challenges and to develop a framework, methodology, and timeline to work collaboratively to reach effective solutions.

Undeniably, the time for contentious debate and general antipathy is past. It is undisputed that the charge for lawmakers is to ensure the highest degree of education available; nonetheless, schools are responsible for teaching and learning and can provide guidance concerning best practices. To do otherwise is defacto acceptance of additional new, cumbersome legislation that might further complicate the business of running public and higher education. Instead of facing the difficult challenges with acrimony, a more viable solution for educators is to meet the problems with innovation, cooperation, and a well-orchestrated plan.

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⁴<http://www.kipp.org/>

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