THE END OF EDUCATIONAL EXCEPTIONALISM: THE RISE OF EDUCATION EXECUTIVES IN THE WHITE HOUSE, STATE HOUSE, AND MAYOR’S OFFICE

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Abstract: In an array of settings and at all levels of our federal system elected executives are increasing their formal power and political engagement with issues relating to education and school reform. While mayoral control of schools has received the most attention, the shift of formal power from school boards to mayors should be understood in conjunction with similar expansions of executive involvement at the state and national level.

This chapter reviews the emergence of the new education executives in order to identify patterns in timing, place, and political dynamics. These patterns suggest that this is a broader phenomenon than conventionally portrayed, that it extends beyond tinkering with formal governance structures to include a range of informal political factors relating to power and shifting agendas, and that the growing involvement is not limited to one branch of government. Compared to most other important areas of domestic policy decisions about public schools historically have been highly localized, consigned to special single-purpose governance structures, and dominated by a smaller array of highly focused interest groups. I argue that this special status of education decision-making has been eroding and that we are witnessing the gradual re-absorption of educational decision making into multi-level, general-purpose government and politics.
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“I want to be the education president.” George H. W. Bush.2

“It’s like a one-way vector force, where there’s continual force for governors to gain control of education policy….The governors are on the offense, and the people supporting traditional arrangements where education should be separately governed ... are on the defense.” Michael Kirst, education scholar and California State Board of Education president.3

"In the olden days, we had a board that was answerable to nobody. And the Legislature said it was just not working, and they gave the mayor control. Mayoral control means mayoral control, thank you very much.” New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg.4

In an array of settings and at all levels of our federal system, elected executives are increasing their formal power and political engagement with issues relating to education and school reform. In some cases they are leading the demand for a stronger role; in some cases they are responding to such a demand voiced by others.

On the contemporary scene, it is mayoral control of schools that has received the most attention, with proponents arguing that it catalyzes reform and opponents complaining that it marginalizes parent and community groups. But the shift of formal power from school boards to mayors needs to be understood in conjunction with similar expansions of executive involvement at the state and national level. Indeed, the emergence of so-called “education governors” and “education presidents” predated the movement toward mayoral control.

What accounts for the growing role of elected executives in education? Popular accounts frequently zero in on the personal characteristics of strong leaders: their insight in understanding the critical role of education in a global economy, their ability to reframe issues in the public arena and build supporting coalitions where none existed before, their determination to improve educational performance, and their willingness to be held responsible if they fail. Scholars, who typically recognize that leadership represent more than an act of will or assertion of charisma, nonetheless have tended to examine a narrow slice of the phenomenon: focusing separately on

1 I’d like to thank the Institute for Advanced Studies and The Spencer Foundation for support that has contributed to this chapter, and Elizabeth Chu, a Ph.D. student in education policy at Teachers College, who provided extremely valuable research assistance. I’ve benefitted from helpful feedback at various stages from Daniela Fairchild, Chester Finn, Dorothy Shipps, and especially Patrick McGuinn and Paul Manna. Some of the discussion in this chapter borrows and builds upon arguments I first offered in (Henig, 2009b) and that will be developed much more fully in a coming book.
3 Robelen (2009).
either governors or presidents or mayors, treating the three movements as distinct, each accounted for by elements specific to the level of government, the political venues in which they are located, and the nature of the pressures and opportunities presented by conditions at the time. Both perspectives understate the importance of the broader political institutional landscape, and the ways in which shifts in the views and power of other powerful interests helped to determine whether and when executive muscle could be effectively exercised.

In this chapter I review the emergence of the new education executives in order to identify patterns in timing, place, and political dynamics. These patterns suggest that this is a broader phenomenon than conventionally portrayed, that it extends beyond tinkering with formal governance structures to include a range of informal political factors relating to power and shifting agendas, and that the growing involvement is not limited to one branch of government.

Compared to most other important areas of domestic policy—for example, the ways in which we make decisions about the economy; welfare and income support; family policy; civil rights; crime and punishment; and most questions relating to environment, transportation, and health care—decisions about public schools historically have been highly localized, consigned to special single-purpose governance structures, and dominated by a smaller array of highly focused interest groups. I believe that this special status of education decision-making has been eroding and that we are witnessing the gradual reabsorption of educational decision making into multi-level, general-purpose government and politics. The broad changes underway constitute the end of educational exceptionalism in the United States.

There is an extended literature about “American exceptionalism,” which focuses on the ways in which institutions, norms, and political practices in the United States differ from those in other nations. While the U.S. system of educational governance is indeed unusual when compared to other developed nations, in referring to educational exceptionalism, I’m focusing less on the differences between the U.S. and other countries than on the differences between the handling of education and the institutions, norms, and practices characterizing the handling of other major domestic policies. Education policy in the U.S has traditionally been seen—and treated—as different and distinct, a thing apart.

The expanded assertion of leadership by mayors, governors, and presidents, I suggest, is part of a broader governance shift that is increasingly placing key educational decisions in the hands of public officials who have other issues in their portfolio as well. Compared to school-specific decision-makers, general-purpose governance institutions and the officials who operate within them face more cross-cutting demands, deal with a broader range of interest groups, are familiar with a wider array of policy tools. Education, in other words, is becoming more like other domestic policy arenas. This means that policy ideas and instruments that have been more common in those other arenas—things like contracting out, vouchers, reliance of for-profit and nonprofit providers—face a more respective (or at least more informed) audience than when school-specific institutions dominated. And it has implications for how politicians, parties, interest groups, and citizens should act if they hope to shape effective and sustainable efforts to improve education. In particular, as decisions about schools and their budgets migrate into

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5 (Hodgson, 2010; Lipset, 1997)
general purpose arenas where they no longer have favored status, it may be more important for education advocates to form coalitions with multi-purpose organizations and to reframe their arguments to better attract support from those who are not personally connected to public schools.

**Education Governors**

First out of the gate were the so-called “education governors.” During the 1970s a handful of mostly Southern governors began to take a more proactive stance in engaging with K-12 public education, framing school improvement as a critical component in their efforts to attract and hold jobs. Among the standouts, as identified by education historian Maris Vinovskis, were Lamar Alexander (R-TN; took office in 1979), Bill Clinton (D-AR; 1979), Bob Graham (D-FL; 1979), James Hunt (D-NC; 1977), Thomas Kean (R-NJ; 1982), Richard Riley (D-SC; 1979), and William Winter (D-MS; 1980).  

To the extent that there is a standard explanation of the expanding role of governors, it focuses on the catalytic role played by these early governors acting as policy entrepreneurs. The concept of policy entrepreneurship in the public sector builds on the image of the private-market entrepreneur, who spots a latent demand, mobilizes investment to create the product to fill that demand, and realizes profit in return for acumen and the assumption of risk. Policy entrepreneurs, analogously, detect an unmet societal need, unrepresented constituency, or untried policy and carry it onto the policy agenda, reaping political support and influence as the primary reward.

Left somewhat ambiguous in the standard accounts is whether these early “education governors” were unusually astute—spotting needs and possibilities their predecessors had overlooked—or whether they were responding to changing conditions that made education either more important to the states’ well-being or more politically appealing to ambitious politicians. Several factors lean against viewing this as a simple assertion of outstanding leadership. First, the near-simultaneity of the emergence of this cohort of education governors across a range of states suggests that something beyond individual perspicacity was involved. The global economy and increasing mobility of capital were creating new competitive pressures; the increasing attention governors gave to education was more an extension of their traditional responsibility for economic development than a sudden shift in priorities. Second, this initial wave of governors acting individually very quickly evolved into a more collective phenomenon. In the 1980s and 1990s, the National Governors Association became a prominent voice in reformers’ efforts to push education higher on the national agenda and place greater emphasis on standards and accountability. Finally, the expanding role of governors was not simply a case of aggressive leaders pushing the envelope of powers that had been long present, but latent, in the office. The assertion of leadership on the education issue was accompanied by formal changes in governors’ authority over education, and these formal changes in how state boards of education and state superintendents were selected often preceded the emergence of recognized education governors.

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6 Vinovskis (2008).
7 Kingdon (1995); Mintrom (2000).
8 Davies (2007); Manna (2006); Vinovskis (2008).
and were not limited to the states where these high profile education-policy entrepreneurs emerged.

While the popular lore about education governors focuses on the personalities and strategies of individual leaders, scholars who study governors more typically zero in on how state laws either do or do not give governors the formal power to make and shape policies. Political scientists who study governors have tended to measure their power by looking at formal authority along several dimensions, the most commonly included ones being: tenure potential (length of terms, term limits); appointment power (ability to appoint heads of key agencies and degree to which this requires approval by other bodies); budgetary power (exclusive or shared with others); and veto power (line item veto power and how hard it is for legislature to override). Reviewing the empirical literature, including that on formal power, Barrilleaux and Berkman conclude that “overall, state governors are stronger than ever before.”

But a governor’s overall power may or may not translate into the realm of public education. The standard way to measure the role of governors in education policy is by examining their formal role in selecting chief state school officers (CSSOs) and state boards of education (SBEs). When SBEs are elected, governors must pitch and pursue their educational agendas in competition with board members who have their own priorities, political ambitions, constituencies, and claims to electoral mandates. When CSSOs are either directly elected or appointed by elected SBEs, executive oversight of education is divided, with governors less able to act authoritatively, dependent for implementing their policies on agencies whose loyalties may lie elsewhere, facing a rival who can use the reality and reputation for having greater educational expertise as tools for developing their own bases of support. Beginning some time in the late 1940s, there was a steady shift away from direct election of the CSSO to selection by the State Board of Education (SBE). From 1945 to 1967 the number of states electing the CSSO dropped from thirty-three to twenty-two, while the number giving the state board authority to appoint the CSSO increased from eight to twenty-four. Direct appointment by governors was rare and declined slowly throughout the first two-thirds of the twentieth century; at the turn of that century nine governors had that power, and in 1967 only four did. But the second shift, unfolding over the last forty years, has seen a substantial increase in the governor’s appointment power. The sharpest period of change was between 1980 and 2005, with the number of state allowing governors to appoint CSSOs increasing from five to fourteen.

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9 On the measurement issue see: Dometrius (1979) and Schlesinger (1965). A classic application is Dye (1969). For a pretty comprehensive set of contemporary and historical measures and their definitions, see http://www.unc.edu/~beyle/gubnewpwr.html.
10 Barrilleaux and Berkman (2003).
11 These shifts followed an earlier one that saw states shift from relying heavily on state boards of education populated by ex officio members. Between 1784 and 1950, 40 states formed State boards of education (Keeseecker, 1950). These boards were created under the beliefs that a board is more representative of the state’s population than an individual, that a board is able to protect education from partisan politics, that a board allows for continuity in educational policy, and that a board is a defense against abuse of power (Beach and Will, 1955). Initially, many state boards were comprised wholly or mostly of ex officio members due to transportation and communication difficulties; however, during the first half of the twentieth century, most states moved away from ex officio membership (Beach & Will, 1955). In 1890, twenty state boards were made up of majority ex officio members compared to four states in 1950 and no states in 2010 (Keeseecker, 1950; Education Commission of the States, 2010). In fact, most states have moved away from having any ex officio members on the state board: In 1920, thirty-five
Even when they do not directly appoint the CSSO, governors have had indirect formal power through their role in selecting the members of the state boards of education. Governors have always played a role in the majority of states and the number of states with fully elected boards has been relatively stable for over fifty years. Between 1954 and 1972 there was a sharp increase in the number of states empowering governors to select all of the board members; even before this, though, governors in most states had the power to appoint at least some. As of 2010, governors had total appointment power (thirty states) or partial appointment power (seven states) in three quarters of the states, with direct election of the board in ten states.

Formal power is like a shovel in the woodshed. Its availability makes it more likely that a hole will be dug, but for that to happen someone has to pick it up and have the will and skill to use it. Recently, governors such Scott Walker in Wisconsin, John Kasich in Ohio, and Chris Christie in New Jersey have instigated high-profile challenges to teachers unions on a number of fronts: challenging collective bargaining, replacing strict salary schedules with merit pay, and introducing value-added measures into decisions about salaries and tenure. But these were not dependent on an injection of new formal authority. Have increases in the formal-appointment authority of governors coincided with increases in their inclination to make education an important part of their policy priorities and public identity?

To develop a rough measure of gubernatorial leadership on education issues across all fifty states and throughout their political history as states, I turned to an online database of over 2,300 governor biographies compiled by the National Governors Association (NGA). To identify education governors, we first searched the NGA database for all governors whose biographies included the keyword “education,” “school,” or “schools.” We then skimmed each of these selected biographies and determined whether the biography included a substantive reference to K-12 education policy.

Figure 1 summarizes the percentage of governors, over time, that qualify as “education governors” based on the indication that they made K-12 education a prominent element in their agenda. As with governors’ formal appointment power, this measure of governors’ informal involvement with education shows a growing role, especially over the last fifteen years. This does not appear to be an artifact of growing media coverage; the overall length of the NGA biographies did not change overtime, so the increase reflects a greater relative attention to education. Education governors were no more or less likely to come from large, or urban, or older states, but their prevalence was higher in Southern states (37 percent) than in the rest of the

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12 This database is searchable by many criteria, including state, governor’s name, time in office, number of terms, and keyword. To write the biographies, NGA staff draws upon a variety of sources, including state archives, state history museums, and online databases, such as The Political Graveyard. Since these biographies are designed to be overviews, they do not provide definitive information as to which governors prioritized education. The advantages of having near universal coverage of governors from all states throughout their history makes even this imperfect source valuable, however, as an additional window into the phenomenon of governors’ involvement with education. Further details regarding coding are available from the author.

13 The first three time periods depicted are relatively arbitrary efforts to capture half-century spans. 1983 (Nation at Risk) and 1994 (Improving America’s Schools Act) provided substantively meaningful benchmarks for dividing the contemporary era.
Reinforcing the fact that formal power does not automatically translate into action, there is no correlation between this measure and the extent to which governors are legally empowered to appoint state boards and superintendents. North Carolina, whose four-term governor James Hunt is often cited as the prototype education governor, also has had the highest percentage of governors who earn the label “education governor” on this index, yet measured on a scale of formal gubernatorial appointment power it is among the weaker states.

Figure 1: Education governors, 1775-2009

Education Presidents

Just as there were governors who dealt with education before the contemporary era of “education governors” emerged, so, too, at the national level there have been presidents who seriously attended to education before the term “education president” came to anyone’s tongue. Berube labels Thomas Jefferson the nation’s “first education president,” but admits that Jefferson’s claim to such a title depends mostly on his writing and actions “outside the presidential office,” and characterizes the role of the presidents in education policy as “periodic” prior to Lyndon Johnson. Lawrance McAndrews, in The Era of Education Presidents, labels LBJ the “first self proclaimed” education president. In calling for Congress to rename the U.S. Department of Education building after Lyndon Johnson, Democratic Congressman Gene Green, in March

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14 The p-value for the difference in averages is less than .001.
15 Berube (1991), 17.
2007, said, “Lyndon Johnson’s first priority in life was education, and he was the first education president.” Backing up that claim was the fact that Johnson—who had graduated from a teachers college, taught school, and even served a brief stint as a principal—had signed more than sixty education bills during his presidency, including the path breaking Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the creation of Head Start.17

Despite the ambiguity in timing, the transition from Ronald Reagan to George H.W. Bush, provides something like a continental divide, and gives the mid- to late-1980s the most credible claim to be the onset of an era of education presidents. Reagan came into office in some ways as the antithesis of an educational entrepreneur. He conceived of education as properly the province of states and localities and his primary objectives at the national level were to dismantle the Department of Education that had been created under President Jimmy Carter and to institute education vouchers as a way to reduce the government role more generally in favor of an education marketplace driven by supply and demand. Despite his inclination to disengage the White House from education policy, Reagan ended up having considerable influence. Chester Finn goes so far as to call him the “original education president,” not missing the irony that “Reagan’s legacy includes a larger role for the federal government itself in education than he could have imagined, perhaps larger than he would have liked.”18

If Reagan was a reluctant education president, Bush was eager to take that mantle. Eight years after the 1980 election, while still in office as Reagan’s vice president, he made a national leadership role in education reform a central defining characteristic of his own presidential campaign. In office, in September 1989, Bush assembled a group of governors in Charlottesville, Virginia for an “education summit.” His goals for the meeting were relatively modest, but pressed by the governors and the NGA the gathering helped launch a partnership to establish national education goals.19 Bush senior had no substantial legislative achievements on the education front, but by working so directly with the nation’s governors he was able to combine a cheerleader role with traditional Republican deference to states rights. The model of presidents and governors working to find common ground on issues of standards and accountability arguably played a role in defusing the hot politics that had pitted the national government’s desegregation efforts against “states rights,” and helped set the stage for White House/statehouse collaboration that continued to characterize efforts in the Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama administrations.

In emphasizing education, George H. W. Bush was responding to a changing set of public expectations for presidential leadership in this area. From the 1960 election, pitting Kennedy versus Nixon, through the 1984 election between Mondale and Reagan, education had never ranked among the top ten issues named as “most important” to the American public. When Bush ran against Dukakis in 1988, education issues ranked eighth out of twenty-six in the months leading up to the election; in 1992, when he ran against Clinton, they ranked fifth.20 As Fuhrman

observed, “as the 1990s began, it was clear that some resurgence in federal leadership would follow, but the shape of a revitalized federal role was not yet apparent.” By 1994, she concluded, “a more vigorous federal presence in education was evident.”

Figure 2 shows the relative emphasis presidents have put on education in their State of the Union speeches between 1948 and 2005. The data is drawn from the Policy Agendas Project and summarizes the percent of the speeches that deal with education as opposed to other policy area. Bush senior gave about 75 percent more emphasis to education than did Reagan; Bill Clinton was by far the overall leader, with more than one in ten of his policy references being to education. Gerald Ford, in his abbreviated presidency, gave only one brief address and it included no substantive mentions of education. Overall, the three presidents who were first elected after A Nation at Risk (Bush, Clinton, Bush) gave more than two and one half times the relative emphasis to education than did the seven that preceded them.

**Figure 2: Education emphasis in state of union address**

Although the Policy Agendas Project data runs only though 2005, Smart Politics, a political analysis blog hosted by the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey School of Public Affairs, did a

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21 (Fuhrman, 1994): 83-84.
22 The Policy Agendas Project used “quasi sentences,” to account for the fact that a single sentence sometimes included more than one policy idea. The analysis further distinguished offhand or ritualistic mentions of education from those with “policy content.” The length of a speech is not necessarily a determination of how much policy content there was. The presidents with the highest percentage of their speeches devoted to statements with policy content were Jimmy Carter (95.2 percent) and Dwight D. Eisenhower (90.2 percent).
similar content analysis of President Obama’s annual addresses to Congress for the years 2009-2011. In a 2009 address to Congress, education was second only to his attention to budget issues relating to deficit, debt, and spending. Education dropped in attention during his 2010 State of the Union, when the economy and budget issues dominated, but rebounded to take up a greater part of his 2011 speech than any other of over twenty-six issues.23

As important as the increased volume of messages about education is the change in the degree to which presidential involvement in education has shifted from marginal and deferential to assertive and core. As president, George W. Bush did not talk about education as much as Bill Clinton had, but No Child Left Behind was, by almost anyone’s calibration, a major escalation in the national government’s reach into the day-to-day practices of schools.24 Clinton’s pursuit of national standards and accountability was moderated by Republicans’ suspicions of a White House-led encroachment on states rights, but because Bush was a Republican—“one of them”—in a classic twist on the “Nixon goes to China” phenomenon, he was able to push the federal role further than any of his Democratic predecessors.

Obama and his aggressive Secretary of Education Arne Duncan pledged to keep up the pressure begun under NCLB. But what really ratcheted up the visibility and muscle of the President’s impact was Race to the Top (RTTT). Race to the Top began somewhat as a ride-along on the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), the administration’s effort to stimulate the economy after the huge financial collapse it confronted in its first months in office. ARRA provided $100 billion in education funds. “While the vast majority of ARRA money went to preserve teachers’ jobs and fund existing programs, a smaller pot of $4.35 billion was set aside for ‘state incentive grants.’”25 Since the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, the bulk of federal support to K-12 education had come via formula grants. Congress can attach various policy conditions to formula grants, and NCLB, as noted, marked a ratcheting up of the prescriptive components, but formula grants in general tend to be less narrowly directive than competitive grants (because competitive grants by their nature are selective both in who applies and who wins the award, Congress gets less involved in stipulating the conditions than it does with formula grants that affect a far larger number of local districts). By attaching strong conditions and a weighting system that penalized applications that failed to include program elements it favored, the Department of Education was able to entice many states to make commitments (e.g., raising caps on the number of charter schools) that they were not otherwise inclined to make. Largely because of this policy leverage, Hess concluded that RTTT had “arguably become the most visible and celebrated school reform effort in American history.”26

While tied to new funding, this expansion of the White House-governance role masked to some extent the redistribution of authority that potentially eroded the leverage and autonomy of other institutions. School districts were visible losers in some senses, as NCLB put them under much

24 The ongoing pressures of responding to 9/11, terrorism, the invasion of Iran, and similar foreign-policy events likely led Bush to talk less about NCLB and education in general as a president than he had as a governor or presidential candidate.
closer scrutiny and control, but NCLB also gave districts more resources and license to strengthen their oversight of schools. NCLB similarly both constrained states and empowered them to assert stronger leadership vis-à-vis failing districts; and as long as states retained the right to calibrate the proficiency levels that were the key trigger embedded in the law, the constraints were less restraining than they initially seemed to be. That RTTT was a competitive grant, not a mandate, meant that states had the option not to play if they found the federal criteria too confining. But the zero-sum aspects of the governance changes came into sharper relief as money tightened, and as the Obama/Duncan team sought to expand the use of NCLB waivers to further advance its priorities. The latter, in particular, threw down the gauntlet to Congress, which theretofore had considered itself more or less an equal partner to an expanded national role, but now became more inclined to fret that it was being forced into the back seat.

Presidents “see scant political reward for spending time on education,” Chester Finn wrote in 1977.27 Some thirty-five years later, it appears that this observation has been turned on its head. Although much of the first two years of its administration was spent wrestling with economy and health care, in his 2001 address to Congress, Obama not only had a lot to say about education, he underscored its centrality, linking public investment in education and research to innovation and pulling out the old trope of global competitiveness and to declare: “This is our generation’s Sputnik moment.”

**Mayoral Control**

The erosion of traditional education-specific policy institutions has been more evident at the local level than in the White House or governors’ mansions. That is not because the local level is where the role of general-purpose government and politics is most prevalent—to the contrary—but because it is at the local level that education-specific institutions historically have held sway. In the early twentieth century, public education in large cities often was housed in an agency reporting to a mayor much as would be the case with law enforcement or public works. During the Progressive Era, many communities removed oversight of schools from the mayor’s responsibility in the belief that this would lead to a more professional approach and one less responsive to partisan politics and the temptation to use school jobs and school building contracts as forms of patronage. Some urban districts, such as New Haven, Connecticut; Jackson, Mississippi; and Yonkers, New York never took schools out of the mayor’s portfolio of control. In that sense, mayoral control of schools is less a new idea than a re-engagement of an old one.

It is the sharpness of the shift, from long dominant school boards to newly mobilized mayors, that has made mayoral control the most talked about manifestation of the end of educational exceptionalism. Since Boston adopted mayoral control in 1992, a series of large urban school systems have followed suit, including Chicago (1995); Cleveland (1998); Harrisburg, PA (2000); New York City (2002), Providence, RI (2003); and Washington, D.C. (2000; 2007). While the details of the arrangement differ, each formally strengthened the mayor’s role, by giving them

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27 Finn (1977), 104.
28 Parts of this section draw directly on some of my earlier writing about mayoral control. See: Henig, 2009a; Henig and Fraser, 2009; Henig and Rich, 2004).

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greater power in selecting superintendents, selecting school boards, authorizing charter schools, determining the budget or all of the above.29

While the rate at which large districts are adopting the model seems to have slowed for the moment, the possibility of moving in that direction remains under discussion in a number of other places, including Milwaukee, Newark, Los Angeles, Sacramento, Rochester, and Rockport, IL. Detroit, which had mayoral control from 1999 to 2004 is talking about it once again. “Schools aren’t under my command,” Mayor Dave Bing told the Wall Street Journal in 2009, “they are run by a school board that is dominated by teachers unions. One of my goals is to have mayoral control of the school system.”30

As with governors, giving formal authority to mayors—to appoint school boards, to hire superintendents, to set school budgets—does not ensure they will take up the cause of school reform with wisdom or even energy. In theory, mayors are better situated than school boards or superintendents to mobilize a broad constituency for educational investment and improvement and to find and develop positive spillovers between schools and the other work of other municipal agencies that host programs that can help families and youth.31 But theory and practice do not always align. In Baltimore, for example—where the mayors long held power to appoint the school board and, through their power on the city’s Board of Estimates, to tightly control spending—even strong and dynamic mayors like William Donald Schaeffer traditionally preferred to play a minimal role.32 So, too, was this the case in Chicago, where during the years from 1947 to 1980, while the mayor formally controlled both the board and budget, “most mayors avoided public school debates and disavowed any responsibility for their problems.”33

Nor does lack of formal authority preclude strong mayoral leadership in the education arena. Michael Kirst and Fritz Edelstein highlight Long Beach as a “prime example of how mayoral involvement in education need not rely on formal changes to governance.” There, Mayor Beverly O’Neill has worked closely with the superintendent’s office in a partnership that appears to have provided much of the multi-agency coordination and public support that proponents of mayoral control talk about. Long Beach won the Broad Prize in Urban Education in 2003.34 Francis Shlay, mayor of St. Louis, made up for a lack of appointment power by backing a slate of reform-oriented school-board candidates and helping them all get elected. Wong, Shen, et al. cite Douglas Wilder, mayor of Richmond, VA, as an example of a politically skillful mayor who has used his informal power and authority to hold the superintendent accountable to him even when there was no formal line of authority to call upon.35

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29 Washington, D.C. gave its mayor partial control in 2000 and adopted a stronger form of mayoral control in 2007. Some districts (e.g., Detroit, MI; Oakland, CA; Prince George’s County, MD) adopted (or had imposed) mayoral control but then reverted back to elected school boards during this same time period.

30 Moore (2009).


33 Shipps (2004).

34 Kirst and Edelstein (2006).

Probably the strongest formal version of mayoral control is the one instituted in New York City beginning in 2002. For most of its history New York City school governance had included a major role for the mayor, but reforms in 1969 weakened the mayor’s role by decentralizing some functions to thirty-two separate school districts and by strengthening a city-wide board of education (of which the mayor appointed two of seven members) that hired the chancellor and ran high schools. At the request of newly elected Mayor Michael Bloomberg, in June of 2002, the state legislature greatly strengthened the mayor’s authority. Among the formal changes were empowering the mayor to appoint the chancellor (i.e. superintendent) of the system and eight of the thirteen members of the City’s Board of Education (which Bloomberg renamed the Panel on Educational Policy). Some grants of formal appointment authority are more checked and limited than others. Consider the U.S. president’s authority to appoint a Supreme Court justice, which is limited at the front end by the requirement for the Senate to provide its “advice and consent” and at the back end by the fact that the appointment, once made, cannot be rescinded. In the NYC case, Mayor Bloomberg was given the power to select an appointee without the need for subsequent approval and with the unchecked power to revoke such appointment should the mayor so choose.

While the legislation was strong, what has made the NYC form of mayoral control extreme has had as much to do with the aggressive use of the delegated authority by Bloomberg and his first chancellor, Joel Klein. For example, a mayor’s formal power to appoint school-board members can in practice be a mild form of control or a strong one. The formal power is mild if the mayor relies heavily on the judgment of others in identifying candidates, heavily weighs the views of education experts, seeks consensus candidates, avoids second-guessing and challenging appointees once they are in office, and accommodates the decisions by the board even when they might differ from the mayor’s preferences. The same formal power can be strong if the mayor aggressively manages the process of identifying and selecting nominees, puts allegiance to the mayor’s agenda and priorities above educational expertise as a selection criterion, and uses the formal power to remove members as a means of enforcing loyalty to that agenda and priorities after the board member is in office.

Midway in Michael Bloomberg’s first term in office, when a few members of the PEP expressed doubts about approving the Chancellor’s plan to end social promotion for the City’s third graders, Bloomberg, as reported in the New York Times, simply “fired them, had three new members appointed and rammed his policy home—in one workday…” The mayor had no compunctions about using his formal authority to the fullest; pressed on the issue he asserted: “Mayoral control means mayoral control, thank you very much. They are my representatives, and they are going to vote for things that I believe in.” Less visibly and directly, Bloomberg and Klein worked to marginalize the thirty-two community districts, which the state legislature quite deliberately had refused to eliminate.

36 Ravitch (2009).
37 State law did set some formal limits by stipulating that school superintendents must meet certain certification requirements relating to their educational background, training and teaching or leadership experience. By choice, Mayor Bloomberg twice chose to appoint candidates with almost no educational background, which required a waiver from the requirement by the NY State Commissioner of Education. In both cases this waiver was granted.
38 Winerip (2004).
The NYC case provides a useful illustration of an additional aspect of mayoral control more generally. Although the movement from elected school boards toward more active mayors takes place at the local level, its unfolding often involves states and sometimes even national actors. Initiating mayoral control in all states requires at minimum the consent of the state legislature; indeed, sometimes the impetus has come largely from the state level, when governors or legislatures became frustrated by what they considered to be recalcitrant districts. In NYC, though, the legislature was something of a reluctant partner. Rudolph Giuliani, Bloomberg’s predecessor, had tried and failed to get such power while he was mayor. Some legislators argued against extending the authority to Bloomberg, and in reflection of such hesitation the legislature included in its 2002 grant of power a sunset provision so the arrangement would expire at the end of June 2009 unless affirmatively renewed before that time. Mayoral control was renewed, but not without a lengthy battle and some modest concessions to parent and community groups that had strongly objected to what they considered to be the administration’s authoritative and non-responsive regime.41

The role of the national government in reinforcing mayoral control for the most part has been more indirect. Arguably, the accountability pressures exerted by NCLB have added to the sense of dissatisfaction with school boards and districts, making the soil more fertile for proposals for governance reform. However, during the debate surrounding the extension of mayoral control in NYC, the Obama administration took an even more forceful stand. At the height of the debate, and despite criticisms by some parents’ groups that were concerned that New York-style mayoral control had resulted in a far too centralized regime, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, who had served as a mayor-appointed school CEO in Chicago, told a local newspaper: “I absolutely, fundamentally believe that mayoral control is extraordinarily important. I’m absolutely a proponent.”42 White House support for mayoral control also became a central focus of controversy in Milwaukee, where the governor and other supporters of an effort to institute mayoral control openly argued that failure to do so would put state’s effort to win a federal Race to the Top grant in jeopardy.43

It’s Not Just Executives

The growing prominence of mayors, governors, and presidents makes it clear that there are important changes in educational governance underway. But are these changes specific to the executive branch? Or are they better understood as one current in a broader reassertion of general-purpose governance?

Changes in the tasks of governance, in popular conceptions of governance, and the impact of media all may be giving elected executives a more powerful platform for engagement and making it more feasible for them to expand their reach into areas they previously left to legislatures, courts, or their agency heads. As government grows—in personnel; in professionalism; in scope of responsibility; in regulatory reach, management, and administration—the challenging task of riding herd on the governmental apparatus becomes more important in actuality and in people’s minds. That, arguably, creates an environment in

43 Richards (2010).
which the executive branch stands to gain in stature relative to the legislature and judiciary. New data systems that give agencies informational advantages also may add to the musculature of the executive branch.

What these explanations fail to account for, though, is the fact that the courts and legislatures have not been passive bystanders as presidents, governors, and mayors maneuvered onto center stage. This is a distinction that could make a large difference. Proponents of stronger executive leadership hold out the prospect that this could lead to more coherent policies, tighter linkage between policy and implementation, and less of the kind of policy “churn” that substitutes shallow and ephemeral change for sustained change in core educational functions. If general-purpose institutions are being activated more broadly, courts and legislatures might pursue crosscutting agendas, and checks and balances might generate a new form of education-policy gridlock. Critics of strong mayors, governors, and presidents have fretted about an over-centralization of authority that they see as promoting a narrowness of vision and coming at the expense of traditional mechanisms for asserting democratic control. If these general-purpose institutions are, in fact, being activated, there may be prospects for a more pluralist approach to agenda-setting, one in which courts and legislatures bring to the fore rights, values, and contrasting ideas that currently are marginalized.

The Courts

Although reluctantly and against the grain of their normal deference to precedent and wariness of proactive policymaking, at the national level—and particularly at the state level—courts have featured prominently as catalysts for the emergence of stronger executive leadership. They did this by challenging and diminishing the traditional role of local school boards, by helping to push education decision-making up the ladder of federalism to the state and national level where school-specific institutions were never as strong as locally, and, somewhat paradoxically, by making the minefields of race and class politics somewhat less treacherous for risk averse politicians.

In taking on school segregation, the judiciary, a general-purpose institution, came head-to-head with school districts. Local responses varied—from tooth and nail resistance, through resigned accommodation, to constructive and willing embrace—but districts’ legitimacy and power were dented overall. In the extreme cases, the courts literally displaced them, directly issuing orders or appointing special masters to gather information, shape remedies, and oversee implementation. Even when they did not get quite so directly involved themselves, the effect of the courts’ efforts was to push decisions further up the ladder of federalism and into general purpose arenas like state legislatures or Congress: “As courts assert their legal authority in this fashion to leverage desegregation, they centralize the power to make decisions about equal educational opportunity in institutions that are sometimes geographically and institutionally distant from local levels where this change is to occur.”

44 Frederick M. Hess (1998).
46 For the story of Judge Arthur Garrity’s involvement in the Boston case, see: Lukas (1985). On the courts’ uses of special masters in desegregation cases see: Arnow (1980); Chayes (1976); Kirp and Babcock (1981).
47 Superfine (2010), 114.
On fiscal equity and adequacy issues, the courts’ encroachment on the turf of local school districts was less dramatic; there were no televised images of children being escorted into previously segregated school buildings by police or National Guard. But when it comes to the relationship between general-purpose institutions versus special-purpose ones, the story line was similar to that with race and segregation. When courts found their states’ school-funding systems violated state constitutions, they typically opted, at least at first, to defer to the legislatures to create and implement the remedies. This in and of itself pushed decision-making up the ladder of federalism, both because it was in state constitutions—not local law—that the courts found the violations and because the fiscal capacity to remedy the situation demanded state leadership.\footnote{48}{On the dynamic of legislative recalcitrance and the way that forced the courts to become more prescriptive see: Lehne (1978). On the empirical literature demonstrating the centralization consequence see: Levin and Koski (2000).}

As with desegregation, though, iterative efforts to force compliance on the part of reluctant legislature and districts also drew the courts deeper into the weeds of education practice.\footnote{49}{On legislative and local resistance, see: McDermott (1999); Reed (2003).} While court rulings in school-finance cases “have traditionally issued vague orders or guidelines to state legislatures” a handful have “issued sets of rather precise orders about how to restructure funding across local districts,” and over the last two decades several courts have moved beyond issues of funding to consider “precise types of resources that additional funding can buy, such as qualified teachers and staff, school supplies, facilities repairs, and lower student-teacher ratios”\footnote{50}{Superfine (2010), 118. See also: Umpstead (2007).} While some judges restrict themselves to doing nothing more than kicking the problem to legislatures, increasingly judges find they must work with legislatures, executives, and even broad swathes of civic leadership, if their remedies are to take hold.\footnote{51}{Liebman and Sabel (2003).}

While the catalyzing action most immediately and directly came from their demanding action on the part of the other branches, there is a second, less direct, role the courts may have played in opening the gates to greater involvement by general-purpose institutions and actors. Presidents, governors, and mayors had incentives to take positions on education even before the contemporary reform era, but these were met and usually checked by the powerful disincentive to taking on the political hot potatoes of race, class, religion, and local control that often swirled around schools. Race in particular was a deterrent. Even when they wanted to, elected executives could not venture into school-quality issues without it being interpreted within the polarizing context of race, desegregation, and states’ rights. McAndrews notes that at a May 26, 1976 news conference in Columbus, OH, President Gerald Ford “found himself having to respond to a reporter’s implication that ‘quality education’ were code words for ‘segregation.’”

Judicial intervention could hardly be said to have “solved” the tough issues of race and equity, but by bringing them out in the open and by absorbing some of the body blows associated with impinging on local school-board control, they arguably made it safer for both elected executives and legislature to venture into the waters of school reform. That elected politicians are venturing more confidently into the territory of education policy—executives as discussed above and legislatures as discussed below—is not only because they have new reasons to do so, but also because the courts have eliminated some of the longstanding obstacles to their doing so.
President Lyndon Johnson may have been the first to say that he wanted to be known as the “education president,” but count him also among those who realized that the national government’s ramped up responsibility extended beyond the White House. In praising Congress for passing the Higher Education Facilities Bill, LBJ labeled it the “Education Congress” on December 10, 1963.

When it comes to national policy initiatives in education two events stand out: the initial passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and its later reauthorization as No Child Left Behind. The dominating narrative in both cases focuses on executive leadership, and clearly both LBJ and George W. Bush were important factors in publicly framing the issues, in giving them high priority, in helping to leverage the necessary votes. In both cases, however, there is a counter-narrative in which legislatures loom large.

LBJ and the White House made the passage of ESEA their highest priority following the 1964 election. White House strategists deliberately framed the education bill as an extension of the War on Poverty as a way to push into the background to hot potato issues that had bedeviled federal education policy efforts previously: states rights as tied to race and desegregation and funding for schools as it intersected with the question of religion and separation of church and state. And the president’s legendary phone calls, featuring sweet-talk and arm twisting, clearly were important. But also important was fact that the 1964 election had given Johnson better than a two-thirds majority to work with in both the Senate and House. Nor did White House strategizing and arm-twisting bowl over a passive and accommodating Congress; some of the specific components, including the shape of the allocation formula—which spread the funding broadly rather than concentrating it where the need was the greatest—and the general lack of specificity about how the funding should be used were crafted precisely to win sectors of Congressional support.

Congress was at least as critical to the crafting of NCLB. The original Bush proposal was not a flesched out bill but a thirty-page blueprint that pulled together various proposals that had come before and were known to have some built-in support. The administration was anxious to garner broad bipartisan support, and in order to get that it relied on bargaining on the Hill to shape key provisions. To bring in Democrats like Senator Edward Kennedy, for example, it was necessary to raise the envisioned amount of federal spending and drop the initial plan for vouchers. Congress worked through issues, such as trading off vouchers for supplemental income. Though NCLB came to be seen as a “Bush law…the reality is that the final bill’s 681 finely printed pages were filled with a tangled assemblage of Bush administration proposals, New Democrat proposals drawn from reforms crafted during the Clinton administration, liberal ideas put forth by leading democrats like Kennedy and [Democratic Congressman George] Miller and proposals and cautions introduced by countless other constituencies…”.

52 See: McAndrews (2006); see also chapter 3.
53 See: http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/lbjforkids/edu_timeline.shtm
54 (Davies (2007), chapter 2.
55 Hess and Petrilli (2006), 20; See also: Rudalevige (2003).
it diluted or strengthened the policy that emerged, there is little question that Congress had its fingerprints all over the final product.

Earlier, I presented evidence of growing presidential involvement based on the extent to which education was emphasized in State of the Union speeches. Figures 3 and 4 present a comparable measure of Congressional attention to education drawn from the same Policy Agendas project data. From 1946 to 2008, the Agendas database has coded over 65,500 Congressional hearings, of which 1,549 dealt with some dimension of education as their major topic. The top panel compares raw counts of hearings to State of the Union mentions; the lower panel presents these as percentages.

Several observations are warranted. First, as with the presidents, Congress shows increased attention to education as a percentage of its agenda. From 1946 through 1979, 1.64 percent of Congressional hearings dealt with education; from 1980 through 2005 this rose to 2.6 percent. Second, Congress overall has been steadier and less erratic in its allocation of attention to education. Talk is cheap, so it is perhaps not surprising that presidential mentions of education can fluctuate more wildly and spike on occasion as they did in 1981 and in 1997-2001. A president who decides to emphasize an education issue can use a lot of sentences to do so, and some presidents accommodate this just by talking at greater length. Organizing a hearing is a more substantial undertaking, which makes it less likely that Congress will careen about from issue to issue. Also, and importantly, both the House and the Senate have committees for which education is a major part of their responsibility. Because these committees have other responsibilities besides public education, they are free to devote their time and attention elsewhere, but institutionally they represent what might be considered a more hospitable venue for educational enthusiasms to take root. Over 125 committees or special commissions are listed as having held hearings during this time period. Over the time period, 71.7 percent of the hearings dealing with education were held by either of the two primary education-focused committees: the House Committee on Education and the Workforce or the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. The other 28.3 percent were spread among forty-four committees.

Third, Congress is not just the tail on the dog. The late 1990s spike in presidential emphasis on education is probably the most prominent feature in the figure, but in many years Congress is devoting proportionally more attention to education than the presidents. There are three rather distinct periods in terms of the relative primacy put on education by the two institutions. Presidents gave greater emphasis to education in sixteen out of the seventeen years from 1946 to 1962. From 1963 to 1987, however, the relative emphasis shifted, with Congress giving a higher proportional emphasis to education in eighteen out of twenty-five years. After 1987, the scales tipped back to the president who placed a higher agenda priority on education in fourteen of those eighteen years. Congressional and presidential attention likely interact, feeding and responding directly to one another and also indirectly through the media, which may pick up and amplify their activities.

56 The dominant role of these education-focused committees did not diminish over time; despite fluctuations from year-to-year, overall the two major committees accounted for exactly the same proportion of the education hearings before 1980 as they have since.
Figure 3: Congressional vs. educational emphasis of education: Hearings and State of the Union addresses, number, 1946-2005

Number of Education-related Hearings

Figure 4: Congressional vs. educational emphasis of education: Hearings and State of the Union addresses, relative attention, 1946-2005

Relative Attention (% of Hearings; SOU Quasi-sentences)
State legislatures have been active as well. With a list of all education-related state-legislative activity related to education from 1994 to 2008, as compiled by the Education Commission of the States, I isolated laws passed that dealt with preK-12 education. State legislatures passed eleven laws and 660 bills. Some of the more active states are larger, more urban ones like California and Illinois but others (e.g. Arkansas, Louisiana) are more active than would be predicted by their size alone, and some large states (Pennsylvania, Massachusetts) anchor the low end of the legislative activity scale (see Figure 5). Simple activity, of course, is not necessarily an indicator of serious engagement; a single well-crafted, far-reaching piece of legislation could have more influence than a scattershot of minor bills. As at the national level, though, this is indicative of the fact that it is not just the executive branch that is actively involved. Since 1975, fourteen states have increased the governor’s role in appointing either or both the CSO and SBEA; preliminary analysis shows that legislative activity was higher in these states, suggesting that gubernatorial and legislative involvement may work in tandem rather than competing institutions with activity by one prompted by or inducing passivity in the other. Another indication that we are witnessing an expansion of the role of general-purpose institutions, rather than a redistribution of a fixed pie of power among them, is that legislative activity at the state level is associated with what is happening nationally; prior to NCLB (1994 to 2001) states averaged 10.2 bills per year, afterward (2002-2008) that more than doubled to 21.6.

Figure 5: PreK-12 laws passed per year, 1994-2008

57 Massachusetts’s lower level of activity may reflect that fact that it had passed a comprehensive education-reform bill in 1993, just before this data series commenced.
The End of Exceptionalism: Implications for the future

The growing role of education executives has implications for how education is governed, which, in the coming years, will alter the configuration of interests, issues, and policies that influence the nation’s schools. This is especially true if, as I’ve suggested here, the new leadership by elected executives is just a more visible feature of a broader re-absorption of education policy into general-purpose arenas.

The education-policy subsystem that had matured through most of the twentieth century was specifically organized around public education and provided favored access to a limited set of interest groups with intense interest in public schools and a commitment to maintaining and expanding public investment in education. The tight dominance of the education-specific groups, such as the teachers unions, was most prominent at the local level, but extended all the way to Washington D.C. Hyper-localization meant that schools often were seen as extensions of dominant community norms and that investment in good schools would accrue as appreciation in local property values. Buffered from the broader interplay of party politics, frequently funded by dedicated revenue streams, and with leadership selected off-cycle low turnout elections, dominated by parent and teacher organizations, it was a somewhat closed and protected system, and designed to be so.

These attributes were a source of genuine strength, but developed also into problems and tensions that fueled a potent backlash. The strengths included a prominent place for professional expertise and a stability of funding and support that was less vulnerable than other domestic policies to competing demands, shifting public priorities, changing political regimes, the vicissitudes of fiscal pressure. When changing demographics brought new minorities into local communities, however, the closed nature of the systems contributed to frustrations on the part of newcomers who felt they had limited access to jobs and limited influence on policies. When the nation’s economic and political dominance on the world stage weakened, the view that America’s schools were failing to compete bruised their image and opened the education profession to criticism from which it had been largely spared. The public K-12 school system controlled huge amounts of resources: jobs, dollars, contracts. Those outside the systems—general-purpose politicians looking for ways to build power and influence; private companies looking for a piece of the action akin to that they had obtained via contracting arrangements for providing other public services—had long been held at bay, intimidated by the iron triangle that protected the status quo and also, too, perhaps by the treacherous currents of race, religion, and family values that threatened to flare up when local equilibrium was disrupted. The single-purpose, buffered, and protected status of American education in some ways was always an anomaly, and in that sense the reassertion of general-purpose politics and government once its vulnerabilities emerged was less a surprise than the fact that it had taken so long.

In her analysis of the changing politics of federal education policy, Debray-Pelot identifies seven interest groups as “formerly influential” in setting federal education policy; each of them is education specific in focus (American Association of School Administrators; American Federation of Teachers; Council of Chief State Officers; Council of Great City Schools; National Association of State Title I Directors; National Education Association; National School Boards Association). In contrast, five of the eight “newly influential” groups she identifies are multi-
issue organizations (Business Roundtable; EXPECT Coalition; Heritage Foundation; National Governors Association; Progressive Policy Institute), and none of the newly influential education-focused groups (Education Trust; Education Leadership Council; Thomas B. Fordham Foundation) is a constituency-based group with members tied to the traditional education sector.\(^\text{58}\)

The more “all-purpose arena of governance” within which education policies are shaped and implemented today means that unconventional ideas for delivering education are more likely to get a hearing. This is partly because the mix of interest groups that has access to general-purpose venues is broader than that of school-specific arenas. Policy entrepreneurs who lack traditional education credentials—who have not been teachers or principals; whose academic training is in management, or law, or science and technology—are better able to make the case that their different kinds of expertise are relevant and should be taken into account. Greater openness to new ideas is also likely due the different backgrounds and experiences of the general-purpose officials themselves. While schools systems have a fair amount of experience contracting with private providers of auxiliary serves like janitorial and food-service provision, doing so to provide core aspects of the educational enterprise is a new and somewhat alien and threatening concept for those accustomed to the traditional public-school model. But contracting out has been a major and somewhat routine experience for mayors, governors, and their associated legislative bodies for many years in areas like road and highway construction, parking enforcement, daycare provision, and the like.\(^\text{59}\)

For those frustrated with what they consider to be complacency, lack of imagination, or self-serving bureaucracy, the changes in the institutional landscape have been welcome. There are bitter and still unresolved debates about whether the new reform elements—and the initiatives they have launched in charter schooling; test-based accountability for students, teachers, and schools; portfolio-management districts; new educational technologies; alternative certification; and the like—are leading to better education or worse, or if they are narrowing achievement gaps or exacerbating inequalities.\(^\text{60}\) But there are few who would deny that a system with a reputation for stasis has been opened to disruption and change.

There are many uncertainties about how the shifting sands of education governance, characterized by greater role played by general-purpose leaders and groups, will play out in the long-term: But there is at least one potentially critical cost and at least one potentially damaging risk. It is reasonable to be suspicious of the notion that the only expertise worth valuing is that steeped in the particularities of education, detailed in its understanding of curriculum and instruction, delivered through traditional institutions for training professional educators, and leavened by years in the trenches of classroom experience. Yet it is totally unreasonable to assume that these traditionally recognized forms of expertise are not important. Cohen and Moffit make a compelling case that the much of the energies and resources burned in the contemporary efforts to reform education have lacked traction precisely because they were disconnected from knowledge about the aims, instruments, capabilities, and environment that

\(^{58}\) Debray-Pelot (2007). On the changing constellation of interest groups at the national level, see also: DeBray-Pelot and McGuinn (2009); Kaestle (2007).

\(^{59}\) Henig (2010).

\(^{60}\) For a full-bore critique of the new reformers, see Ravitch (2010).
shape educational practice and determine its consequences.\textsuperscript{61} And the reform models that seek to work around the traditional model of professionalism—charter schools that depend on waves of young teachers willing to work longer days, weeks, and years with fewer job protections and benefits; education-technology solutions that envision teachers able to handle large classrooms while students spend increasing amounts of their time doing self-paced learning—are largely untested in terms of their sustainability and scalability.

The risk is that investment in public education will not fare well in the broader arena of general-purpose politics. The initial expansion of executive involvement and the growing role of general-purpose institutions rode in on a wave of broad enthusiasm for the importance of education as away to leverage economic competitiveness and narrow the inequalities associated with race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class. It benefited as well by a relatively expansive economy, through many of the key years, and strong philanthropic support that, after years of some frustration with the slowness of change in the traditional public school sector, found working with mayors and governors and the White House more appealing. To the extent that public education can deliver on these fronts, its contribution to social well-being is objectively important. But there is no guarantee that objective importance will drive the politics and policy agenda of the future. After having played a major role in the previous four presidential elections, education was not a prominent feature of the 2008 campaign or the lead-up so far to 2012, displaced, at least for the time being, by concerns over the economy, deficits, and federal health care reform. Within general--purpose governance arenas, calls to invest in public education must compete more on a head-to-head basis with other demands on governmental attention as well as the arguments for the alternative strategy of cutting spending and taxes and relying more on private incentives and market forces to generate and allocate the education the public wants and needs. Research on governmental agenda-setting establishes both the somewhat fickle nature of public attention\textsuperscript{62} and the ways in which objective measures of need compete with politics, ideology, symbolism, biased perceptions about beneficiaries, external events, and serendipity as determinants of what government chooses to focus on.\textsuperscript{63} Advocates for public education may need to find new ways of framing their issues in order to attract and maintain allies among non-school focused groups that share some of their aspirations but are also competing for public and philanthropic support.

Even if general-purpose institutions keep education high on the policy agenda, there is no guarantee that they will deliver effective policies. Enthusiasts for stronger executive involvement portray it as a step toward more rational, comprehensive, and decisive decision-making. This vision may prove naïve if, as I have suggested, the governances changes underway may include more active legislatures and courts. Each branch of general-purpose governance has its own history of dysfunction, and the clashes among them could just result in new forms of policy churn or gridlock.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{61} Cohen and Moffitt (2009).
\textsuperscript{62} Downs (1972).
\textsuperscript{63} Baumgartner and Jones (1993); Kingdon (1995); McCombs and Shaw (1972); Pierson (1993); Rochefort and Cobb (1994); Schneider and Ingram (1993).
\textsuperscript{64} On both the institutional strengths and limitations of Congress to engage in education reform leadership see: Barone and DeBray (forthcoming).
As a necessity and at the least, education advocates will need to find more and better ways to work in multi-issue coalitions in order to compete within these general-purpose arenas. Their ability to do so will depend upon both the political resources they bring to the table and their ability to make the case to potential allies that investment in education will generate benefits even for those who do not work directly within the sector or have children currently enrolled in public schools. Americans historically have shown alliance to the idea that schools are a public good—what Moe refers to as the “public school ideology”—but in the emerging arenas of general-purpose politics they are likely to have to build a stronger evidentiary case.65

While the political challenges of operating in a broader, multi-issue arena make it likely that the initial posture of traditional education interests will be defensive, one potentially salutary outcome of the increasing importance of education executives and all-purpose governance could be the erosion of bureaucratic and political barriers that have pitted proponents of school reform against those who adopt a broader vision of education and seek to integrate education policy with other social-policy efforts to address concentrated poverty, income inequality, housing, and public health. When schools do what they are supposed to do, payoffs are not limited to school performance; they include an array of human- and social-capital outcomes and the causal arrow runs in the other direction as well. The new politics of education governance makes it more likely, as I have argued elsewhere, that the false choice between pursuing school-based versus non-school focused policies can be bridged. “Trade-offs and spillovers across policy domains are more visible in these general-purpose arenas, and the levers for addressing them more readily in reach.”66

In conclusion, let me add some disclaimers. Here is what I’m not saying. I believe that the structural shifts I’m discussing are real and important, but I do not claim or believe that they are sharp, dramatic, or inexorable. The changes I’m highlighting are like the shifting of tectonic plates, not the earthquake to end all earthquakes. Core institutions take root and last because they are resistant to change, and once in place they develop defending mechanisms (that may be different from the originating rationale and the groups that pushed for the changes initially). Dominating structures sometimes do suddenly dissipate. I do not project that special purpose governance arrangements, education-specializing institutions and venues, and single purpose interest groups are destined for obsolescence. I expect them to be resilient, to use power and argument to resist some of the end of educational exceptionalism, to adjust tactics and settle into somewhat new patterns of interaction, but to still be around for many years to come.

Just as the early development and long domination of local school districts did not make general-purpose governance and politics irrelevant for education decision-making, so too the muscling up on the general purpose venues we are witnessing now likely will stop short of displacing or even marginalizing local school districts and education-specific agencies, committees, and interest groups. The game is changing, but given the many special and political forces that enforce incrementalism, many of the familiar rules, familiar groups, familiar tactics, and familiar outcomes will likely stay on the scene. The effect, as others have written about institutional change, is more like “layering” than replacement.67 The result is a complex field of play, where

66 Henig and Reville (2011)
67 Orren and Skowronek (2004); Thelen (2003); van der Heijden (2011).
groups’ dexterity and slack resources become critical as shopping for the most hospitable venue becomes an increasingly important tactical tool. The layered and overlapping decision-making venues potentially open more avenues for influence by different groups with differing ideas and interests, but to the degree that the lack of coherent management or clear lines of accountability is a central problem in public education (as many argue) it has the potential also to make things worse.

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68 Baumgartner and Jones (1993).
69 Thanks to Paul Manna for suggesting this point.
References


Interest, 28, 28-50.


