The model implicit in most research on the politics of education assumes that political factors such as interest group support and opposition shape policy. However, because this perspective yields incomplete information about the educational enterprise, researchers should not just ask what kinds of policies politics creates but also reverse the causal arrow to examine what kinds of politics result from different policies. In addressing this question, the concept of policy feedback focuses analytical attention on the institutional structures and rules policies establish, the elite and public interpretations of those policies, the interests that are mobilized, and how these factors interact to shape future policies.

Keywords: policy; politics

The theme of the 2009 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, “Disciplined Inquiry: Education Research in the Circle of Knowledge,” was intended to show that academic disciplines have contributed a diverse array of theoretical insights and research methods to the study of education. At the same time, education has provided a major venue for testing disciplinary theory and developing analytical methods, with its studies refining and expanding those theories in significant ways. In keeping with the theme, I chose a topic for this address that I believe deserves greater attention by education researchers. But it is also one where education research can contribute to disciplinary knowledge—in this case, to my own discipline of political science. A research agenda focused on this topic requires thinking about politics in a different way.

The Traditional Model of Politics and Policy

Before discussing the “repositioned politics of education,” I briefly review politics’ usual place in the study of education and education policy. The model implicit in most research on the politics of education policy assumes that political factors—of the type listed in Figure 1—shape policies that determine what resources are expended on which students and define in general terms what gets taught, how, and by whom. These broad parameters create opportunities and constraints that influence school and classroom practices, and these practices, in turn, shape learning outcomes. In this analytical framework, politics is assumed to have an indirect and diffuse effect on learning, with a variety of other social, cultural, and organizational factors having a more direct effect on student outcomes. But policy, nonetheless, influences the context in which learning occurs. This conception of the role of politics should continue to be central to the study of education policy because its endpoint is student learning, which should be the primary goal of policy.

However, the perspective represented in the traditional model is incomplete because it provides only partial information about key aspects of the educational enterprise, including why major policy changes are so difficult, why some policies persist past their useful lives, and how different policies shape who participates and who decides how educational resources are allocated. It also does not offer much insight into one of the most important questions that those who study the politics of education can address: how well schools function as democratic political institutions, including their ability to foster political equality.

Consequently, I argue that in addition to asking what kinds of policies politics creates, we need to reverse the causal arrow to examine what kinds of politics education policies create. I am not suggesting that we abandon the perspective represented in the traditional model of education politics. Rather, we need to add an additional one to our analytical repertoire that draws on a body of theoretical and empirical research in political science called policy feedback.

Why Reverse the Causal Arrow?

The theory of policy feedback posits that policies enacted and implemented at one point in time shape subsequent political dynamics so that politics is both an input into the policy process and an output. A brief history of how the concept has developed in political science provides context for how it might be applied in education research and also highlights the kinds of causal mechanisms that are assumed to produce the relationship between policy and politics.

“New policies create a new politics.” Although Schattschneider (1935, p. 288) made this oft-cited argument more than 70 years
Arguments for importing policy feedback into education research include more than just the opportunity to test the theory’s applicability in another policy domain. The rationale is both more practical and more deeply felt than just intellectual curiosity. Nevertheless, there is some element of intellectual curiosity in arguing for the importance of this topic. I believe that education is a good domain for advancing the study of policy feedback—especially in understanding linkages among the institutional, elite, and mass political effects of policies—because it offers varied cases across a wide range of policy goals and political arenas.

The practical rationale stems from my growing concern that education is facing a major crisis in its governing institutions, especially at the local level. Recent reform policies have focused largely on mechanisms such as standards and assessments, teacher training and career opportunities, and school organization. Until recently, however, scant attention has been paid to the system by which education is governed and services delivered to students. That system, as much as the policies that pass through it, requires a major overhaul. Research from a policy feedback perspective can inform the design of subsequent generations of education policies that pay greater attention to institutional effects because institutions are so central to this theoretical framework. The pressing need to address the shortcomings of education’s governing institutions, then, is the practical rationale.

My deeply felt reason for advocating a different take on politics stems from why I study education: my strong belief that schools are critical democratic institutions. How they are governed, who participates, how resources are allocated, and who benefits from those resources have long-term consequences far beyond individual school systems because they shape the future of democratic citizenship.

Overview

In arguing that politics should be repositioned in education’s circle of knowledge, I cover three topics:

- A conceptual model of policy feedback.
- Three examples from education policy to illustrate what might be learned from reversing the causal arrow: (a) the standards-based accountability (SBA) policies begun in states some 20 years ago and now reflected in the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation; (b) school finance equalization policies; and (c) entrepreneurial or marketizing policies such as charter schools and contracting-out to the private sector for services traditionally delivered by the public sector.
- A research agenda to understand how education policies create politics.

It should be noted that only a few studies in education are grounded in a policy feedback perspective. Consequently, in describing the illustrative cases, I rely on extant research, much of which was not conducted with the explicit purpose of discerning what kind of politics each policy has produced. So at this point, we basically have guiding hypotheses. I also realize that illustrative examples are not the same as testable propositions. Nevertheless, I believe there is sufficient evidence to suggest that a policy feedback perspective can generate valid knowledge in education research and that its use can provide a more extensive and valid exploration of the theory than has occurred in other policy domains.
A Conceptual Model of Policy Feedback

The model displayed in Figure 2 integrates the institutionalist and individual-level perspectives. The three middle boxes depict the political dynamics that policies create. This politics, in turn, shapes future policies—either changing them or, in many instances, reinforcing and continuing the existing policy regime.

Policies. Four policy characteristics shape the resulting politics. Origins includes such factors as who advanced the policy; whether it originated in the legislative, judicial, or executive branches; and the governmental level(s) enacting and implementing it. Whether a policy represents incremental or major change is important because it signals whether existing institutions and political arrangements are likely to be disrupted.

The nature of policy target(s) draws on Schneider and Ingram's (1997) conceptualization that classifies policy targets on two dimensions: (a) their social construction, or how they are viewed by policy makers and their constituents (deserving or undeserving); and (b) the political power resources of target groups. Schneider and Ingram hypothesize that these two dimensions interact to create different types of target groups. For example, senior citizens receiving Social Security are classified as advantaged because they are viewed as deserving and politically strong. In contrast, children from low-income families are classified as dependents because although perceived as deserving, they are politically weak. Policy makers take these dimensions into consideration in deciding on whom to confer benefits or impose burdens.

Research with a focus on policy instruments has not always considered how they shape politics, but such assumptions have been implicit. For example, hortatory instruments or those that use values or information to change targets’ behaviors assume people will act—including politically through actions such as grassroots organizing and lobbying—when presented with certain kinds of information (Fung, Graham, & Weil, 2007; McDonnell, 2004; Schneider & Ingram, 1997; Stone, 2002). As another example, inducements or grants-in-aid are likely to engender a different kind of politics than rights-based policies that confer a legal entitle ment, with the politics surrounding inducements focusing on legislative and bureaucratic allocational rules and those responding to rights-based policies often seeking redress in courts.

Institutional structures and rules. In this model, I assume that the first kind of politics created by a given policy is manifested in institutional structures and rules. Policies may establish new institutions, alter existing ones, or reinforce them. For example, how does a policy’s allocational rules affect how benefits are distributed—who wins, who loses, who pays? Answering these questions helps identify who has an incentive to mobilize. Similarly, rules about who can participate in decision making, the level at which decisions are made, and how grievances are handled all help explain—and even predict—the political coalitions and actions likely to result. The configuration of institutional rules can also point to which groups and individuals may lack the political resources and opportunities to express their interests.

Interpretive effects. This model draws on Pierson's (1993) concept of interpretive effects and assumes that how individuals ascribe meaning to a policy is mediated through the institutions implementing those policies. Interpretive effects capture the impact of policies on political identity, learning, and trust. It is this aspect of policy feedback that scholars see as the link to mass attitudes and behavior. Mettler and Soss (2004) suggest a number of ways that policies signal targets about their political status: by influencing how individuals understand their rights and responsibilities as members of a political community, by conveying messages about group characteristics directly to members of a target group and to broader public audiences, by playing a role in building and distributing civic skills among the public, by defining policy problems and their solutions in particular ways, and by creating arenas for citizen demands.

Over the past decade, several studies have examined the nature of policy feedback as it relates to mass political attitudes and participation. Three examples from research on policies that send strong messages about how the larger polity views programs illustrate how policies can shape individual attitudes and political behavior. The first comes from a study of Social Security. The universalism and social insurance framing of Social Security has led to positive interpretations of the policy and engendered broad-based capacity for political mobilization among its beneficiaries. In contrast to a strong bias in political participation

FIGURE 2. A conceptual model of policy feedback.
generally toward the more affluent and better educated, Campbell (2003) found that mobilization supporting Social Security is strongest among low-income beneficiaries, the group most likely to be dependent on the program.

In a second study, Mettler (2005) found that the G.I. Bill sent a strong message to beneficiaries that government was for and about ordinary Americans—“people like them.” It provided veterans from less-advantaged backgrounds with educational benefits, but it also conveyed a powerful message that they were included as esteemed members of the polity. They responded by becoming more civically involved than would have otherwise been expected. In contrast, the means-testing and tight regulations associated with the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program sends a very different message. Soss (1999) found that welfare recipients’ experience with welfare bureaucracies and their stigmatizing treatment by these agencies spills over into recipients’ perceptions of their status as citizens. So, for example, results from the 1992 National Election Study show that even after controlling for demographic variables, being a welfare recipient reduced a person’s likelihood of voting to slightly less than half. In contrast, being a Social Security Disability Insurance recipient did not have that effect, and in his qualitative interviews Soss found limited evidence that welfare recipients with children enrolled in Head Start act more efficaciously as citizens because of the participatory opportunities embedded in that program.

Although the interpretative effects of these policies are major factors in shaping targets’ political attitudes and their conceptions of themselves as political actors, they are buttressed by the level and type of material resources the policies allocate and by the institutional arrangements through which government agencies interact with program recipients.

Differential mobilization of interests. In this model, the mobilization of interests is shaped by the incentives created by a policy’s institutional structures and rules and by how individuals interpret the policy and its effect on them. In allocating resources or in regulating their use, policies create incentives for targets to organize to preserve and expand their benefits or to minimize their costs. This assumption is consistent with Wilson’s (1989) notion of the concentration of costs and benefits as predictors of mobilization. Policies that concentrate either costs or benefits create incentives to organize for the individuals and groups who pay or who benefit. When costs and benefits are diffusely allocated across a large population, people have less incentive to mobilize in support of or opposition to a policy. The results of mobilization can be either what institutional theorists call positive policy feedback, in instances where the persistent support of policy beneficiaries reinforces and expands existing institutional structures, or negative policy feedback, in cases where political opponents are successful in scaling back or terminating those institutions (Hacker, 2004; Pierson, 2000).

Not all policies directly influence mass political action, but many, in advantaging some interests and disadvantaging others, can lead to forms of mobilization. So policy feedback may occur at just the elite level or at both the elite and mass levels. For example, policies giving tax advantages to specific industries are likely to mobilize support coalitions limited to groups representing those industries, whereas Social Security has mobilized a broad swath of senior citizens. The word differential indicates that policies create opportunity structures that may lead to political inequalities, depending on the type and number of access points (e.g., who has standing to sue) and the resources available to different groups.

All these factors, resulting from a given policy and the politics it creates, then shape and constrain the direction and scope of future policies. In the following sections I illustrate the policy feedback perspective with three examples. The first, standards-based accountability (SBA), is more fully developed than the other two cases because the extant research is more informative about SBAs’ subsequent politics. The second example focuses on just one aspect of school finance policy but shows how the policy feedback lens helps in understanding why attempts at resource equalization are often significantly altered in their movement between state courts and legislatures. The final example is the least well developed and the most speculative because research on the political effects of marketizing policies in education is limited. Nevertheless, because this group of policies, along with SBA, currently dominates the national education policy agenda, it warrants attention.

A Policy Feedback Perspective on Standards-Based Accountability

Based on existing research and what we know about SBA in practice, Figure 3 depicts some of its most salient characteristics. However, it is important to keep in mind that what is represented here is SBA policy through the lens of the politics it has created. It does not indicate anything about its effectiveness as an educational improvement strategy.

Policy characteristics. SBA has largely been a top-down policy, promoted by political and business elites and education reform groups that have framed the rationale in terms of economic progress and more equitable educational opportunities. This rationale has been reflected in governors’ “state of the state” speeches for several decades, and recently in U.S. President Barack Obama’s speech to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, in which he argued, “We know that economic progress and educational achievement have always gone hand in hand in America,” and “It’s the most American of ideas, that with the right education, a child of any race, any faith, any station, can overcome whatever barriers stand in their way and fulfill their God-given potential.” He then went on to talk about his administration’s commitment to “higher standards” and “money tied to results” (Obama, 2009).

Although analysts disagree about the extent to which NCLB represents a major change in policy direction and in the federal government’s relationship with states and local school districts, they acknowledge that the politics that produced it and its grounding in SBA assumptions developed over several decades (McDonnell, 2005; McGuinn, 2006; Wong & Sunderland, 2007). The recent history of the federal–state relationship strongly suggests that NCLB was possible only because of profound changes in the state policy role over the past 20 years. In his analysis of the origins of NCLB, Manna (2006) develops the concept of borrowing strength that “occurs when policy entrepreneurs at one level of government attempt to push their agendas by leveraging the justification and capabilities that other governments elsewhere in the federal system possess” (p. 5). He argues that the
passage of NCLB was possible because state governments had earlier enacted reforms organized around standards and assessments.

Another central characteristic of SBA is that it assumes multiple targets and relies on multiple policy instruments. Because publication of information is at the core of this policy, the targets include more than just educators and students. They also include parents and the general public who are expected to act on that information. So a critical criterion in assessing the politics of SBA is the extent to which information about school and student performance prompts public mobilization.

Institutional structures and rules. The institutional structures resulting from SBA policies include the state-level processes that establish academic content and performance standards, and the state and local bureaucracies responsible for assessing students. The rules that define and govern these institutions stem from the premises underlying SBA policies. In its ideal form, the theory of standards-based reform assumed that states would establish rigorous content and performance standards for all students and then align major state policies affecting teaching and learning—regarding curriculum and instructional materials, teacher training, and assessment—to these standards. In exchange for holding school districts and schools accountable for student performance on the standards, states would give schools and school districts greater flexibility in designing and implementing their instructional programs (Smith & O’Day, 1991).

In this ideal form, instructional policies were to be linked because rigorous standards require that teachers have the knowledge to teach different content and in different ways and that schools have the financial and instructional capacity to bring all students to proficiency (Goertz, 2007). Consequently, the operative rules were assumed to be those allocating resources and coordinating their use as well as those related to holding schools accountable. However, in practice, as the assessment portion of SBA has become more prominent and high-stakes, fewer of the rules have focused on either support or local flexibility and more on the criteria for allocating rewards and sanctions (Heubert & Hauser, 1999).

The institutional structures resulting from SBA policies have created several political paradoxes and tensions. One is an updated version of what Meyer (1979) called “fragmented centralization.” SBA has led to more centralized direction and control from the federal and state governments than was the case 30 years ago. Yet considerable fragmentation remains in the federalist system. It is evident in multiple aspects of education, from significant resource disparities among states and localities to content and performance standards that vary substantially from state to state (Liu, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, 2007; Porter, Polikoff, & Smithson, 2008). The political effects are most evident in a continuing tug between interests advocating for greater uniformity in educational opportunities through more centralized policies and localized interests opposing significant centralization.

At the same time, the educational delivery system has become more complex, with a variety of organizational arrangements having emerged to provide professional development, technical assistance, testing, and instructional materials to implement SBA. However, this complexity has not been accompanied by any significant changes in governance structures and capacities, especially at the local level. Elected school board members, most with “day jobs,” are expected to ensure that this more complex system is fiscally and educationally accountable and to mediate among a much denser network of often competing interests.

Further complicating the institutional picture is the continuing tension between the extent to which content and performance standards are externally imposed by political bodies such as state boards of education directly answerable to governors and how much is left to the professional judgment of teachers (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2008).

To a large extent, these structures are not new and grow out of well-institutionalized characteristics of the U.S. system. In fact, they demonstrate how deeply entrenched and path dependent institutions can become, even as policies change. However, what has been altered is that these structures have become more complex as they have been superimposed on a fragmented, low-capacity
system. The supreme irony may be that what was originally called “systemic reform” has morphed into even greater fluidity.

Interpretative effects. Public opinion about SBA policies is decidedly mixed—even inconsistent—and based on low knowledge levels. For example, surveys over the past decade indicate that the public recognizes the limits of standardized testing. However, despite some decline in support since the advent of NCLB, a majority think the amount of testing in their community is about right or not enough, and a majority approve of high-stakes tests such as high school exit exams (McDonnell, 2008). But these opinions have also been formed in a low-information environment where, for example, after 7 years of NCLB, a majority of respondents in the latest Phi Delta Kappa–Gallup poll report knowing very little or nothing about the law (Bushaw & Gallup, 2008).

With the exception of this limited public opinion data, we know little about the interpretative effects of SBA, including how its framing and language have affected public perceptions of the educational system. What effect, for example, do phrases such as “all students can achieve to high standards” juxtaposed against terms such as “schools needing improvement” or “failing schools” have on public trust? Asking about the perceptual messages conveyed in SBA is particularly important because a majority of voters do not have school-age children and lack firsthand information about even the schools in their own communities.

The differing perceptions of SBA by individuals and groups are evident in the views of the business community as compared with those of teachers, or in the divisions among groups representing low-income students and students of color. But they were also manifested in the early years of SBA in what have now become known as the “math, science, and reading wars.” Among these controversies were disputes about the cultural and curricular values embodied in the standards and assessments. These values were, for a small minority, powerful mobilizing incentives leading, for example, to the demise of California’s Learning Assessment System in the mid-1990s (McDonnell, 2004).

Differential mobilization of interests. Researchers have documented the expansion and diversification of the interest group terrain around SBA policies (DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; Manna, 2006). The groups include general government and business coalitions that pressed for the policy, and provider organizations that have an economic interest in the services authorized under SBA policies. But the issue networks are broader and denser, extending beyond just these groups. Kaestle (2007) enumerated 10 categories of organizations currently involved in education policy, ranging from some traditionally considered part of the education establishment to think tanks, foundations, and for-profit firms.

In addition to contributing to increased numbers and diversity of groups, SBA has also created a politics that does not follow along traditional partisan or ideological lines. The issue of standards and assessment has been a bipartisan one at the state level since the policy’s inception, with the active involvement of both Democratic and Republican governors who recognized its appeal for business elites interested in economic development and for voters concerned about the quality of public schools and the use of their tax dollars. At the national level, Republican support for test-based accountability has been a way to neutralize the Democrats’ traditional advantage in public perceptions about the two parties’ relative ability to handle education (Hess & McGuinn, 2002). However, both parties have seen their base support coalitions divide over NCLB. For the Republicans, it has been most evident in the differing views of the Business Roundtable and Republican state legislators. The Democrats have experienced similar splits, with the teacher unions strongly critical of NCLB and some (but not all) civil rights and child advocacy organizations, such as the Citizens Commission on Civil Rights and the Education Trust, supporting it. These divisions among traditional allies stem from differing interpretive effects. For some, SBA has been interpreted as a strategy for significantly improving student learning, whereas others perceive it as an unwarranted federal and state intrusion in local communities that brings little added benefit. Similarly, some see SBA as an effective strategy for forcing schools to address the achievement gap, whereas others view it as an excuse for not equalizing resources that unfairly blames students and teachers for conditions beyond their control.

Despite the assumption that SBA would reduce information asymmetries between educators and the general public and provide an important mobilizing resource to parents and the public, grassroots activism has been limited. It has largely been confined to small groups of middle-class, suburban residents opposed to state assessments, either because of the curricular values reflected in them or because they are perceived to measure only lower level academic standards (Schrag, 2000). This result is not surprising, given the significant social class bias in political participation (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Nevertheless, other education policies, with differing origins and policy instruments, offer a contrasting case. The best example is special education, a policy initiated through parental activism and grounded in rights-based entitlements to service. Although special education groups also evidence a middle-class bias, Itkonen (2007) found in her research that grassroots, parental activism in that policy area is more widespread and has functioned as a counterweight to organizations representing education professionals.

The next generation of SBA policies. Ideally, after identifying the politics that SBA has produced, we should be able to predict how these political dynamics will create a policy feedback cycle and help shape the next generation of policies. Although the skeletal mapping presented here is incomplete, with considerably more research necessary before making any predictions with a high degree of certainty, three tentative conclusions seem reasonable.

The first is that there will be a future generation of SBA policies because SBA is likely to continue as a dominant policy paradigm for some time. Interest group support is sufficient to obtain incremental changes in the accountability system to permit more valid judgments about student and school performance and to give educators, policy makers, and the public better diagnostic tools for improving educational quality. However, opposition to SBA does not seem strong enough to create the conditions for fundamental change or its elimination as a policy strategy because the policy’s core elements of large-scale state assessments and consequences tied to test results are well institutionalized.

Second, the push for common content and performance standards across multiple states, which is now being advocated by a variety of groups, including the National Governors’ Association,
A Policy Feedback Perspective on School Finance Equalization

Focusing on one aspect of school finance policy, Figure 4 presents a policy feedback perspective on a question that Reed (2001) poses: Why are the egalitarian assumptions underlying decisions in school finance lawsuits often diminished when state legislatures fashion remedies in response to judicial mandates? This case illustrates that political dynamics and the subsequent policies they create can originate from a long-standing constellation of several policies. It is also an example of a theoretical and methodological imperative in studying policy feedback to examine not just the observable political effects of policy but also what was expected by initial reformers that did not occur (Jacobs, 2007).

The answer to Reed’s question lies in the Rodriguez decision that moved school finance litigation to the states (Sracic, 2006) and in the path-dependent nature of state and local taxation policies. The resulting institutional structures and rules include school finance systems based on local property taxes, the use of lawsuits grounded in state constitutional principles, and judicial mandates requiring legislative remedies.

These institutional structures engender conflicting interpretative effects. For example, based on his analysis of public opinion data from four states, Reed (2001) concludes that even though there has been a trend away from local control, its persistence as a defining characteristic of the U.S. educational system shapes public attitudes toward educational opportunity, particularly opposition to school finance reform viewed as a threat to localism. Reed details how the local governance of municipalities and school districts and local control of property tax receipts “implicitly structure our beliefs about the proper way to organize education, and indirectly, they inform a good deal of our democratic politics surrounding education” (p. 132). The tension between generalized support for equal educational opportunity and opposition to specific school finance remedies is further exacerbated if policies are perceived as redistributing resources or, in some states, as allocating benefits mostly or even exclusively to racial minorities (Carr & Fuhrman, 1999).

Reed’s analysis indicates that institutional structures and interpretative effects interact to shape interest mobilization, with the link between the primacy of localism and public attitudes strongly influencing state legislative behavior. In responding to their constituents, legislators have traditionally reinforced geographically based inequalities by preserving local control over a significant proportion of school funding. However, because of the constitutional basis for school finance policies, groups seeking to equalize educational resources can mobilize to return to the courts if legislatures delay or produce remedies unacceptable to plaintiffs’ groups. The result in some states is continual venue shifting between the legislature and the state court, and over time, some reframing of the policy problem and proposed solutions (e.g., from equity to adequacy arguments based on state constitutions’ education clauses). This interaction of institutional structures and rules, interpretative effects as evidenced in public opinion and historical norms, and resulting interest mobilization helps explain both the gap between judicial mandates and legislative remedies and why some states have experienced a long history of multiple iterations of finance equalization policies.
Policy feedback and school finance equalization: Unanswered research questions. Equalization is a mature policy whose resulting politics have been well documented over its three-decades-long history. In addition, analysts have drawn on institutional and interest-based explanations in comparing problematic attempts at equalization in states such as Alabama with more successful ones in states such as Kentucky and in explaining why equalization has been so contentious—persisting over many years—in states such as New Jersey and Texas (Carr & Fuhrman, 1999; Paris, 2001; Reed, 2001; Schrag, 2003). Consequently, research on the politics of finance equalization is at a point where a policy feedback perspective should ideally be useful in predicting subsequent policy generations.

Whether research on this topic can become more predictive is an open question. However, several issues, now emerging on the policy agenda, lend themselves to such an examination. One is the growing interest on the part of those concerned about significant resource disparities across states in having the federal government assume a greater proportion of the costs of education (Liu, 2008). A second is linking educational finance systems with school and student performance (Committee for Economic Development, 2004; Hill, Roza, & Harvey, 2008; National Research Council, 1999; National Working Group on Funding Student Learning, 2008). Both of these policy issues raise questions about the conditions under which the dominant policy paradigm focused on equalization of resource inputs within states is likely to be altered. Answering these questions requires a nuanced understanding of the extent to which existing structures and rules are institutionalized, of trends in public perceptions of the current system’s fairness and effectiveness, and of the potential for mobilizing challenges to the current policy regime. Using a policy feedback perspective to address these questions should allow for more systematic predictions about the likelihood of moving finance equalization in fundamentally new directions.

A Policy Feedback Perspective on Entrepreneurial Policies

Research on the politics of entrepreneurial or marketizing policies (e.g., charter and voucher schools, private-sector provision of educational goods and services) has largely focused on the political factors leading to the adoption of new policies (Bulkey & Fusarelli, 2007; Hess, 2006), with little attention to the politics that result from them. Consequently, we do not yet know enough about entrepreneurial policies (unlike SBA and finance equalization) to specify a conceptual framework. Yet their recent expansion presents an excellent opportunity to build policy feedback research into studies of these federal, state, and local policies.

The only comprehensive studies of policy feedback in education have focused on school choice. Buckley and Schneider’s (2007) study of charter schools in Washington, D.C., and Abernathy’s (2005) research using a variety of data on choice options in Milwaukee, Minnesota, and New Jersey reached similar conclusions. Both found enhanced parental participation and trust within the charter schools but little spillover to the larger community. As Buckley and Schneider note, “To use Putnam’s terms, school choice may create ‘bonding’ but not ‘bridging’ social capital” (p. 243).

We know little about the political effects of other types of entrepreneurial policies in education, but there is some suggestive evidence from other policy domains. For example, existing research suggests that private provision of public benefits typically results in what Hacker (2002) calls a more “subterranean political process” than for public social programs. In examining the politics of public and private pensions and health insurance, he found that the policy-making process governing private provision is less publicly visible, the scope of conflict more restricted, and policy decisions less traceable to specific outcomes. In one of only a few studies in education, Gold and her colleagues concluded that market-oriented reforms in Philadelphia have resulted in a lack of transparency in district decision making and the awarding of school contracts (Gold, Christman, & Herold, 2007; Gold, Simon, Cucchiara, Mitchell, & Riffer, 2007).

Although it is only a working hypothesis and not a solid conclusion, less-transparent decision making and public accountability are themes that emerge from research on privatization in other policy areas and from a limited number of studies in education. Whether or not less transparency is found to be a consequence of
entrepreneurial policies, researchers need to recognize that what Rowan (2002) calls the “school improvement industry” is likely to create its own set of political dynamics through increases in the number and diversity of institutional arrangements and a changed interest group environment. For example, large national private provider groups such as test publishers have peak associations working on their behalf in Washington and state capitals, so their political strategies are likely to resemble those of other economic interest groups. In contrast, in cities such as Philadelphia, grassroots community and civic groups have become service providers under contract to the school district, thus potentially making it more difficult for them to criticize the district in advocating for students and parents (Gold, Christman, et al., 2007).

The political effects of entrepreneurial policies: Unanswered research questions. Because we know so little about the political effects of these policies, the research questions that need to be addressed are quite basic and follow the conceptual framework presented in Figure 2. The first question warranting systematic investigation is how different entrepreneurial reforms have affected state and local governance structures and capacities. For example, to what extent have they created new institutions or altered existing ones, including their relationships with each other and with state agencies and local school districts? How do the varying capacities of state and local agencies to execute and monitor contracting arrangements affect the resulting interest group politics?

A second related question is the extent to which different types of entrepreneurial policies have changed rules and norms for participation, decision making, and resource allocation. The main issues deal with transparency, access, and accountability, particularly whether marketizing policies in education will be similar to those in other policy domains and lead to a weakening of democratic values. Since participation and decision-making rules governing entrepreneurial policies stem from legislation such as NCLB (Burch, 2006), addressing these questions is critical to informing the design of future legislation.

We also need to develop a much better understanding of the interpretative effects of entrepreneurial policies. For example, one could hypothesize that contracting regimes in public education will undermine its image as a transparent, community-centered institution. Alternatively, we might hypothesize that if contracting regimes make schools appear more efficient, trust in the institution will increase. At this point, we do not know whether either of these hypotheses is valid, but they deserve to be tested because understanding the long-term effects of entrepreneurial policies on schools as democratic institutions is critical.

As with policy feedback in other areas of education policy, future research should examine the groups that have economic and educational interests in entrepreneurial policies. Again, the unit of analysis should be individual groups or types of groups (e.g., for-profit and nonprofit providers, those representing educators, national reform advocates, and grassroots organizations). The focus should be on their resources, strategies, and effectiveness, and how their influence has changed in the wake of various policies. We also need to know if any affected interests are excluded or lack an equal voice in policy development and contracting.

Developing a Research Agenda to Reposition Politics

In terms of an overarching research agenda, I want to argue that while keeping the effect of policy on learning outcomes front and center in education policy research, we also need to expand our analytical horizons to ask more systematically about the kinds of politics these policies are creating. To do that, questions about the types of institutional structures being established and their effect on who participates and who decides should be routinely incorporated into studies of policy design and implementation. Because of electoral constraints, public officials tend to focus on the early-order political effects of a policy, while groups with a longer time horizon, such as education reformers, may pursue strategies that result in delayed forms of policy feedback (Jacobs, 2007). Consequently, studies need to focus on both short-term and longer term effects.

In some areas of education policy, such as SBA, the research base is more robust than in others, such as entrepreneurial policies. Nevertheless, the goal of policy feedback research should be prediction that can inform future policy design. Even when the research base is solid, reliable prediction in social science research is difficult to achieve. Yet by definition, policy feedback is about applying knowledge of past policies and the politics they create to predict how they are likely to shape the next generation. A conceptual framework based on policy feedback can shine a lens on key determinants of future policies, allowing for systematic, theoretically grounded speculation if not prediction.

A variety of research methods are necessary to address the kinds of research questions outlined for the three illustrative policies. Although education research has been at the forefront of multimethod approaches, we have not been as sophisticated about some methods central to policy feedback research as in other policy domains. One example is public opinion research. We have excellent longitudinal surveys measuring the determinants of students’ educational experiences, but we have not moved much beyond the Phi Delta Kappa–Gallup poll and similar surveys for measuring public interpretations of education policies. In comparison with studies in other policy domains and of political attitudes and participation in general, survey research in education has not been as analytically advanced in explaining variation across societal groups or the process by which attitudes are formed. Consequently, in addition to more sophisticated secondary analyses of extant poll data, future surveys should be designed to include probes of respondents’ basic value positions, such as their conceptions of equality, and how those beliefs shape their interpretations of specific policies. Similarly, policy feedback research requires an understanding of the relationship between the public’s perceptions of particular policies and how that affects their expectations for what public education should accomplish and their trust in it as a democratic institution.

We also need greater collaboration between historians of education and education policy researchers. Such interdisciplinary partnerships can help develop a better understanding of the path dependencies of current policies and of the conditions under which critical junctures or opportunities for major changes are likely to occur (Hacker, 2002; Vinovskis, 2009). It is also important that those studying policy feedback draw on the work of philosophers and theorists of democratic education in developing normative
standards for judging the kind of politics that policies are creating. Clearly, such an endeavor is open to dispute about what constitutes a “good politics.” But my guess is that there are some general criteria about which most of us would agree. These might include a politics that promotes political equality, is transparent and accountable, and encourages broad participation and deliberative decision making.

Finally, although I have focused on the adult political effects of education policies, we know that there are profound effects on students. I am reminded of that several times each academic year when students who grew up in poor neighborhoods mention the differences they observed in their high schools as compared with high schools several miles away. Luckily, the students who come to talk with me are those whose political interpretations of policy lead to decisions to become teachers in their home communities or lawyers and politicians trying to change such conditions. Yet there are many other students whose interpretation of the policies to which they are subjected is less efficacious and optimistic. It is especially for them that we have a responsibility to question what kinds of politics education policies are creating and to use our research-based knowledge in ensuring that the politics that today’s policies create lead to more enlightened and effective policies in the future.

REFERENCES


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