Politics of School Reform
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The notion of modern American school reform as contained politics may be a misnomer. Instead, since the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act in 2001, our nation’s education reform landscape has been anything but contained. Uncontained 21st century federal, state and local politics in terms of education reform represents a dynamic shift to a new, congested power paradigm in American education in our post-Nation at Risk (NAR) and –NCLB world. As the balance of power continues to shift, a vast number of education interest groups and advocacy communities at both the federal and local levels seek an expansion of spheres of influence and improved positionality in public discourse. As factions jockey for position, American school reform can be better defined as uncontained politics in uncertain times.

As noted and queried in DeBray-Pelot and McGuinn (2009), NCLB has fundamentally altered the national politics of education; in particular, the inclusion and rise of interest groups, think tanks and advocacy communities over the past decade in response to NCLB has led to a yet-to-be-answered question: What does this all mean for the future of federal education policy and politics? “In the new pluralistic and information-rich post-NCLB environment, interest groups and organizations can no longer afford not to put forward innovative proposals, forge coalitions, and actively communicate with members” (DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009, p. 39). As they do, education reformers ponder what the effects of this “new politics” might have on our legislative bodies across the nation.

The response to the doom and gloom forecasted in Nation at Risk (1983) was an increased presence by the federal government in American education, as exemplified by NCLB. The increase in national uniformity of federally imposed accountability requirements has meant less state and local control. School quality is now measured on outcomes students’ achieve. As Guthrie and Springer (2004) project, however, this is a fundamental shift in the education appraisal paradigm that will have a positive
long-term impact on both our nation’s education system and society. In the meantime, they emphasize the current weight of the landscape: “The NCLB act is a legacy of the Education Department’s NAR report. It also is a revolutionary federal enactment. Not only does it mandate a dominating accountability model for America’s public schools, but it is revolutionary in terms of the federal government’s involvement in education” (p. 32). The accountability measures mandated by NCLB have become a significant driving force in American education. As such, the federal government has captured perhaps the largest seat at the table of disruption propelling American education policy reform.

Leading the federal government’s efforts and sitting in that large seat (throne?) is the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, Arne Duncan. In a speech delivered to the National Press Club in the fall of 2013, Secretary Duncan acknowledged that every state is wrestling with complex questions concerning education and necessary partnerships needed to best serve children at risk, support teachers, transition to higher standards, control college costs, expand access to high-quality early childhood education, and simply get better faster. He believes that states are beginning to partner with the federal government to liberate themselves from rules that inhibit innovation and, rather, hold themselves to high standards of accountability. In his speech, Duncan cautions the growing number of participants in this public discourse: “Instead of talking with each other—and more importantly, actually listening to each other with respect, with humility, and with a genuine interest in finding common ground—many of these people are just talking past each other. They are ignoring plain evidence and deliberately distorting each other’s positions. And they’re clearly not focusing on children and students; they’re focused instead on false debates” (Duncan, 2013). Duncan calls for an acknowledgement of common ground, that all participants in American education reform want schools and educational opportunity to improve. With acceptance of common ground, he believes that the pace of change can quicken and that both the public and politicians can get on the same page. Unfortunately, he is sadly correct that “many of these people are just talking past each other” at this point in time. Again, we are witnessing uncontained politics in uncertain times.
McDermott (2013) explores the emergence of interstate governance of standards and testing as one example of expanding, uncontained politics. He claims that the nation’s education governance system remains highly decentralized and discombobulated despite recent federal interventions to the contrary. There is no denying that there is significant controversy surrounding national standards in the U.S. Even though NCLB derived from the federal government and requires states to have certain standards, testing and accountability policies as a condition for ongoing receipt of federal compensatory education funds, the setting of these standards still remains in the states’ hands. McDermott believes that federally mandated standards remain politically and constitutionally untenable so long as the power to set the standards rests in the hands of state legislatures. He examines the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) and, in particular, the approach adopted by the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) as an example of an emerging interstate regional consortium created to pool assessment resources to create a better testing system and higher quality test. This uncontained rise in regional consortiums to best realize the Common Core Standards is another area of growth due to the call for American school reform, but is it a realistic solution?

This tension between national-scale goals and a decentralized governance system is one of the oldest challenges facing U.S. policymakers. The CCSSI and its small-scale predecessor NECAP are both efforts to resolve this tension through state collaboration. The CCSSI and the two multistate assessment consortiums have the potential to reduce fragmentation of governance without displacing states from their leading role in education policy (p. 151).

In the end, potential is exactly that… potential. As McDermott states, “Americans remain generally resistant to the idea of greater federal authority over public education” (p. 150). As he postulates, “If dramatic change in federal education policy takes place, state governments may prefer to move in different directions. Renewed fragmentation remains a distinct possibility” (p. 151). Political containment may be a difficult aspiration as national education reform efforts move ahead.

At the more local levels, there are various interest groups and education advocacy communities getting involved in public discourse and the political apparatus that have vested interests in the direction of American school reform. For instance, as the national teaching force continues to undergo a significant
demographic makeover that it has experienced over the past few decades (Ingersoll, Merrill & Stuckey, 2014), the leadership and politics of the nation’s teaching force will require researchers, policy-makers and the public to take notice and consider their redefined voice. As Ingersoll, Merrill and Stuckey note, it is also striking that while these trends raise important questions, until recently we have seen little awareness of discussion of them or their implications—whether by researchers, by policy-makers, by educators, or by the public. But there are good reasons to investigate the sources and continuation of these changes—because if these trends continue, there will be large implications, with serious financial, structural, and educational consequences for America’s educational system (p. 27).

In particular, Teach for America (TFA) is one emerging teacher preparation and education organization that is redefining some of the nation’s approaches to developing new educators to fill increasing need. Labaree (2010) examines the distinct differences between TFA and other teacher education programs crafted by American colleges and universities. He analyzes the roots of TFA’s extraordinary rise as a major contributor in the universe of national educational reform and educational policy. There is no doubt that the TFA model is one that will be replicated and, as such, will lead to an expansion in the number of teacher education approaches the country will undoubtedly witness in this uncontained time of educational reform.

The program understands the connection between the structure of educational credentialing and the structure of social opportunity in America. It recognizes that the American educational system is a judicious mix of two inequalities—access and advantage—offering everyone a chance to gain some form of education and then making sure that everyone gets a different educational experience and a different social outcome. (Labaree, 2010, p. 54)

As TFA gains further momentum and garnishes ongoing success, copycat programs will undoubtedly emerge with similar missions and, of course, increase the voices of debate in American educational reform.

As the nation’s largest collective bargaining body for teachers, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) turned itself into a labor union to compete for political persuasion and voice. In thousands of school districts across the country, the AFT evolved between 1960 and the early-1980s, becoming arguably the most powerful force in American education due to membership and money (Moe,
Subsequent to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, the AFT’s voice and role in the national conversation about school reform became prominent. According to Moe,

> The unions now shape the public schools from the bottom up through collective bargaining agreements that affect virtually every aspect of school organization and operation. They also shape the schools from the top down by influencing the education policies of government and blocking reforms they find threatening to their interests. It is difficult to overstate how extensive a role they play in making today’s schools what they are, and in preventing them from being something different (p. 230).

As it stands now, the AFT has approximately 850,000 Prek-12 public school teachers in its association, a majority of whom work in traditional public schools with others representing charter schools and childcare centers. The scope of this advocacy community cannot be understated as it maintains one of the strongest labor union lobbying presences in Washington, D.C.

Finally, Cochran-Smith, Piazza and Power (2013) examine the numerous teacher education reform policies being proposed, piloted and debated at all levels by various interest groups and policy-makers. Policy-writers seemingly cannot keep up with the demand. They consider teacher education programs to be woefully inadequate and urgently need to be fixed, particularly in terms of meeting the demands for accountability that this period of reform maintains. Cochran-Smith, Piazza and Power focus on “the politics of policy” in this national discourse. Through the analysis of three complicated and evolving accountability initiatives, they make the case that policy (and policy proposals) are unavoidably political, and that the rapidly growing debate is both increasingly contentious and complicated, certainly not contained. They conclude that,

> [O]ur ‘politics of policy’ framework exposes the policy arena as a messy, contested space of competing interest groups and ideologies. This framework, which accounts for the interactions of governmental regulation, professional influence, public advocacy, and local agency, allows us to conceptualize policy in a broad way—not simply the purview of the state, but also of the many diverse actors and agencies that influence; not simply official governmental directives, but also public initiatives that demand response through pressure and coercion and professional initiatives with multiple consequences that may work at cross purposes… Our analysis reveals many of the contradictions and tensions that emerge as accountability policies are produced and influenced by advocacy and professional groups with particular agendas, and also interpreted, resisted, remade, and recast by practitioners...
working in particular local settings and/or collectively. In the process, we raise questions about what the intended and unintended consequences of these highly visible U.S. accountability initiatives in teacher education will be.” (p. 23)

Applying these highly related teacher education queries to the larger political landscape when it comes to national school reform, it is undeniable that the shape and scope of political discourse will continue to grow in the years ahead. To repeat, American school reform can be better defined as uncontained politics in uncertain times. These articles demonstrate that actuality.
References


