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Trends – Who Should Control Education?

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Trends- Who Should Control Education

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Abstract

Until recently, educational governance was left primarily in the hands of locally controlled school boards. In the 1980s, however, states began to reassert their influence in education policy making. More recently, the federal government has expanded its role in education through programs like No Child Left Behind. But as state and federal policy makers continue to increase their involvement in education policy, does the public support such shifts? By examining public opinion from the 1970s to 2010, we find that unlike some policy advocates who see local control of education as obsolete, the public often expresses strong support for and satisfaction with local control. At the same time, the people recognize that the state and federal government can play an important role in education. We find increased support for state and federal involvement when issues of equity are invoked by question wording.

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Introduction

Historically, educational governance in the U.S. was left primarily in the hands of over 90,000 locally elected representatives serving on nearly 15,000 school boards. While states are legally responsible for public education, authority to govern schools has mostly been delegated to local officials. In the 1980s, states began to reassert their influence in education policy. Recently, the federal government has expanded its role in education through programs like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top. Recent discussions and conflict regarding the reauthorization of NCLB demonstrates that further erosion of local control may be forthcoming. Supporting these shifts, some argue that local school governance is “a dinosaur” that needs to be replaced (Finn, 2003). But as state and the federal policy makers continue to increase their involvement in education policy, does the public support these shifts? Has the public become so dissatisfied with their local school boards that it favors state and federal control?

To understand public opinion towards educational governance, we examine changes and continuities in Americans’ satisfaction with local, state and federal control from 1970 to 2010. While much of the data come from Phi Delta Kappa, which conducts an annual poll through Gallup on education issues that is often cited in education literature, this is the first time the data on this topic have been analyzed in a comprehensive and longitudinal manner.

As education governance has shifted away from local control and toward state and federal authorities over the past four decades, the trends outlined here, which span the same time period, demonstrate that the public is less quick to endorse the abandonment of locally controlled public education. While we find some growth in the percentage of the public favoring state and

local involvement on specific issues such as curriculum standards, in many cases we find that a significant portion of the public has actually grown *more* tentative about trusting state and federal officials. Overall, solid majorities of the public continue to favor local control of public schools.

While some trend data are limited due to infrequent questioning or changes in wording, the conclusions we are able to draw demonstrate an important contradiction exists between education policy trends and public preferences. As legislators in Washington, D.C. begin to debate the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind, including proposals that call for even greater federal involvement, awareness of this contradiction is imperative. Moreover, recent polls have neglected this topic, possibly due to an assumption that everyone prefers increased state and federal control. However, this assumption is challenged by these data and demonstrates a need for ongoing data collection on this topic to understand how the people view the often-rapid changes in education governance.

Local Influence in Education Governance

We might expect that decreasing levels of satisfaction with local school boards precipitated the growth of federal and state involvement. However, the trend appears to be in the opposite direction: Americans report increasing levels of satisfaction with their local school boards. In 2006, 49 percent of respondents graded their local school board an “A” or “B” (table 1). In the two decades prior, fewer respondents (41 percent) gave their school boards an “A” or “B”. Not only do people report higher levels of satisfaction, we also see a slight decline in dissatisfaction. While 17 percent of respondents in 1984 gave their local school board a grade of “D” or “F,” that number dropped to 14 percent in 2006.

Table 1. GALLUP/PDK: Students are often given the grades A,B,C,D, and Fail to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the ... school board ... in this community, were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the public schools here---A, B, C, D, or Fail?

	5/84 (%)	5/91 (%)	6/06 (%)
A	9	8	13
B	32	22	36
C	29	30	32
D	11	12	9
F	6	8	5
Don't know	13	20	5
N	1,515	1,500	1,007

Similarly, the public has stated that it would like to see their local government have *more* influence on improving the local schools. The public has twice been asked whether “the local government” should have more or less influence on local public schools. On both occasions, the majority responded that it wanted more local influence. In 1987 and 1995, nearly two-thirds of respondents (62 percent and 64 percent, respectively) indicated that they wanted to see more influence (table 2).

To be fair, the percentage of respondents selecting more local influence remained relatively unchanged, there was a significant increase in the percentage of people reporting a desire for the local government to have *less* influence on the public schools. While only 15 percent of the public selected “less influence” in 1987, 24 percent selected less influence in 1995. The greater response of “less influence” may have been in response to the greater scrutiny schools boards were facing in the mid 1990s as leaders, such as President Clinton, criticized U.S. results on international math and reading exams and focused blame on school boards (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009). However, these data demonstrate that the public has largely favored local control, more so than the national policy discussions at this time may imply.

Table 2. GALLUP/PDK: Would you like ... the local government ... to have more influence, or less influence, on improving the local public schools?

	4/87 (%)	5/95 (%)
More influence	62	64
Less influence	15	24
Same amount (vol.)	15	8
Don't know	8	4
<i>N</i>	1,571	1,311

State Influence in Education Governance

Since the founding of this country, states for the most part delegated responsibility for running public education to local officials. This began to change in the 1980s when states began to reclaim control of educational issues. State governments reasserted their power over local education policy through increased centralization of funding, mandated state curriculum standards, and increased requirements for teachers (Odden & Picus, 2008; Reese, 2005; Steiner, 2005).

While the trend towards increased state involvement is clear, public opinion is mixed. When asked, “would you like the state government to have more influence or less influence in determining the educational programs of local schools?” the percentage of people responding, “more influence” increased somewhat from 1987 to 1995 (table 3). More interesting, however, is the change for those reporting a desire for less influence. In 1995, after more than a decade of growing state involvement in education through increased regulation of school funding, teacher certification and curriculum mandates, 37 percent of respondents reported that they would like the state government to have *less* influence. This trend seemed to continue in 2000. However,

because the question wording was altered slightly, this conclusion is tentative. When asked in 2000 whether the state government has “too much, too little or just about the right amount of say” in decisions that affect the local public schools, 43 percent of respondents selected too much influence (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan, 2000). These polls indicate that the public is less certain about state involvement than policy changes would indicate.

Table 3. GALLUP/PDK: How about the state government? Would you like the state government to have more influence or less influence in determining the educational programs of the local schools?

	4/86 (%)	4/87 (%)	5/95 (%)
More influence	45	55	52
Less influence	32	21	37
Same amount (vol.)	16	15	8
Don't know	7	9	3
<i>N</i>	1,552	1,571	1,311

Federal Influence in Educational Governance

Until the 1960s, the federal government had a very limited role in education policy. With the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, the federal government’s role was primarily tied to Title I, a program for students living at or below the poverty line. Then, in 2001 with the passage of No Child Left Behind, the federal government expanded both regulations and funding for local districts substantially (Manna, 2011). Whereas the federal government once was seen as a provider of supplemental funds for disadvantaged populations, it is now seen as a key regulator of American public school systems.

Federal involvement has been met with mixed review by the public, which has grown more polarized on this issue. The percentage of Americans who would like the federal government in Washington to have *more* influence in determining the educational programs of the local public schools remained relatively stable from 1982 to 1995 with a high point in 1987. The slight increase in 2000 (table 4) may be in response to the 2000 presidential election where education was a major campaign issue for both the Bush and Gore campaigns during the primaries (Manna, 2007).

Simultaneously, however, there has been an unsteady increase in the percentage reporting the federal government should have *less* influence. In 1982, 54 percent of the public polled wanted the federal government have less influence, and by 2000 the size of this group had grown to 61 percent of those polled (table 4). These results may represent a pushback by some against the policy movement away from local control. Further, we might speculate that the growth of the “less influence” category may be even larger today because the most dramatic increase in federal involvement came after this question was last asked.

Table 4. GALLUP/PDK: Thinking about the future, would you like the federal government in Washington to have more influence, or less influence in determining the educational program of the local public schools?

	5/82 (%)	4/86 (%)	4/87 (%)	5/95 (%)	6/00 (%)
More influence	28	26	37	28	33
Less influence	54	53	39	64	61
Same as now (vol.)	10	12	14	5	*
Don't know	8	9	10	3	6
<i>N</i>	1,557	1,552	1,571	1,311	1,093

* Less than .5%

Between 1990 and 2010, the public was asked whether the federal government should be more involved in “supporting” public education. In 1990, 73 percent of respondents wanted the federal government to be more involved (table 5). However, this number plummeted to only 46 percent in 2000 and then declined to 43 percent in 2010. Again, reflecting a growing polarization, there was also an increase in the percentage of people stating they want *less* federal involvement – going from just 10 percent in 1990 to 35 percent in 2011. It is important to note that the question wording was changed and the order of the categories shifted from 1990 to 2000, but the change was relatively minor (see table 5 notes). Given the changes in policy during this time, we suspect that while question wording may have contributed to the changes observed, it seems unlikely that such dramatic changes were due solely to question wording.

Table 5. In terms of public education in this country, do you think the federal government ... should be more involved in ... supporting public education ... than it currently is, should keep its involvement the same, or should be less involved in education than it currently is?

	Marist College ^a	GALLUP ^b	GALLUP ^b
	1/90	4/00	8/10
	(%)	(%)	(%)
Should be more involved	73	46	43
Should keep its involvement the same	10	22	20
Should be less involved	16	29	35
Don't know	2	3	1
<i>N</i>	1,044	1,557	1,552

^a In each of the following, do you think the federal government should become more involved, less involved, or its current involvement is about right? ... Supporting public education?

^b In terms of public education in this country, do you think the federal government ... should be more involved in education than it currently is, should keep its involvement the same, or should be less involved in education than it currently is?

Another form of federal involvement is establishing a national curriculum or set of educational standards. While national standards were at one time unthinkable in our

decentralized public education system, their popularity began to grow in the 1990s. Currently, 48 states support the Common Core Standards (Anderson, 2010). Unlike the polarization seen above, these poll results indicate that the public is highly supportive of national standards. When asked, “Would you favor or oppose requiring the schools in your community to use a standardized national curriculum?” we see consistent support in favor of a national curriculum from 1989 to 2002 (table 6). These data suggest solid majorities (between 59 and 69 percent) support a standardized national curriculum.

Table 6. Would you favor or oppose requiring the schools in your community to use a standardized national curriculum?

	GALLUP/PDK 5/89 (%)	ABC News 2/90 (%)	GALLUP/PDK 5/91 (%)	GALLUP/PDK 6/02 (%)
Would favor	69	59	68	66
Would oppose	21	39	24	31
Don't know	10	2	8	3
<i>N</i>	1,584	766	1,500	1,000

We again see high levels of support for federal involvement when the public is asked whether it agrees or disagrees that the “federal government should require states to set strict performance standards.” While somewhat less specific than the above reference to a national curriculum, we still see strong support at both time points (1996 and 2003), with just over two-thirds of the respondents agreeing with this statement (table 7). It seems that while the public is less certain about federal involvement generally, there is strong, stable support for federal involvement in setting a national curriculum or standards.

Table 7. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? The federal government should require states to set strict performance standards for public schools?

	CAC ^a 12/96 (%)	PRC 8/03 (%)
Agree	69	67
Disagree	28	21
Don't know	2	12
Refused	n/a	*
<i>N</i>	800	1,508

* Less than .5%

^a The categories were collapsed from strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, don't know to make a consistent comparison.

Comparing Federal, State, and Local Involvement

When the public is asked to compare different levels of government to determine who should control education policy, we find that the public holds a relatively consistent view that the federal government should not play the biggest role in how the public schools are run. For three of the four time points examined, roughly one-fifth of the public stated that the federal government should play the biggest role (table 8). For the second time point (1995), just 11 percent selected the federal government.

Public opinion, however, has shifted dramatically with regard to state and local involvement in education policy; while a little over half (51 percent) of respondents believed the state should play the biggest role in 1973, by 2002, just under one-quarter (23 percent) selected the state. The opposite trend occurred for the local response category (21 percent in 1973 and 53 percent in 2002). Contrary to actual policy changes, where the trend in decision-making has been

steadily moving into the hands of state officials, the public has increased its desire to see local government play the biggest role in determining how schools are run.

Table 8. Turning to education, what level of government should play the biggest role in how the public schools are run: local government, state government, or the federal government?

	Harris 4/73 (%)	ISI 2/95 (%)	NW 3/98 (%)	ETS 5/02 (%)
Local	21	38	30	53
State	51	44	47	23
Federal	23	11	21	20
Don't know/ Not sure	5	7	2	4
<i>N</i>	1,537	1,031	1,003	1,003

When the question wording is varied slightly to ask about “improving the quality of our public schools,” we again see the public favoring local control. In 2000, half of the respondents selected local school boards as the group that should be primarily responsible for improving the quality of public schools (table 9).

Table 9. Do you think the responsibility for improving the quality of our public schools should be primarily with the federal government, the state government, or local school boards?

	WSJ 3/97 (%)	WP 5/00 (%)
Federal government	13	13
State government	25	33
Local school boards	47	50
All (vol.)	10	n/a
Some of each (vol.)	3	n/a
Not sure/ Don't know	2	3
<i>N</i>	2,010	1,225

The public has also considered which level of government should have the greatest influence in deciding what is taught in local public schools. Unlike the national curriculum question discussed above, this wording finds small but growing favor for federal influence (9 percent in 1980 to 20 percent in 2008) (table 10). The percentage selecting the state government as the group that should have the greatest influence in deciding what is taught in the local public schools also grew over time: from 15 percent in 1980 to 30 percent in 2008 (table 10). While increased favor for state and federal control means a decline in those selecting local control, the majority of respondents (46 percent) in 2008 still selected their local schools boards as the group that should have the most influence in deciding what is taught. While this represents a significant decrease from 1980 when 68 percent favored local control, the decline in public opinion does not match the rapid and dramatic changes in actual governance policies over this same time period.

Table 10. In your opinion, who should have the greatest influence in deciding what is taught in the public schools here -- the federal government, the state government, or the local school board?

	CFKF 5/80 (%)	ABC News 2/90 (%)	GALLUP/ PDK 5/03 (%)	GALLUP/ PDK 6/06 (%)	GALLUP/ PDK 6/07 (%)	GALLUP/ PDK 6/08 (%)
Federal government	9	20	15	14	20	20
State government	15	29	22	26	31	30
Local school board	68	50	61	58	49	46
Don't know	9	1	2	2	*	4
<i>N</i>	1,530	766	1,011	1,007	1,005	1,002

* Less than .5%

When the wording is altered to use the phrase “standards for student achievement” (table 11) rather than “what’s taught,” (table 10) the public is more supportive of state and federal

control. In two polls, asked just two years apart (1996 and 1998), we see much smaller support (39 percent and 22 percent, respectively) for local control over “standards for student achievement” and larger support for state and federal control (table 11).

Table 11. Which level of government should set standards for student achievement -- the federal government, state government, or local government?

	US News 3/96 (%)	NW 3/98 (%)
National/ Federal government	24	31
State/ State government	27	40
Local/ Local government	39	22
Combination (vol.)	4	n/a
Unsure/ Don't know	5	7
<i>N</i>	1,000	750

When asked in this comparison format, we see higher levels of support for state and federal control when the question wording does not prompt respondents to think about their local community schools. When respondents are asked to think generally about setting academic standards, they are more supportive of state or federal control. However, when asked to think about “what is taught in the public schools here,” respondents strongly preferred local government. One possible explanation for this finding is that people have a strong affinity for their own local schools. While people tend to give very high grades to their local schools, they often report significantly lower grades for the broader school system. This finding resembles the research on public satisfaction with its congressional representative as compared to congress as a whole (Cook, 1979; Parker & Davidson 1979; Patterson & Magleby 1992). This seemingly

incongruous finding may simply reflect that the public thinks everyone else's schools need federal or state oversight, but its local schools have adequate academic standards and, therefore, it would prefer those decisions to be made locally.

Discussion

While policy discussions in education today seem to assume that local control of education is a “dinosaur left over from the agrarian past and an education sinkhole that supports the status quo” (Finn, 1991), the public sees ways that all three levels should be involved in education policy. Often, the public indicates a preference for local control. However, we do find support for state and federal control in specific circumstances. These findings suggest that, like many in education, the public is attempting to balance the tradeoffs between equity and localism. Rather than seeing one level of government as absolutely superior, the public seems to support the notion that different levels are better suited for different roles. For policy decisions related to the promotion of equity across all schools, the public favors state and federal government. When issues of the day-to-day operation of schools are considered, the public believes that local officials best serve this role. This delineation points to a sophisticated public that aims to balance the difficult tension within educational federalism.

The public indicates that local authorities are best equipped to make and oversee decisions regarding daily classroom activities. When key words such as “running schools” or “improving schools” are used in questions, the public prefers local authorities be in charge of these policy decisions. Further, these findings are particularly powerful given that the public has maintained a preference for local control even when national policy discussions have criticized local control and have taken steps to diminish local decision making ability through policy changes.

However, the trends also indicate that over time the public has increased its support for the federal and state government to intervene in issues of equity and standards. For example, when asked about standards, a subject that invokes images of consistency across the entirety of the educational system, the public expressed increased support for state and federal involvement. Like standards, funding is also an issue that implies system-wide equity. Unfortunately the public has not been asked consistently overtime its views on education funding. However, in 2004 another poll found that only 33 percent of the public felt that the local government was the level that “would be most effective at making sure that funding is equitable” (Educational Testing Service, 2004). This further supports the idea that when asked about education policy designed to create equity, the public favors more centralization at the state or federal level. This is consistent with literature indicating that centralization is important when working to create a more equitable educational system (Green, 1983).

Conclusion

While some policy debates frame local schools boards as “obsolete” (Maxwell, 2009), the public has assigned above average performance grades to the activities of local school boards over the past thirty years and continues to express a strong need for local control over aspects of education policy. Understanding these public preferences are particularly important in light of the planned re-authorization of NCLB in 2011. Future research and policy should continue to explore how the public considers such tradeoffs rather than simply dismissing local control as an outdated form of education governance. Moreover, education polling lacks consistent wording across many surveys. Therefore, in order to make more definitive conclusion about public preferences in education governance, survey experiments are needed to identify ways that the public is sensitive to wording changes. This will further our understanding of what the public

wants for its largest public good.

Appendix

ABBREVIATIONS –

ABC: ABC News

AP: Associated Press

AP/ISOS: Associated Press/IPSOS-Public Affairs

CAC: Coalition for America’s Children

CBS: CBS News

CFKF: Charles F. Kettering Foundation

CNN/USA: Cable News Network/USA Today

CPS/UM: Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan

ETS: Educational Testing Services

GALLUP: Gallup Poll

GALLUP/PDK: Gallup Poll for Phi Delta Kappa

GALLUP/CNN/USA: Gallup/CNN/USA Today

HARRIS: Louis Harris & Associates

ISI: Institute for Social Inquiry/Roper Center

NBC: NBC News

NW: Newsweek

PRC: Pew Research Center

MARIST: Marist College

WSJ: Wall Street Journal

WP: Washington Post

Data presented in this article were obtained from the iPOLL Databank and other resources provided by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. Unless otherwise indicated in the table notes, all surveys involved national adult samples. Data were collected through personal interviews or via the phone (see below). When conducted via the phone, respondents were located via random digit dial. Where oversamples were involved, results were weighted to represent the national adult population.

Personal Interviews – CAC (12/96), CFKF (5/80), Harris (4/73), PDK (5/82, 5/84, 4/86, 4/87, 5/89, 5/91, 6/06), Marist (1/90).

Telephone – ABCNews (2/90), ETS (5/02), PDK (5/95, 4/00, 2001, 2002, 5/03, 6/06, 6/07, 6/08, 6/10, 8/10) WSJ (12/94, 3/97), Gallup (6/00,8/10) RD (2/95), NW (3/98), US News (3/96), WP (5/00), PRC (8/03).

Survey response rates were as follows:

Gallup/PDK (AAPOR RR3): 5/03 14 percent, 6/06 11 percent, 8/10 11 percent

Survey response rates for Marist (1/90), ABC News (2/90), NW (3/98), Gallup/PDK (5/82, 5/84, 4/86, 4/87, 5/89, 5/91, 5/95, 4/00, 6/00, 6/02, 6/07, 6/08), ETS (5/02), Harris (4/73), RD (2/95), the WSJ (12/94, 3/97), CAC (12/96), PRC (8/03), CFKF (5/80), US News (3/96) and the WP (5/00) were unavailable. Attempts were made to elicit response rates from each of these organizations, but they were not made available to the authors. The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance from Alyssa Brown of Gallup for her assistance with the documentation.

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