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## AWAKENING TO THE POLITICS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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### THE LEGACY OF THE PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT

I am going to admit at the outset that I am not a philosopher of education. Indeed, the fact that the philosophy of education is not my field is the main reason that I was asked to respond to the essays, “The Ohio Transfer Articulation Guide” by Kathleen Knight Abowitz and “The Policy Agenda for Teacher Education: The Ohio Story” by Xiaodan Huang. My field is, however, one of the “foundations of education”; my specialty is the politics of education, an area which, because of the vagaries of licensure requirements, has traditionally been assigned to administrator preparation programs rather than to teacher education. My students are largely practicing teachers and, in some cases, practicing school administrators who wish either to move into administration or to move up in the administrative hierarchy. It has long been considered essential that they understand some of the rudiments of the politics of the world that they desire to enter.

When I began teaching at Miami University in 1990, however, most of my students resisted the idea that they needed to know anything about politics. They saw political activity as a disreputable enterprise that could easily sully their purity as educators and uncritically accepted such ancient bromides as “Politics and education don’t mix” and “Let’s keep politics out of education.” My students were, of course, the unconscious heirs of the Progressive Movement of the turn of the twentieth century. At that time the municipal reformers instituted a number of changes in local government, including the government of school districts. Among their reforms were the small school board; nonpartisan, at-large elections for school boards; and the establishment of school administrators as “experts” who supposedly made rational, rather than political, decisions.<sup>1</sup> Almost a hundred years later, this ideology was alive and well in my classes. As a result, I usually spent the first couple of class sessions of each of my politics in education courses building the case that since public schools were funded by tax money and children were legally compelled to attend school, it was neither possible nor desirable to separate politics and education.

Looking back, I am astonished at how much things have changed in just fifteen years! I no longer have to build a case for studying the politics of education. In fact, having lived through state proficiency tests, state standards, state report cards, the legislature’s failure to reform school finance in the wake of the Ohio Supreme Court’s decisions in *DeRolph v. Ohio*, Praxis, the proliferation of charter schools, the Cleveland voucher program, and No Child Left Behind, most of the K-12 teachers and administrators who wind up in my

classes have no reservations about mixing politics and education. They are much more likely to ask me insistently: “What can we do to influence the legislature?” than to argue with me that as school leaders they will not need to be politically literate. In short, their political consciousness has been raised by the events of the last fifteen years.

#### THE POLITICAL AWAKENING IN PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

We teacher (and administrator) educators in public institutions of higher education have been somewhat slower to awaken to the political forces that shape our work. Like K-12 teachers and administrators we perform work that is funded to a considerable extent by the government and which impacts the quality of the education provided in both public and private K-12 schools. Clearly, it is a legitimate matter of public concern. Yet for many decades we enjoyed a great deal of freedom to teach what we wanted to teach, the way we wanted to teach it. We believed that, like all academics, we had (and should have) academic freedom. That is why the last few years have been cruelly disillusioning as we have forced to face the fact that we too are influenced by a politics of education over which we have little control. In these two articles we have reactions by two teacher educators to the lowering of the heavy hands of the state legislature on what they teach and how they work. Abowitz seems to have had a precise moment of recognition. She was sitting in the office of the associate dean, who at least squirmed uncomfortably in his seat as he told her that under a new state law he was obliged to identify a course required of prospective teachers as “Introduction to Education” and that it would have to cover topics spelled out by the State of Ohio. He had chosen one of *her* courses—a course that she had helped design and had taught and coordinated for many years—to be her university’s “Introduction to Education” course for the Ohio Transfer Articulation Guide. She had thought of “her” course as a social foundations course that challenged students to think critically about American schools, but the changes she was going to have to make would, at the very least, water it down. Huang seems to have experienced a more gradual recognition process. Probably it began while she served on the Ohio Teacher Education Licensure Advisory Committee (OTELAC), which included six higher education representatives, and rapidly accelerated when OTELAC was replaced by an Educator Standards Board (ESB), which only includes three. At some point she realized that the influence of teacher educators was being deliberately reduced, even though the decisions made by the ESB would greatly affect their work.

People react in different ways when they realize that their work lives are being shaped by political forces over which they have little control. One common reaction is to remain passive and inactive. Another is to complain and perhaps even write a few scholarly articles, but to take no direct action. A third is to resist either covertly or overtly. Both Abowitz and Huang, however,

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recommend a fourth possible response: political action. It is their proposed political action that I've been asked to critique from the perspective of someone who has some theoretical knowledge about and practical experience of the political process. On the surface, Abowitz and Huang recommend quite different courses of action. Abowitz proposes a way of revising her course that both meets the state's expectations and permits her to maintain her professional integrity. She also urges other social foundations professors to strive to produce work that both university scholars outside the social foundations field and K-12 practitioners will read. Huang urges activities that are closer to what we ordinarily think of as political action: contacting representatives; checking the Ohio Department of Education and Ohio Board of Regents web sites frequently; and developing what she calls a "policy silo," or organized group that works together to achieve political goals. I would like to suggest, however, that both Abowitz and Huang are recommending political courses of action. In fact, both are suggesting that teacher educators build their power. Abowitz is arguing that social foundations professors break out of their isolation and find allies among professors in other fields and even among teachers in the public schools while Huang is arguing that teacher educators need to build their power by obtaining knowledge and speaking out on issues of concern to them. In my opinion, both approaches would be essential if teacher educators really want to have any impact on the policies that shape their professional lives. I will discuss each set of recommendations in turn and critique them from the perspective of practical politics in the real world.

#### OVERCOMING THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE EDUCATION ESTABLISHMENT

When Abowitz describes the theory-practice split that divides teacher educators and admits that many practicing K-12 educators consider social foundations courses worthless, she is really describing one dimension of a major political characteristic of the education establishment in the United States, including Ohio: It is extremely "fragmented," or divided. Out in the K-12 districts, one of the legacies of the Scientific Management Movement of the early twentieth century is that classroom teachers and administrators distrust each other.<sup>2</sup> Forty-nine of the 50 states—the exception is Hawaii—are divided into many school districts, and at the state level these districts fight against each other, with suburban, urban, and rural districts forming distinct lobbying groups. Although K-12 education and post-secondary education have a great deal in common, they tend to think that they inhabit different worlds. Even within colleges of education we cannot agree; those who prepare teachers and those who prepare administrators often have low opinions of each other, and few of them think highly of the people who inhabit Education Psychology Departments. Frankly, I was unaware of the theory-practice split between professors who teach methods courses and those who teach social foundations courses until I read Abowitz's article, but it does not surprise me, for I have

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been long aware of the strong tendency of American education to fragment along multiple fault lines.

But *mark my words*: state legislatures like it this way! Soon after I moved to Ohio, a member of the Ohio General Assembly told me with a condescending smile that educators in Ohio are very divided and that the legislature consciously plays them off against each other. He assured me that as long as the state's educators are unable to agree on major issues, the legislature will be able to do whatever it wants to do with public education in Ohio. Undoubtedly, legislators in most other states could say the same. Therefore, when Abowitz suggests a few modest steps to bridge some of the divisions in our field, she is really suggesting that we strive for greater unity. And that is essential. As long as we are fighting among ourselves, we are weak and vulnerable. If we were more unified, if we could focus on a few key issues about which we agree, we would have more power, and those in positions of power would be more likely to listen to us.

Abowitz also suggests that social foundations professors reach out to others, primarily through their writing. In my opinion although that might be helpful, it would not be sufficient to bridge the distances that she describes. It would be more important to find appropriate spaces and times within our colleges to meet each other face to face so that we can build relationships across disciplines and departments and grow beyond our preconceived notions and stereotypes of each other. Once we get to know each other, once we begin to talk to each other, we may begin to read each other's work. And, ultimately, we may begin to work together to address the political issues that affect us all.

In addition, Abowitz recommends that teacher educators reach out to K-12 practitioners as well as to other teacher educators; if we really want to build our power, that step will be essential. The political reality in Ohio is that the Ohio Education Association (OEA), with 100,000 members and a multi-million dollar budget, is by far the most powerful education group in the state. The second most powerful group is the much smaller Ohio Federation of Teachers (OFT), which is concentrated in a few urban areas. Although the OFT is not nearly as large as the OEA, compared to other groups such as the Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators and the Ohio School Boards Association, it is mammoth. Often the OEA and OFT work together, and when they do they dwarf—in both numbers and resources—all the other education interest groups put together, including any groups that teacher educators might be able to field today or might put together in the future. However, research conducted in the late 1980s found that although the teacher unions are the most powerful education groups in most states, when *all* the education groups, including the unions, work together on an issue their power considerably exceeds that of the teachers' unions working alone.<sup>3</sup> Since money plus large numbers of adherents equals power in politics, this means that all education

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groups have a strong motive for learning to work together. Thus, if teacher educators want to influence state politics, they will have to enter into coalitions, preferably coalitions that include one or both teachers' unions. In order to enter into such a coalition, however, they would have to engage in a great deal of the type of "re-constructing of [their] identities" that Abowitz describes. This would be a painful and time-consuming process, and one that would require much courage, perhaps more courage than most teacher educators have.

#### WORKING TO INFLUENCE POLITICIANS

While Abowitz recommends that we undertake the internal political work of reaching out to other groups within the academy and in the public school system, Huang makes recommendations that are more overtly political and which target the outer world of advisory boards, the Ohio Department of Education, and state government. However, her list of possible activities is, in my opinion, inadequate. Therefore, I would like to suggest some modifications in her approach.

First, it is important to remember at all times that *effective organization is one of the major sources of power*. The idea that teacher educators need to build a "policy silo" is Huang's most essential idea, but she does not emphasize it or indicate its crucial importance. I would therefore suggest that building an organization should be her central priority and that all the other suggested activities should be subordinated to such a group and coordinated by it. Piecemeal activities done by individual people scattered here and there across Ohio will not be effective and will have little or no impact on the policy process.

Next, I would recommend that any teacher educators who wish to become politically active should learn the discourse of political science and use it. It is foolish to develop a political discourse limited to teacher educators, yet this seems to be happening. For example, the term "policy silo" used by Huang is a term that I have never encountered before, even though I have taken numerous political science courses and am very familiar with the literature in that field. Based on the definition that Huang gives, I believe that a "policy silo" is what political scientists would call an "interest group". I realize that Huang borrowed the term from Penelope Early, another teacher educator. But why should teacher educators reinvent the wheel and develop a policy discourse unique to them? A rich literature on interest groups has developed over the last fifty years, but it will remain inaccessible to people who only know the term "policy silo." Moreover, since most politicians use the political science discourse that has been developed in academia, it is a language with which they are familiar. Using the already existing discourse would therefore enhance the credibility of teacher educators who want to be politically active while failing to use it and using one of their own devising instead would suggest that they are political amateurs unfamiliar with the real world of

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politics.

Finally, any teacher educators who want to become politically active must learn how to talk to the powerful. This means not only learning to use political science discourse and learning to frame concepts in ways that powerful people, such as those in legislatures, Congress, and governor's mansions understand, but also trying to comprehend their world view. Unfortunately, most of the politicians currently in power in Ohio and in many other states have an understanding of the world quite different from that of most teacher educators. For example, here is a statement made by a former member of the Ohio General Assembly in an interview with me in 2002: "I have an abiding faith in competition and the power of the marketplace to effect change and to improve [school] systems." And here are some words from Jennifer Miller, who ran as a "Christian Conservative" in her November, 2005, school board election, and won: "I ran because I care about what our students are being taught and to help better manage the community's school money....I don't take this lightly. Conservative and Christian values are under represented in Mason schools."<sup>4</sup>

When I hear comments like these, I cringe, and I am sure that many of my readers do as well. Nonetheless, both of these people represent widely held views, views that are quite common in the halls of power. Educators who want to be politically influential in the early twenty-first century must learn how to communicate with people who see the world in these and other ways. This is admittedly a challenging task, but even so educators can take steps toward understanding these people better. First of all, and most importantly, they can read books that analyze and explain these ideologies as well as books written from these points of view. Once they understand how many politicians think, they should develop arguments and identify evidence that will appeal to people who hold such beliefs. For example, neither adherents of market ideology nor Christian conservatives have the slightest interest in such popular higher education causes as democratic schooling or diversity. However, if educators can couch a policy argument in terms of economic growth or family values, they may be heard. Finally, educators who want to become politically active should try to identify well-constructed, *quantitative* studies that support their positions. For example, Abowitz should try to find research that supports the value of the social foundations while Huang should look for research that supports the value of teacher education. Not only are market ideologues and Christian conservatives impressed by such studies, research on issue definition suggests that Americans generally are swayed by numerical evidence.<sup>5</sup> Given this fact, it would be wise to marshal as much of this sort of data as possible when presenting one views to the powerful. In communicating with them, *we* must adapt to their discourse, for they certainly are not going to adapt to *ours*.

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## A FINAL CAUTION

In conclusion, I would make it clear that I am not advocating that all teacher educators add to their already busy professional lives a detailed program of political activity. Rather, I was asked to respond to two papers that *recommend* such activity. Becoming politically active is one way of reacting to the situation that currently faces us and which Abowitz and Huang describe in such a compelling manner. But political activity is not for everyone. To be blunt, it is time-consuming, exhausting, and at times depressing. It is also fascinating, exciting, and eye-opening; it is not without reason that some have called politics “the only game for real adults.” I would urge anyone who is considering becoming politically active to carefully weigh all the costs before jumping in. I would also urge him or her to take steps to gain some political savvy before taking the leap rather than trying to reinvent the wheel. In this response I have tried to sketch a general outline of what that would entail.

## NOTES

1. Joel Spring, *The American School, 1642–1993*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994).
  2. Raymond E. Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
  3. C. Marshall, D. Mitchell, and F. Wirt, *Culture and Educational Policy in the American States* (New York: Falmer Press, 1989).
  4. M.D. Clark, “Elected on Values Platform,” *Cincinnati Enquirer* (20 Nov. 2005), B5.
  5. Joel Best, “Dark Figures and Child Victims: Statistical Claims about Missing Children,” in *Images of Issues* (New York: deGruyter, 1989), 21–37.
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