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E is for Elephant, J is for Jackass: The Role of Politics in Education

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Academic Leadership Journal

K-12 institutions find themselves under the realm of No Child Left Behind. A central question is, “What does this really mean in terms of the educational world?” State legislatures are more and more influencing the organization and operation of institutions of higher education. It seems that the roles assumed by individuals in education and the roles assumed by individuals in politics have taken drastic, if not cataclysmic changes. No Child Left Behind and state-mandated funding formulas (to mention only a few) are not the only times in which educators and institutions have found themselves inundated by politics. The days of the small, one-roomed, red-bricked school house have definitely come and gone. In its place have arisen the multi-leveled acropolises we now call “P.S. something or other.” Gone are the days of small agricultural colleges. These small A&M institutes are now supplanted by the million-student universities. Cities have grown and with this growth have come more and more students for fewer and fewer teachers. Something or someone had to step in. The question is, “Were the politicians or the politics (the laws, the court cases) the right choice?” The paper to follow will delve into the role of politics in education historically, currently, and in the future by looking at Supreme Court decisions, State and Federal laws, as well as teacher opinions using one of the basest cornerstones of education, the ABCs (some letters omitted or “left behind”). Simple overviews of incidents of politics and education meeting will be displayed with author conclusions and opinions reserved until the end.

A is for Adler v. Board of Education of New York

One of the best places to begin the examination of the role of politics in education is to look at the most supreme arena for the administration of politics: the Supreme Court. In the court case Adler v. Board of Education of New York, the Supreme Court looked at the rights of employees of public schools. The case centered on whether or not employee screening, at that time looking at whether or not the potential employee was a member of a subversive group such as the communist party, etc., denied said potential employee’s constitutional rights of free speech and free assembly. The Supreme Court decreed that denying employment based on the potential employee’s membership in subversive groups was not unconstitutional. Furthermore, the Supreme Court held that it was reasonable to expect potentially-employed teacher to sign, “A loyalty oath that all teachers were required to take and mandated expulsion of any teacher found guilty of advocating ‘a form of government other than the government of the United States or of this state’” (Howlett & Cohan, 2008, p.59). It is clear from this intrusion into the organizational design and flow of educational institutions, that much had been misaligned and needed alteration.

B is for Brown v. Board of Education

No paper discussing the role of politics in education would be complete without looking at one of the grandest examples of politics reaching into the educational realm—desegregation of public schools. Education for the longest time in our history was one of the final landmarks of segregation within the public eye. It was the monumental court case of Brown v. Board of Education which changed this landmark of segregation. It was from this court case that the Supreme Court denied public schools, and by them to deny states the right to exclude individuals of color from white only schools. Schools have

been “desegregated” since 1955 in part due to this decision. Most historians stop here. Unfortunately, the bleeding of this instance of politics did not cease in 1955. The state of Arkansas continued the battle. In the much-hidden court case, *Cooper v. Aaron*, the state of Arkansas was mandated to desegregate their schools in the Little Rock School District immediately. The Little Rock School District had requested an additional two and one half years to plan and implement a desegregation policy while remaining segregated during this interim. It was unanimously decided in this case that remaining segregated during this time period would stand in direct violation of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (Minow, 2008, p. 617).

The sense of desegregation was not simply contained in K-12 institutions. One-race colleges found themselves facing the reality as well. J.H. Braddock, III (1979) wrote that, “results indicate that choice of a desegregated college (predominantly white college) depends on various types of antecedents; however, desegregation practice—the experience of having attended a desegregated high school—manifests some of the largest direct and total effects among the total set of predetermined variables in the model.” This indicated to colleges attempting to attract students, especially those from desegregated high schools, a gross need to be equally desegregated.

C is for Compulsory Education

Compulsory education is a term used by the states in acts that require students to attend school until that student reaches a certain age. According to Federal Law, the individual states are autonomous in their ruling and running of their own educational systems and requirements. In other words, each state determines what ages are included in their compulsory education act or laws. These acts are listed as examples in order to display the role of politics in determining who should participate in education. Politics is being used here as the deciding factor of school-age children rather than parents.

Compulsory education certainly affected the organizational structure of schools and has often been the “chink in the chain” for individuals vying for private schools, etc. In the Supreme Court case of *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, the Supreme Court decided that, “parents [had] the right to opt out of public schools, contains the uncomplicated declaration:

‘No question is raised concerning the power of the State reasonably to regulate all schools, to inspect, supervise, and examine them, their teachers and pupils; to require that all children of proper age attend some school, that teachers shall be of good moral character and patriotic disposition, that certain studies plainly essential to good citizenship must be taught, and that nothing be taught which is manifestly inimical to the public welfare’” (Reich, 2008, p. 20).

The Court decried that enforcing the act, enforcing the requirement that the child attend a public school, was unconstitutional, but that the child should be required to attend a school. In this sense, politics defined the organization and its structure by first allotting the power to the states and then limiting that power—keeping it from becoming absolute.

Higher education institutions are often affected not by compulsory laws or acts, but rather by attendance policies. Many colleges and more specifically many faculty members insist upon compulsory attendance policies in their academic coursework. Karen L. St. Claire (1999) investigated the impact of compulsory attendance policies on student motivation and found that there was little

correlation. She posits that colleges and universities need not focus on attendance and rather focus on the other academic factors.

D is for...

Here is our first child left behind.

E is for Elephant

The elephant is the symbol for the Republican Party. The Republicans are known to support military power, but now propose that they are the powerhouse behind No Child Left Behind. The act was, actually, introduced by Senator Kennedy and endorsed later by President Bush. The Grand Old Party's platform lists that they will ensure stronger accountability for all children, encourage education methods that work, provide flexibility and control to the states, allow families more information and choices, extend the programs created by NCLB, localize educational decision-making within municipal governments, increase federal funding of education, increase teacher support, increase support of early childhood programs and early childhood training programs, and lower costs of college (2008 Republican Platform, 2008).

The Republican platform affords for an emphasis on higher education in regards to financial aid (albeit a tightening of the belt), access, and proposed affordability. Of utmost interest, the Republican platform makes many mentions of preserving individual rights (e.g. free speech) while in the realm of higher education (2008 Republican Platform, 2008).

G is for Guns in Schools

Columbine, Colorado changed everything for schools. Many schools had policies that worked against allowing weapons in schools, but after the tragedy at Columbine High School, the stakes were raised. In many situations, the politicians looked to strengthen the laws, while others fought against the strictness of the laws in hopes of keeping kids in schools instead of out of schools where they could be affected by outside sources that might promote weapon use. K-12 institutions might have been affected first, but recent events have equally illustrated higher education institutions' weaknesses as well.

Miller, Hemenway, and Wechsler (1999) conducted a study of college students pertaining to firearm ownership on college campuses. These surveyors were attempting to find correlation between firearm possession and other ills affecting the college community. Their results indicated that institutions of higher education need to examine their policies (organizational structures) regarding firearms on campus. They stated,

Having a gun was positively associated with driving after binge drinking, being arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol, and damaging property as a result of alcohol ingestion. Students with guns were also more likely to be injured severely enough to require medical attention, especially for injuries occurring in fights or car crashes... Overall, students with guns at college were more likely than others to engage in activities that put themselves and others at risk for injury (Miller, Hemenway, & Wechsler, 1999, p. 9, 11).

H is for Hierarchy

By simply examining the existence of No Child Left Behind and other political reaches such as A Nation at Risk, it is easy to see that politics have helped form hierarchies in education. Of utmost interest is the idea that politics has placed the government as the head of the hierarchy. It must be admitted, though, that many efforts are made through educational law to spread the power amongst the players. Schools, both public K-12 and higher education, operate under autonomous governance granted by the federal government to the states and then subsequently to the respective authority of the school, be it a board of trustees or the superintendent/school board. Even this dispersion exhibits the power of the government in the creation of the hierarchy.

A study published in 2008 by Kolawole Kazeem and Noah Musa examining the role of the home (a miniscule element of the hierarchy) in the learning process exemplified the political hierarchy. Kazeem and Musa (2008) state,

Teachers, using the policies put in place by government are responsible for the day-to-day running of the school system particularly... School learning and curriculum development was also found to be an issue that concerns both the government and the school alone... Indeed, curriculum development tends to remain the responsibility of a few, an elite group located at the top of a hierarchy (p. 1000).

I is for Illinois ex rel. McCollum v. Board of Education

One of the hot items in education yesterday, today and very likely in the future is separation of church and state. The questions surrounding this issue are whether or not there is such a thing, whether or not the Constitution contains items that require separation, etc. In the Supreme Court case of Illinois ex rel. McCollum v. Board of Education, the appellant sued on the grounds that the school district and school board was allowing religious teachers to come into the public schools and for a period of thirty minutes teach religious subjects. The appellant argued that this violated parts of the First and Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution by allowing a joint public and private school setting, thus using tax-supported property to support religious instruction. The Supreme Court decreed that the school board was wrong to allow the use of school property for religious teaching.

More recently, the Florida Supreme Court, in October of 2008, tossed out two initiatives that were aimed at eliminating the moratorium which prevents the use of public funds for religious institutions. These initiatives,

would have opened state funding to religious organizations. They also provided a means by which state money could be used for vouchers at private schools—including religious institutions. Florida law currently prohibits taxpayer-funded vouchers for private school tuition (Christian Century, 2008, p. 18). Both of these cases exemplify the powerful reach of politics into the day-to-day procedures of education institutions.

J is for Jackass

The Democratic Party has traditionally been known to be the proponents of education in opposition to the GOP's favoring the military, yet this line becomes more and more blurred with each passing year. In their revised platform of 2008, the democrats believe in an education system where,

graduation from a quality public school and the opportunity to succeed in college must be the birthright of every child—not the privilege of the few. We must prepare all our students with the 21st century skills they need to succeed by progressing to a new era of mutual responsibility in education (Renewing

America's Promise: The 2008 democratic national platform, 2008, p. 18).

How is this any different than any other party's stand on education? Wouldn't it be counter-productive to take an opposing stand on education? Don't all Americans want their children to succeed in school? The platform goes on to say that the federal government will meet its financial obligations to education, lower class size, place greater qualified teachers in each classroom, ensure achievement for all ethnicities, ensure high-quality assessments, lower the costs of college education, and implement citizenship programs with the ultimate goal of fixing the gaps of No Child Left Behind (Renewing America's Promise: The 2008 democratic national platform, 2008).

In terms of organizational design, the DNC offers several recommendations for K-12 and higher education. These include qualified teachers, qualified principals, innovative teaching strategies, short-term accelerated training programs, technical education programs in post-secondary education, and a push to make college more affordable (Renewing America's Promise: The 2008 democratic national platform, 2008).

L is for Law Enforcement

Since the Gun-Free School Act, schools have taken measures to ensure the safety of their students. Part of this action was to create law enforcement positions within the schools. These officers are known as School Resource Officers or SROs. One of the central questions surrounding the creation of SROs is the safety of these individuals and the safety of the students. In other words, are SROs an appropriate reach of political power? Amanda Nickerson and Matthew Martens (2008) examined the role of law enforcement in schools as a means of preventing disruptions. They found that there are two prevailing approaches to crime prevention:

A focus on physical safety is often characterized by a 'get tough' approach that includes zero tolerance policies (e.g., suspending students who violate school rules), restricting autonomy through the use of punitive measures, and policing functions, such as hiring resource officers and installing metal detectors... Approaches concerned with psychological safety are often educational or therapeutic, with the assumption that improving school climate, involving parents, teaching conflict resolution, and counseling prevent and reduce school disruption and crime (Nickerson & Martens, 2008, p. 229).

Furthermore, Nickerson and Martens (2008) found that nine out of ten principals supported the zero tolerance policies and the creation of SROs. Even with support, does all of this make SROs the right choice or even a safe choice?

M is for Matriculation

Matriculation is the act of being admitted into college. How has politics bled into the college admission procedure? Simple enough, politics has taken a hands-on approach to matriculation. One example of this hands-on approach is Affirmative Action. The push for schools to have a greater sense of diversity is pervading the process of school admissions. The question is this: Is it appropriate for politics to define the number of a said ethnic group allowed in college? Devon W. Carbado and Cheryl I. Harris (2008), both professors of Law at UCLA, examined two initiatives currently on ballots in Michigan and California which are aimed at "eliminating state promulgated race-based affirmative action programs"

(p. 1139). What these professors espouse is that it is close to impossible to eliminate race as a criterion in the selection process. They offer several examples of how race is inherent in the application process: name, race selection, personal statement, etc. and how colorblindness is likely unavoidable.

N is for No Child Left Behind

The powers of Russia were the cause behind the iron curtain. Such the same is No Child Left Behind. This is the view by many teachers today, but to fully understand the ramifications of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), teachers need to fully understand this act. The best way to view the effects and implications of NCLB is to directly quote the creators. According to A Guide to Education and No Child Left Behind, a handbook on education under NCLB from the United States Department of Education (hitherto referred to as U.S. Dept. of Ed), the act is broken into specific goals. "Improving the Academic Achievement of the Economically Disadvantaged" is the first goal set aside by NCLB and is the flagship program of Title I which is supported by a 13.3 billion dollar budget (A Guide to Education and No Child Left Behind, 2004, p. 14). The second goal set aside by NCLB is "Preparing, Training, and Recruiting Highly Qualified Teachers and Principals" which is the guiding force behind the statement highly qualified which President Bush supports via a 5.1 billion dollar support budget for training, incentives, loans, and tax relief (A Guide to Education and No Child Left Behind, 2004, p.15). The third goal established by NCLB is "Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students" aiming to aide all students from all ethnic and cultural backgrounds to be successful in schools. This goal is backed by a 681 million dollar budget (A Guide to Education and No Child Left Behind, 2004, p. 16). An additional goal launched by NCLB is "Giving Parents Choices and Creating Innovative Education Programs." This goal allows the creation of charter schools, and the ability of students to transfer to higher-scoring schools and is backed by a budget of \$504 million (A Guide to Education and No Child Left Behind, 2004, p. 17). "Making the Education System Accountable" is a goal that is intended to increase the accountability of state standards via a budget of \$401 million in order to develop and implement new standards and assessments (A Guide to Education and No Child Left Behind, 2004, p. 18). In addition to added accountability, NCLB provides flexibility to the states. This goal is called "Making the Systems Responsive to Local Needs" (A Guide to Education and No Child Left Behind, 2004, p. 19). President Bush allocated a budget of 1.4 billion dollars, which "includes \$1.1 billion for the Reading First program, \$132 million for Early Reading First programs, and \$100 million for the Striving Readers program," under the NCLB goal "Helping All Children Learn to Read" (A Guide to Education and No Child Left Behind, 2004, p. 20). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is incorporated in NCLB's final goal, "Helping Children with Disabilities" which aims to ensure that disabled students are not left behind and incorporates an 11.1 billion dollar budget (A Guide to Education and No Child Left Behind, 2004, p. 21).

O is for...

Here's our second child left behind.

P is for Punishment

Spare the rod and spoil the child. At least this is how it used to be. In schools, historically, teachers were allowed to punish a child by spanking him or her. Today, many schools still retain this right. Ultimately though, the federal government has taken a hands-off approach to this topic and has left the burden on the states and municipal governments. According to the Supreme Court in the court case

Ingraham v. Wright, the Supreme Justices declared that corporal punishment did not violate the eighth amendment nor due process entitled under the fourteenth amendment (Dupper & Montgomery Dingus, 2008). This being noted, there is an unprecedented amount of research which shows the negative side effects of corporal punishment. Scientists and psychologists have noted that “corporal punishment... has been shown to be associated with damaging physical and psychological outcomes that can affect some children for the remainder of their lives” (Dupper & Montgomery Dingus, 2008, p. 245). They offer examples such as associations with conduct disorders, the reduction of a child’s ability to problem solve, aggression, defiance, and they point to the fact that children punished in this manner often perform at lower levels (Dupper & Montgomery Dingus, 2008).

Q is for Qualified

One of the labels that No Child Left Behind has created is “highly qualified,” but what does this mean? How does this impact learning? According to NCLB, a highly qualified teacher: “a teacher must (1) hold a bachelor’s degree, (2) hold a certification or licensure to teach in the state of his or her employment, and (3) have proven knowledge of the subjects he or she teaches” (A Guide to Education and No Child Left Behind, 2004, p.15). This encourages schools to be staffed with only highly qualified teachers. In order to do this, teachers must enroll in rigorous training programs within the states in order to pass state-mandated tests that qualify the teacher as highly qualified to teach their subject.

R is for Recruitment

Simply put, the push for retention as a funding factor exemplifies the political influence in the organizational design of both K-12 and higher education institutions. Researchers have pointed out that, “For previous undergraduate students four years were typically required to complete a degree program. Today’s freshman may now spend five, six, and sometimes in excess of six years in order to successfully complete an undergraduate degree program” (Hall, Smith & Chia, 2008, p. 1087). This has prompted many legislatures to implement funding formulas that take this and the numerous drop-out numbers into consideration. The push is to generate institutions which maintain an interest in programs geared toward graduation and true retention. The California Community College system was one such institutional organization which began focusing on retention. It was within this system that recommendations were made to tie retention numbers to the funding formula more heavily. Rachel Rosenthal (2006) stated that, “The current process of funding based upon enrollment on the first day of the fourth week does not force the community college system to focus on student success at the maximum level possible and may, in fact, work against sustained institutional efforts for student retention” (p. 5). Rosenthal further recommends that, “A modified funding model that rewards retention at the end of each semester may also assist in addressing California’s economic workforce development needs. As the community colleges are charged with addressing both the social and economic workforce requirements of our great state, it is critical that this educational system have all its limited resources aligned to maximize their utilization” (2006, p. 5).

S is for...

...another child left behind.

T is for Taxes

Taxes are the inevitable evil when discussing politics. Some parties embrace taxing, others avoid it like the plague, but taxes are definitely an important issue to look at when deciding the role of politics in education. Taxes are linked to education because, quite simply, education costs money—money to fund programs, money to buy books, money to feed our students, etc. All citizens in most states pay property taxes that are directly linked to the public education programs of those said states. Because of this, and because of the importance that most states (and some politicians) place on education, the taxes either increase to ameliorate the schools, decrease when schools seem to do well, or (most commonly) pendulum-swing as schools succeed or fail. Ultimately, states hold in their hands the power of impacting education by adding funding (taking these funds out of the pockets of the constituents), or by limiting funding (putting money back in the pockets of the constituents) and thus limiting programs. Taxing is also reactive to the economic environment. Jeffery I. Chapman (2008) wrote that, “as economic conditions improved after the 2001 recession, state governors became optimistic. All 50 outlined plans to improve education” (p. 124). Regardless of influencing factors, taxes will remain a potent example of politics’ reaching hands.

U is for...

Here’s our fourth child left behind.

V is for Vacation

No Child Left Behind has been discussed often already in this exploration of politics in education. This is because the mandate has created such an importance on the above listed pieces of information by pulling them to the forefront and making them pinnacles of quality education. Educators have focused on many elements of the act which they feel are impossible to achieve. One such example is the projected, or rather required, degree of gains over the next decade. Perhaps one solution to this problem would be to revert back to year-round schooling. Revert is mentioned here because schools, not all but most, began as year-round institutions and did not gain vacations until farming became a necessity. Once Americans moved west, and began heavy farming, schools let out during the harvest time which usually fell around the summers when the weather was good. While farming remains relevant and necessary, the impetus and need for child labor is not as important today as it was in years past. This has led many to propose that American education move away from the agrarian academic calendar. According to the National Association for Year-Round Education, “Nearly 2.2 million students enrolled in more than 3,000 K-12 schools followed a year-round schedule during the 2005-06 school year” (St. Gerard, 2007, p. 56). Positives of this camp include the fact that students would remain in instructional settings instead of lapsing to vacation time, staff would cease the work-until-the-next-break mentality, and instructional time could be allotted for more remediation time. Colleges already operate on a year-round calendar and many are seeking innovative ways of bridging the vacation gaps to offer additional programs, etc.

W is for...

It seems we are losing children more rapidly...

X is for...

NCLB has been in existence for a couple of years, and yet children continue to fall through the cracks.

Y is for Yearly Adequate Progress

No Child Left Behind, in its efforts to ensure accountability, has created a clause known as Adequate Yearly Progress (inverted in the title of this section to satisfy the alphabetical nature of this paper). AYP is delineated by each individual state as set aside within the NCLB act. As stated in the act, “each state establishes a definition of ‘adequate yearly progress’ (AYP) to use each year to determine the achievement of each school district and school. States are to identify for improvement any Title I school that does not meet the state’s definition of adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years” (A Guide to Education and No Child Left Behind, 2004, p.22). Furthermore, the act delineates who is to be subjected to these guidelines by establishing that each school, “must demonstrate that at least 95 percent of all students participated in the state assessment at each grade. This requirement must be met for all students in a school and for subgroups of those students defined by race/ethnicity, poverty level, disability, and English language proficiency” (A Guide to Education and No Child Left Behind, 2004, p.22). AYP and- more importantly- its ramifications have altered the structure, delivery, and decision-making organizations of schools.

Z is for...

Alas, another child left behind.

Conclusions

The question that I was left with when I finished this whole tirade was, “What does it all mean?” When I started this adventure, I hoped to glean some knowledge of the impact of education on politics and politics on education. What I hear educators complain about is their level of exhaustion with politicians and the role(s) these politicians play in defining the role of the teacher. I hear people support and attack NCLB. The campaign ads during the 2004 presidential election had the candidates using education as a battleground. The fact was this: education had become something pertinent on everyone’s mind. I found myself asking, though, “Is this a new thing?” This concern for education is nothing new.

In regards to the influence politics has on the shape of education, the organizational design, I found that the very creation of education was political. From the start, politics has consistently played a role, if not the role of every member of the cast, in education. What I am alluding to is the fact that the citizenry is concerned with education for its future, the citizenry empowers the politicians in a democracy, the politicians decide on education through law-making, and- more recently- the politicians are beginning to take a more active role in the running of education. When you take layer by layer away from the equation, on the other hand, the resulting conclusion is that the people- the citizenry- put the whole mess in motion.

Digging as far back as the single, one-room school houses, I had hoped to find the autonomy of education that I hear and have heard educators starving after. What I found, for starters, was very little history about education from these days. Moreover, what was found was that politics existed here as some hand in the shaping and molding of education. This shaping took place in a far more deliberate fashion: the township politics created and controlled education exactly (verbatim) as it deemed appropriate. The question that remains is whether the politics of today is any different than the powerfully shaping politics of control of the township politics of our antiquated history?

It

too must be noted, as a conclusion, the political influence is not necessarily a bad thing. When examining the above elements, it is too easy to often disparage the impact, yet without much impact

education might have lost its sense of autonomy. In other words, the direct political impact of the small townships might still exist and the democratic political impact of law-making might be completely absent. Again, the positive impacts of school safety and accountability must not be excluded and must never be forgotten. Without these intrusions, schools would definitely be a completely different place both organizationally and fundamentally. If this change hadn't taken place, how radically different would the output of education look/feel/etc.?

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