
The Changing Nature of Federalism in Education: A Paradox and Some Unanswered Questions

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Focus of Presentation

- The trajectory of federal and state education policy
- Contemporary federalism and the paradox of “fragmented centralization”
- Unanswered questions and potential research agendas

The Trajectory of Federal and State Education Policy

- Parallel institutional histories
 - The federal government and the states:
 - o Have both moved from persuasive (constitutive) policies to administrative ones, and after 1965, to increasingly regulatory ones.
 - o Have become mutually dependent —“borrowing strength” and interacting in a dense institutional and interest group environment.
- Converging policy goals
 - Prior to the 1980s, state education policy was less focused on social equity goals than federal policy.
 - School finance lawsuits, state concerns about economic development, and the standards and accountability movement have led to similar federal and state policy goals.

Contemporary Federalism and the Paradox of “Fragmented Centralization”

- State standards and accountability policies, NCLB, and IDEA have led to more centralized and coherent policies.
- Yet considerable fragmentation remains:
 - Significant resource disparities among states and localities.
 - Considerable variation in content and performance standards from state to state.
 - Differing histories and political cultures have led to markedly different state roles.
 - Policies are implemented through a large and loosely-connected governance system.

The Paradox of Growing Centralization and Continued Fragmentation

- Reliance on high-stakes testing recognized as one of the few ways top-down policies can change classroom instruction.
- Unless state and local institutions are fundamentally altered, future policy proposals aimed at greater coherence are unlikely to reduce fragmentation to any substantial degree.
- Two big ideas about how to improve education dominate policy agendas: The centralizing assumptions of standards and accountability and the decentralizing tenets of school choice and competition.
- Cost-shifting from the federal and state levels to local districts is a defining characteristic of the current federalist system.

Unanswered Questions and Potential Research Agendas

Aimed at developing a better understanding of the political interests, administrative capacities, and public expectations that education policy federalism has generated over the past 40 years (*policy feedback*)

- Is fragmented centralization inevitable?
 - embedded in constitutional principles or the result of inattention to institutional design
- How does the intergovernmental lobby shape education policy?
What factors explain how groups representing state and local policymakers define and advance their interests?
 - “borrowing strength” vs. veto groups
- What kind of politics will increased privatization create at the federal and state levels?