

THE POLLS—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 policymaking. More recently, the federal government has expanded its role in education through programs like No Child Left Behind. But, as state and federal policymakers 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 local control. Additionally, the public recognizes 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 in question wording.

Introduction

Historically, educational governance was left primarily in the hands of over 90,000 locally elected representatives serving on nearly 15,000 school boards. Although 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 the No Child Left Behind

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Act (NCLB). Supporting these shifts, some argue that local school governance is “a dinosaur” that needs to be replaced (Finn 2003). But, as state and federal policymakers 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 toward educational governance, we examine changes and continuities in Americans’ satisfaction with local, state, and federal control from 1970 to 2010. Although much of the data come from Phi Delta Kappan, which conducts an annual poll through Gallup 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 shifted away from local control and toward state and federal authorities, the trends outlined here demonstrate that the public is less quick than are education policy leaders to endorse the abandonment of locally controlled public education. Though we find some growth in the percentage of the public favoring state and federal 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.

Although some trend data are limited due to infrequent questioning or changes in wording, the conclusions we draw demonstrate an important contradiction between education policy trends and public preferences. Recent polls have neglected this topic, possibly due to an assumption that everyone prefers increased state and federal control, and the data drawn on here demonstrate a need for ongoing data collection on this topic to understand how people view often-rapid changes in education governance.

Local Influence in Education Governance

We might expect that negative public opinion toward local control of schools precipitated the growth of federal and state involvement. However, trends indicate the opposite. The public reports increasing levels of satisfaction with their local school boards and strong support for more local government influence in education. In 2006, 49 percent of respondents graded their local school board an “A” or a “B” (table 1). In the two decades prior, fewer respondents (41 percent) gave their school boards an “A” or a “B.” Not only do people report higher levels of satisfaction, but we also see a slight decline in dissatisfaction. Whereas 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. Similarly, in 1987 and 1995, nearly two-thirds (62 percent and 64 percent, respectively) of respondents indicated that they wanted to see more local influence on the public schools (table 2). Importantly, there was also a significant increase in

Table 1. Grading School Board Performance (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
<i>N</i>	1,515	1,500	1,007

Table 2. Local Government Influence on Improving Schools (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

the percentage of people reporting a desire for the local government to have *less* influence on the public schools during the same time period (15 percent in 1987 and 24 percent in 1995). The growth of this category may reflect growing scrutiny of school boards in the mid-1990s as leaders such as President Bill Clinton criticized U.S. results on international math and reading exams and focused blame on school boards (Cohen and Moffitt 2009). Overall, however, the trends demonstrate that the public largely favored local control, more than national policy discussions may imply.

State Influence in Education Governance

Since the founding of this country, states mostly 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 and Picus 2008; Reese 2005; Steiner 2005).

Table 3. State Government Influence on Educational Programs (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

Although the trend toward 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 significantly from 1986 to 1987 and then declined slightly in 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, a significant proportion of respondents (37 percent) reported that they would like the state government to have *less* influence (table 3). The growth of the category wanting less influence seemed to continue in 2000 (not shown); however, this conclusion is tentative because the question wording was altered slightly and asked 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. Using this format, 43 percent of respondents selected “too much influence” (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan 2000).

Federal Influence in Educational Governance

Until the 1960s, the federal government had a 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. In 2001, the federal government expanded regulations and funding for local districts substantially through the passage of No Child Left Behind (Manna 2011). Whereas the federal government once was seen merely as a provider of supplemental funds for disadvantaged populations, it is now a key regulator of the American public school system.

The public has met federal involvement with mixed reviews. 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, in which education was a major campaign issue for both the Bush and Gore campaigns during the primaries (Manna 2007).

Meanwhile, there has been an unsteady increase in the percentage reporting that the federal government should have *less* influence. In 1982, 54 percent of the public polled wanted the federal government to have less influence. This percentage declined significantly in 1987 and then rebounded in 1995. By 2000, 61 percent of respondents reported that the federal government should have less influence (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, as the most dramatic increase in federal involvement came after this question was last asked.

Between 1990 and 2010, the public was asked whether the federal government should be more involved in public education. A 1990 Marist poll asked whether the federal government should be involved in “supporting” public education, a term that implies less competition with other levels of government. When asked in this way, we find significant support (73 percent) for more federal involvement (Marist 1990). However, when the term “support” is not included, just under half of the respondents (46 percent in 2000 and 43 percent in 2010) report that the federal government should be more involved (table 5). Whereas it is likely that the change in question wording contributed to the drop observed from 1990 to 2010, we also speculate that the increased federal involvement during this time, including Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1993), the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), and the Race to the Top initiative (2009), may account for some of this large decline.

Table 4. Federal Government Influence on Educational Programs (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 0.5%.

Table 5. Federal Government Involvement in Education (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 about the same, or should be less involved in education than it currently is?)

	GALLUP 4/00 (%)	GALLUP 8/10 (%)
Should be more involved	46	43
Should keep its involvement the same	22	20
Should be less involved	29	35
Don't know	3	1
<i>N</i>	1,557	1,552

Another form of federal involvement is establishing a national curriculum or set of educational standards. Whereas national standards were at one time unthinkable in our decentralized public education system, their popularity began to grow in the 1990s. To date, 45 states have formally adopted the Common Core State Standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2012). Poll results indicate that the public is highly supportive of national standards.

We find consistent support for a national curriculum from 1989 to 2002, with solid majorities (between 59 and 69 percent) supporting a standardized national curriculum (table 6). Similarly, polls indicate high levels of support for the federal government requiring states to set strict performance standards. Though this is 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 6. Requiring a Standardized National Curriculum (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

Table 7. Requiring Performance Standards (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	PRC
	12/96	8/03
	(%)	(%)
Agree	69	67
Disagree	28	21
Don't know	2	12
Refused	n/a	*
<i>N</i>	800	1,508

*Less than 0.5%.

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

(table 7). It seems that although the public is less certain about federal involvement generally, there is strong, stable support for federal involvement in setting a national curriculum or standards.

Comparing Federal, State, and Local Involvement

When the public is asked to compare different levels of government, we find a consistent view that the federal government should not play the biggest role. When asked who should play the biggest role in how schools are “run,” only between one-fifth and one-quarter of the public selected the federal government for three out of four time points (table 8). For the second time point (1995), just 11 percent selected the federal government. In contrast,

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

	Harris	ISI	NW	ETS
	4/73	2/95	3/98	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

a growing percentage of the public selected the local government (21 percent in 1973, growing to 53 percent in 2002) (table 8). 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). Contrary to actual policy changes, where the trend in decision-making has been steadily moving into the hands of state officials, the public maintained or increased its desire to see local government play the biggest role in determining how schools are run.

The public has also been surveyed about 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 local public schools also grew over time: from 15 percent in 1980 to 30 percent in 2008 (table 10). Although increased preference for state and federal control means a decline in those selecting local control, the plurality of respondents (46 percent) in 2008 still selected their local school boards as the group that should have the most influence in deciding what is taught. This represents a significant decrease from 1980, when 68 percent favored local control, yet this decline in public support for local control does not match the rapid and dramatic changes in actual governance policies over this same time period.

When the wording is altered to use the phrase “standards for student achievement” (table 11) rather than “what’s taught” (table 10), the public more strongly supports state and federal control. In two polls, asked just two years

Table 9. Responsibility for Improving Schools (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

Table 10. Influencing What Is Taught (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 0.5%.

Table 11. Responsibility for Setting Standards (Which level of government should set standards for student achievement—the federal government, the state government, or the 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

apart (1996 and 1998), we see much smaller support (39 percent and 22 percent, respectively) for local control over “standards for student achievement” and greater support for state and federal control (table 11).

Questions pertaining to curriculum or “what is taught” appear contradictory at first. When respondents are asked to think generally about setting academic standards (tables 6 and 7), they appear to be more supportive of federal control. However, when asked to think about “what is taught in the public schools here,” respondents strongly preferred the local government (table 10). One possible explanation for this finding is that people have a strong affinity for their own local schools. Whereas 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 specific congressional representatives as compared to with Congress as a whole (Cook 1979; Parker and Davidson 1979; Patterson and Magleby 1992). This seemingly incongruous finding may simply reflect that the public thinks everyone else's schools need federal or state oversight, but one's local schools have adequate academic standards. Therefore, the overall preference is to keep those decisions locally controlled.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although policy discussions in education today assume that local control of education is a "dinosaur left over from the agrarian past and an education sink-hole that supports the status quo" (Finn 1991), the public sees ways that all three levels should be involved in education policy. The public often indicates a preference for local control. However, we do find support for state and federal control in specific circumstances. These findings suggest that, rather than seeing one level of government as absolutely superior, as many education policy leaders often do, 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 asked about standards, a subject that invokes images of consistency across the entirety of the educational system, the public expresses 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 over time its views on education funding. However, in 2004, one 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). Similarly, when asked about ensuring equitable education outcomes across racial/ethnic groups, a 2001 poll found that only 29 percent of the public felt the local government should be responsible for this (Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan 2001).

The public believes that local officials best serve the role related to issues of day-to-day operations. Consistently, we find strong and stable support for local control of "running schools" or "improving schools." These findings are particularly powerful given that this preference remains strong even as national policy discussions have criticized local control and taken steps to diminish local decision-making ability through policy changes.

Because of the striking contradiction between public preferences and policy initiatives in education, future research should continue to explore how the public considers trade-offs between levels of government rather than simply dismissing local control as an outdated form of education governance. In order to make more definitive conclusions 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/CNN/USA: Gallup/CNN/USA Today
 GALLUP/PDK: Gallup Poll for Phi Delta Kappa
 HARRIS: Louis Harris and Associates
 ISI: Institute for Social Inquiry/Roper Center
 MARIST: Marist College
 NBC: NBC News
 NW: Newsweek
 PRC: Pew Research Center
 WP: Washington Post
 WSJ: Wall Street Journal

The survey results reported here were obtained from searches of 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 dialing. Where over-samples 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: ABC News (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), WSJ (12/94, 3/97), CAC (12/96), PRC (8/03), CFKF (5/80), US News (3/96), and 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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