

Can New Forms of Governance Improve America's Schools?

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Who governs America's schools? The answer is complicated, because thousands of actors are involved at local, state, and national levels. There are nearly 14,000 local school boards, and the fifty states have education agencies and boards of education that operate alongside legislatures, governors' offices, and state courts. At the national level, finally, executive branch leaders, committees in Congress, judges, and large numbers of federal administrators all make decisions and take actions that influence the course of U.S. education.

One way to grapple with the implications of such diversification of authority is to consider the important but often overlooked distinction between policy and governance. **Educational policies** are the programs, laws, rules, and regulations intended to influence the daily work of the nation's schools. For example, many states have legislated policies mandating that teacher evaluations include measures of student achievement.

Education governance is a broader concept referring to the processes through which leaders, working in venues such as school boards, agencies, and legislatures, create and implement policies. This conceptual distinction suggests an important question: as Americans work to improve schools, how much should the focus be on launching new policies – and how much should it be on devising improved forms of governance in education?

What Policies and Governance Do

A policy focus might call for funding new preschool programs, adjusting training opportunities for teachers, incorporating new materials into classroom curricula, or setting standards designed to improve student achievement. In contrast, reforming governance would be less about the details of such new programs and more about reallocating authority across levels of government – or changing the relationships within a single level of government. At the local level, for example, governance reforms in education could rearrange the authority and responsibilities of school boards, city councils, and mayors.

Reforms in policy and governance can both influence results. To remedy sagging student achievement, we might adopt a new reading program – a policy change. Or we could reorganize how school boards are elected to better reflect the needs of the community through a governance change. Which approach works better? That depends on circumstances, of course, but typical arguments are often repeated. Why change governance, some say, when a new program will suffice? But advocates of governance reforms maintain that changes in who can influence what happens in schools can do more to improve performance than adding new programs. In their view, each existing program may once have made sense on its own, but too many are now jumbled in a complex mixture, producing confusion or inefficiencies on the ground.

The Impact of Centralized Governance

In a recent research project, I examined the impact on student achievement of more or less centralized education governance in the U.S. states. For the years 2003, 2005, 2007, and 2009, I asked to what degree varied governing arrangements helped to account for overall differences in achievement, as well as gaps between economically disadvantaged students and other students.

The research considered three key aspects of governance centralization. For **leadership**, I looked at the authority of the governor to appoint the education chief and members of the state board of education. For **administration**, I considered states to be more centralized if they had fewer, more consolidated local school districts. In the realm of **finance**, I considered states more centralized as nonlocal sources accounted for a higher share of education funding.

Scholars have often found it challenging to tease out the impact of governance, because many factors influence student success and the contributions of governing arrangements are not always consistent or clear. My findings reveal some of these complexities.

- Across grade levels and subject areas, states where governors install the education chief or appoint members of the state board of education were much more likely to have smaller achievement gaps between economically disadvantaged students and others – but typically there was no significant relationship between centralized leadership and a state’s overall level of student achievement.
- Administratively, my results suggested an interesting governance tension. States with more school districts tended to have higher levels of student achievement, a desirable outcome. But more districts were also associated with larger achievement gaps. Perhaps more local control is conducive to boosting student success overall, but administrative fragmentation makes it hard to reduce differences in performance that promote equity.
- In my study, financial centralization – that is, a larger share of funding from nonlocal sources – was unrelated to variation in overall student achievement or the size of achievement gaps. This finding is especially interesting in light of the intense scrutiny that state legislatures and courts have given to the role state authorities should play in smoothing out inequalities in the local revenues available to schools.

The Future of School Reform

The relationships between education governance and student success are complex, and further investigations of varied approaches would help improve current debates about school reform. New or modified programs may well produce enhancements in areas ranging from curricula to teacher effectiveness. In addition, modifying broader governing arrangements could help make programs more effective. Governance reorganizations alone are unlikely to be the elixir that cures the nation’s educational ills, yet as evidence accumulates we may identify patterns of authority, administration, and resource allocation that maximize possibilities for teachers and students to succeed. Fragmented education governance is the U.S. tradition, but in some realms improved coordination may propel the reforms we need today.

Read more in Paul Manna, “Centralized Governance and Student Outcomes: Excellence, Equity, and Academic Achievement in the U.S. States.” *Policy Studies Journal* 41, no. 4 (2013): 683-706; and Paul Manna and Patrick McGuinn, *Education Governance for the Twenty-First Century: Overcoming the Structural Barriers to School Reform* (Brookings Institution, 2013).