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# Governing American Education

Why This Dry Subject May Hold the Key to Advances  
in American Education

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# Introduction and summary

You could be forgiven for thinking that the way we govern American education is a subject that only a dry-as-dust education policy specialist can love. But I will argue here that it might be the most important topic in American education today and that we will not be able to meet the challenges that now face us until we rethink the way we approach education policy.

The fundamental changes taking place in the global economy pose an existential threat for high-wage economies like the United States. Countries with high-wage economies will either figure out how to convert their mass education systems into systems that can educate virtually all their students to the standards formerly reserved for their elites or these nations will see their standard of living decline until it meets the now much lower standard of living of countries with much lower wage levels, countries that are producing high-school graduates better educated than ours.

Many high-wage countries have in fact been busy completely redesigning their education systems with this goal in mind and are now in fighting trim. But the United States is not among them. The United States is hobbled by a design for education governance that reflects a distrust of government, a naïve belief that it is possible to get education out of politics, and a conviction that the best education decisions are those that are made closest to the community.

This paper looks at the governance issue from a decidedly transnational perspective. This is because it is very hard to get a perspective on education governance as practiced in the United States only by looking at the United States. Different states in the United States have decidedly different policy preferences, but the governance system is pretty much the same across the country. It is only when one looks at the way the education systems of other countries are governed that one realizes that there are other ways to govern education systems, that the U.S. system of governance is an international outlier, and that governance structures can enlarge or limit the possibilities of change and improvement in education systems in crucially important ways.

Much of the description of the governance systems in other countries in this paper is based on the dozens of volumes of field notes that the National Center on Education and the Economy has compiled over the course of the 25 years it has been doing research in the top-performing countries. Most of that research is unpublished, though some of it has been summarized in a report produced by the National Center on Education and the Economy for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, or OECD,<sup>1</sup> and in a book published by the Harvard Education Press.<sup>2</sup> For this paper that research has been supplemented with extended conversation with leading experts and the relevant literature has been reviewed and also cited in the references.

The countries looked at for this project are Australia, Canada (Ontario), China (Hong Kong and Shanghai), Finland, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Singapore. All are “top performers,” among the countries with the highest student achievement and greatest equity as reported by the OECD survey—*Program for International Student Assessment*, or PISA. Germany and Flemish Belgium were also studied.

The top-performing countries have highly regarded, well-staffed ministries of education at the state or national levels that have the capacity to design and implement the kinds of complex, highly coherent, and powerful education systems now needed. The United States, by way of contrast, has competing centers of power everywhere one looks. Governors fight for control of the education system with chief state school officers, elected chief state school officers with state boards of education, mayors with school superintendents, states with the federal government, schools with districts, and districts with state authorities. At the state level, a vast welter of different agencies, commissions, and institutions, each with an important policymaking role, operate completely independently of each other.

The result is a system in which, more often than not, no one is in charge and any policy coherence is accidental. If we lack the political and institutional structures needed to govern our education system effectively, we cannot possibly design, much less implement, the complex systems we now need. That statement applies no matter one’s education reform agenda.

If Americans are going to decide which level of government we want to run our education systems, the only realistic choice is the state. No one wants a national education system run by the federal government, and the districts cannot play that role.

But state education agencies have been steadily drained of staff for years and do not have the capacity or the authority to redesign the education systems of their states to meet the challenges posed by the fundamental changes that have taken place in the global economy over the past two decades. Each state needs to consolidate in its state department of education the policymaking and implementation authority that now resides in a welter of state-level commissions, agencies, and other independent bodies.

And the United States will have to largely abandon the beloved emblem of American education: local control. If the goal is to greatly increase the capacity and authority of the state education agencies, much of the new authority will have to come at the expense of local control.

In this paper, I contrast the theory of local control with the reality and find that local control is the source of many of the nation's problems related to education. At the same time, I show how and why the role of the federal government in the governance of the American education system has grown dramatically in recent decades, to the point that, in practice if not in its rhetoric, the federal government has begun to act like a national school board. And I explain why that is not a good thing for this country.

The paper proposes a major redesign of the education governance system in the United States. Just as former President George H. W. Bush convened a meeting of the governors to consider new goals for American education, President Barack Obama should convene a national meeting to consider how the nation's governance system for education can be modernized to meet the challenges of the global economy. The main theme of this paper has to do with the finding that every nation that tops the list of global education performers has an agency of government at either the state or national level where the education buck stops—an agency that has the responsibility for the health of the education system and the authority and legitimacy needed to provide the effective leadership that results in a coherent, powerful education program. No such agency exists in the United States, where that authority and responsibility are dispersed among four levels of government, and, within the state level, among many different actors.

I propose to greatly strengthen the role of the state education agencies in education governance, at the expense of “local control,” and of the federal government. In this plan, school funding would be the responsibility of the state, not the locality, and the distribution of state funds for schools would have nothing to do



with the distribution of local property wealth. Thus the governance roles of the local districts, as well as the federal government, would be significantly decreased. Independent citizen governing boards would be eliminated. The line of political accountability would run to mayors and governors through their appointees. At the state level, the governance of the schools, higher education, early childhood education and youth services would all be closely coordinated through the governance system. Though the role of the federal government would be curtailed, there are some very important national functions that must be served in a modern education system. I propose that a new National Governing Council on Education be established, composed of representatives of the states and of the federal government, to create the appropriate bodies to oversee these functions.

Many people will disagree with and some will be infuriated by this analysis, to say nothing of the proposals made here. My purpose, however, is not to persuade you of the merits of these proposals but rather to persuade you that we need to redesign our system of education governance. If you do not like my solutions, come up with your own. The one sure thing is that our system of education governance, designed to address the challenges the United States faced a century ago, is hopelessly out of date. Getting governance right is the key to getting education reform right. If we fail to do so, we will have neither the capacity to design effective education systems nor the capacity to implement the systems we design. So, strange as it may seem, this dry-as-dust topic may be topic number one.

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