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The Great Society in Education: A Persistent National Consensus?

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Abstract

This article reviews Gareth Davies, *See Government Grow: Education Politics from Johnson to Reagan* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2007). The commentary focuses on the author's discussion of federalism and ideological change in the nation's education politics.

KEYWORDS: education, federalism, ideology

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With the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) due for reauthorization, questions abound about how the legislative process will alter the nation's main K-12 education law. Will Washington loosen or tighten its expectations for schools and districts? Will performance be redefined to include growth of student achievement, rather than annual snapshots of school performance? Will the law's remedies for schools not making yearly progress – including public school choice, tutoring, corrective action, and restructuring – be expanded, narrowed, or incorporate greater flexibility? Behind these policy questions lurks a political one: Will elected officials even complete a reauthorization on time? Or might 2007 repeat the dynamics of 1999, during which a divided federal government punted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization to the next president and Congress, thus providing George W. Bush an opportunity to propose NCLB?

Those questions of the moment occupy literally thousands of policymakers, interest groups, reporters, local school officials, teachers, and ordinary citizens across the country. But beyond NCLB's details, the law's reauthorization presents a terrific time to consider the federal role in education more generally. Readers with that larger interest would be well-served to read Gareth Davies's terrific new book, *See Government Grow: Education Politics from Johnson to Reagan*.

The work is a mix of political and policy history. It provides a long-run view, built around the ESEA and several other important, but often underemphasized, federal efforts in education. Political scientists seeking an overall theoretical framework will not find one, however, given that the book is constructed in a narrative style focusing on several policy episodes and key turning points. Still, *See Government Grow* is a valuable work for anyone interested in American education policy, ideological dynamics in the country's politics, and shifts in federal-state relations. The book also represents a superb example of the valuable insights that can emerge when a talented historian musters evidence from primary documents, contemporary accounts, secondary sources, and personal interviews.

Davies's main purpose in *See Government Grow* is to explain an apparent anomaly in the nation's history since the 1960s. Some have argued that America has become more conservative since the height of the Great Society period. But simultaneously, Davies observes, Washington has reached its hands more deeply into the nation's education system. How could that impulse for a larger federal presence – typically associated with liberals – have coincided with a more conservative swing in the nation's politics? Focusing on changes from Lyndon Johnson's presidency through Ronald Reagan's first term, Davies adroitly musters a riveting collection of evidence to explain how conservatives came to accept, and even help extend, the federal role in American education.

The narrative proceeds in three main sections. The first examines the ESEA's development and early implementation, focusing on its programmatic expansion

and its role in the turbulent budgetary politics of the late 1960s and 1970s. The second section contains four policy case studies that orbit a general theme of educational federalism. The cases cover school desegregation, bilingual education, the genesis of the federal role in special education policy, and the politics of school finance. A final, relatively brief section considers the Carter and early Reagan years, with special coverage of the U.S. Department of Education's founding and its early battles for survival.

Substantively, the book adds much to our understanding of federal education policy and politics. Two contributions stand out in my mind. First, Davies's thorough research reveals why comprehending Washington's role in schools requires looking beyond the two anchors on Pennsylvania Avenue, the White House and Congress. Presidents and legislators have been important, and Davies's archival evidence captures their impact, often in lively colorful terms. But policy entrepreneurs beyond those national institutions merit close attention, too.

For example, Davies argues that changes in educational federalism during the 1970s were driven largely by creative lawyers, bureaucrats, and judges in the lower federal courts. A narrow focus on ESEA and the priorities of presidents – who in the 1970s were generally uninterested in the substance of education reform and more concerned with its cost – would miss important policy changes and the forces behind them. Davies's case studies show that the Great Society's impulse to promote equality of opportunity (and its minimal attention to educational results), actually builds momentum during that decade given federal policy changes affecting disabled students and English-language learners, especially.

Second, the evidence in *See Government Grow* regarding a conservative convergence to Great Society ideas provides a fresh interpretation not only of the nation's educational policy, but also its political history. Many readers will be surprised to learn that Robert Bork, who, as solicitor general arguing the government's case in *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), defended the rights of non-English speakers to “assistance in learning the language of instruction in the schools.” Not providing those services, Bork reasoned, would be “a constitutionally impermissible act of *de jure* segregation, from which petitioners are entitled to relief” (p. 159). Similarly, it will be news to many readers that conservative Mississippi Republicans, Trent Lott, then a House member, and Thad Cochran in the Senate, butted heads with Ronald Reagan over his administration's stated preference to abolish the fledgling federal education department (pp. 265-6). And others will likely be surprised to learn that over twenty freshman Republican House members, who won office in 1980 on Reagan's long coattails and were known as “Reagan Robots,” formed the Coalition Against Reductions in Education and called Reagan's early proposed education cuts “unacceptable” (p. 265).

How does Davies explain these facts, given the conventional wisdom that conservative jackhammers during the 1970s and 1980s were busy chipping away at LBJ's Great Society agenda? Tactical, political considerations certainly played a role, and the author chronicles several: Nixon's concerns over losing Hispanic voters, which echo today's political strategizing for this burgeoning voting bloc (p. 147); the power of constituent politics and need to deliver federal aid to congressional districts, conservative and liberal alike (p. 255); and even the pragmatism of Ronald Reagan, which often disappointed the "movement conservatives" in his administration on education matters (pp. 250 and 268).

But more broadly, Davies argues that by the early 1980s, "most conservatives had come to terms with the expansion that had taken place in the federal presence [in education] since 1965. . . . Rather than fight the expanded federal role, Republicans increasingly sought a share of the political credit" (p. 282). Put another way, conservatives appeared to adopt the views of many Americans who desire a smaller federal government in the abstract, but who in practice also agree that Washington is an important force for promoting educational equity, an area where states and localities have often failed to deliver.

Because the book covers such diverse policy ground – including the ESEA, desegregation, special education, funding equity, language policy, and the development of a federal education department – it suggests as many questions as the answers it provides. It is especially useful as fuel for debates about educational federalism and ideological change, two topics with tremendous resonance today.

Consider federalism first. In my own work, I have argued that understanding changes in federal and state education policy requires examining both federal and state policy venues simultaneously. What looks like assertive federal advances in education may really emerge from borrowed arguments or capabilities (what I call "license" and "capacity") from other levels of government. Put another way, educational federalism changes not only because federal policy entrepreneurs want it to change. State actors have a ticket to the dance as well. In some portions of his federalism section (the middle of the book), Davies does account for federal changes by incorporating policy entrepreneurs in activist law firms, government bureaucracies, and the courts, who, at times may have contributed more to a burgeoning federal role in education than even presidents and members of Congress. That is one of the most valuable contributions of *See Government Grow* because it reminds readers that the American policy system is dynamic and multifaceted.

State and federal dynamics play a major role in his analysis of funding equity. The crucial *Serrano* case in California, and the strategy of legal thinkers to avoid an early confrontation in the U.S. Supreme Court over student funding (a strategy derailed by the federal *Rodriguez* decision in 1973) show how state officials also

have seen their governments grow in education since the 1960s. Still, I was hoping Davies would extend that line of argument and include the state-level policy dynamics as he developed other parts of his federalism argument.

For example, Davies notes that once lower federal courts had established key rights for disabled students in 1970 and 1971, “states across the nation rapidly started incorporating their logic into statute law, meaning that subnational versions of 94-142 [the federal Education for All Handicapped Children Act] were already in effect across the country by 1975” (p. 168). The implication, he says, is “that when the federal law came about, it did not *seem* to be such a radical departure. Also, it promised fiscal relief at a time when special education costs were mounting precipitously” (p. 168). Davies also shows how state resistance to court challenges regarding disabled students was meager; in fact, his evidence illustrates that some state officials, even those involved in litigation, actually hoped that plaintiffs arguing for expanded disability rights would prevail over the states.

Those facts suggest that something was afoot in state capitals, even if in the background, before activist lawyers won their victories in federal courts. Davies does not dwell on this potential activity from policy entrepreneurs such as elected officials, bureaucrats, and interest group activists who were likely working behind the scenes laying important groundwork for the rapid state policy changes that ensued after key disability cases were decided. Even with court edicts, remember, state policy usually does not turn on a dime. The history of racial desegregation illustrates that. An interesting extension of Davies’s work, then, would be to probe the potential impact that policy entrepreneurs had on state-level conditions that made them ripe sites for rapid policy change in special education during the relatively narrow window between 1971 and 1975.

A second point to consider more deeply is Davies’s theme that conservatives have warmed to greater federal involvement in American schools. The book explains that those on the right have essentially made peace with the Great Society logic that Washington should promote educational equity. That suggests more convergence between those on left and right than other accounts of conservative backlashes against the federal role in education would suggest. It is worth pushing Davies’s thesis regarding ideology in at least a couple of ways, especially in light of contemporary polarization in the nation’s politics.

Changes on the left, especially relatively recent ones, may be just as important to the unfolding federal role as those on the right. Even though the book only briefly discusses the period since the early 1980s, during the last fifteen years liberal policymakers and activists across the country have come to embrace policies such as standards and accountability for performance, and public school choice in the form of charter schools. Even NCLB’s teacher quality provisions, which some have criticized as weak, nevertheless have been championed by

liberal Representative George Miller (D-Ca.) and have sometimes clashed with traditional liberal Democratic constituencies such as teacher unions. The upshot is that while Davies's argument focuses on changes among conservatives, relevant movement in liberals' attitudes has also occurred. Dynamics on the left and right, then, will both continue to contribute to Washington's future role in education.

Additionally, as NCLB's reauthorization unfolds, it will be interesting to see to what extent conservatives actually have come to accept a strong federal role in education. Accepting a federal role to promote equity does not necessarily mean that the Great Society's methods, built around several grant programs that are now infused with accountability provisions, are viewed in high esteem by these same individuals on the right. The turbulence surrounding NCLB's reauthorization will provide a great test of Davies's overall argument, given the somewhat bumpy recent track record of conservatives, even as the ESEA has expanded the federal role since 1994.

While Davies is correct that votes on final passage for ESEA reauthorizations typically have included growing numbers of Republican "yeas" since 1965 (p. 282), 1994 is a notable exception to that pattern, a detail that the author omits from his recap of voting patterns. Further, NCLB was not passed by a "GOP dominated Congress" (p. 5), as Davies states. Recall that Republican majorities were slim in the House (221 Republicans to 212 Democrats), and Democrats actually controlled the Senate in the last half of 2001 during the law's crucial conferencing and final debate. And lastly, while votes on final passage may suggest evidence of ideological convergence, voting patterns on education matters preceding that decision point---including all-important floor and committee amendments---still break along traditional ideological lines. If conservatives truly have made peace with the Great Society in education, one wonders why these particular battles continue to persist.

Today, for example, President George W. Bush has seen his political capital evaporate. That has provided additional room for critics of federal education policy to press their claims with more confidence. Assertive conservatives on Capitol Hill, who were held in check during NCLB's passage in 2001, are now aiming to roll back what they see as a burgeoning and inappropriate federal role in American schools. Especially notable are NCLB criticisms flowing from the caucus of House conservatives known as the Republican Study Committee. Will government continue to grow in education? Not if these members have their way.

In all, readers hoping to engage debates about educational federalism and political ideology should consider Davies's book with enthusiasm. *See Government Grow* provides a nice benchmark for understanding the country's past and potential future in these areas. The book's superior scholarship, compelling narrative and analytic style, and focus on a policy area of great importance should make it required reading for scholars and policymakers alike.