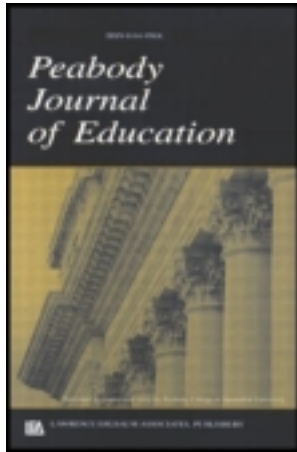


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### State Education Governance and Policy: Dynamic Challenges, Diverse Approaches, and New Frontiers

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# State Education Governance and Policy: Dynamic Challenges, Diverse Approaches, and New Frontiers

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State governments are crucial actors in the nation's system of education governance. This issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education* underscores the wide-ranging roles that state governments play in the oversight, development, and implementation of elementary and secondary education policy in the United States. In this article, I consider these individual analyses by reflecting on the broader themes and patterns that they suggest. I argue that at the dawn of the 21st century, the 50 U.S. states face dynamic challenges that are testing their institutions of governance. States are also simultaneously crossing new frontiers that will influence future policy and opportunities for the nation's students.

## INTRODUCTION

The eclectic set of topics addressed in this issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education* underscores the wide-ranging roles that state governments play in the development and implementation of elementary and secondary education policy in the United States. Ultimately, local factors in districts, schools, and classrooms are hugely important in determining how policies operate in practice (Lipsky, 1980; Wilson, 1989). Despite the enduring influence of local control, the states themselves still create the policy frameworks, regulatory guidance, and measurement instruments that delimit or define acceptable ranges of local action. And although the federal government's role in education has intensified, readers should not believe the frequent headlines and breathless op-eds that lament the supposed federal takeover of the nation's schools via the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). If anything, the nation's decade of experience with NCLB and the Obama administration's subsequent efforts with Race to the Top (RTTT) have magnified rather than diminished the significance of state governments, as almost all federal education programs are administered by leaders in state capitals. Those federal programs operate alongside the states' own efforts to cajole, measure, rate, influence, and assist the nation's 14,000 school districts and 100,000 schools.

A valuable tool for understanding the states' overall position in the nation's complex system of education is Meier and O'Toole's (2006) general model of governance, which views policy outputs and outcomes emerging from the intersection of three things. First are institutional

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arrangements, namely, the formal structures that define bureaucratic roles in government agencies, lines of authority or cooperation between those agencies and their nongovernmental partners, and concrete policies and regulations. Second is the behavior of public managers working within and across those institutions; these managers may seek to defend prevailing approaches or attempt to deviate from them to advance change. Third are environmental factors comprised of numerous social, political, and economic forces that constrain or enable public managers charged with producing valuable policy outputs and outcomes.

Meier and O'Toole's (2006) model and analyses from other scholars emphasize that although inertial forces can constrain new initiatives, these structures and managers operate in potentially fast-moving and unpredictable worlds where prevailing solutions or assumptions can have relatively brief lifespans (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Moore, 1995). That is true in education and other policy areas. At the dawn of the 21st century, the 50 U.S. states are facing dynamic challenges that are testing their institutions of governance. At the same time, states are simultaneously crossing new frontiers that will influence future policy and opportunities for the nation's students.

## DYNAMIC CHALLENGES

Ask veteran teachers, school district superintendents, or state agency managers and they likely will agree that today their work is more difficult than when they entered the field of education. The environmental forces that Meier and O'Toole (2006) described have produced social and economic concerns that have placed ever-increasing demands on state education policymakers. Although it is possible to identify several specific reasons for these changes, they tend to flow from three main sources.

### Ensuring Academic Excellence and Equity

First is the nation's increasing concern about student achievement and the gaps in achievement between student groups. The notions of promoting "excellence" and "equity" are often used to describe these different yet interrelated challenges. A decade of intense focus on standardized testing and measurement—along with international comparisons of student achievement—has prompted a sense of urgency about academic performance. Many American students' absolute levels of educational achievement and attainment remain lower than needed given the demands of life in a modern democracy and a globally competitive economy. For example, employment data from the years of the recent Great Recession show that individuals with higher levels of educational attainment had more employment opportunities than those who possessed only a high school diploma or less (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012).

Those concerns about excellence and high achievement reside alongside the even more persistent challenge of ensuring that success in school is unrelated to the social or economic characteristics of a student's home. In the United States today, children from families that earn relatively low incomes, or children who are members of racial, ethnic, or language minorities (who collectively tend to be low-income) continue to achieve at lower levels than their more advantaged, white, and native-English-speaking peers. International data reveal the depth and breadth of this problem, as achievement tends to be highly correlated with family income across most nations (Ladd, 2012).

Such differences have motivated advocacy groups in the United States, such as the Education Trust, the Center for American Progress, the National Council of La Raza, and the Black Alliance for Educational Options, to propose diverse policy reforms designed to increase resources and educational opportunities for the nation's most disadvantaged students. Harrison and Cohen-Vogel's (2012/this issue) analysis of teacher reform illustrates examples of this advocacy in Florida.

This issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education* is important because it shows how the struggle to improve educational excellence and equity varies across the states. Results from the 2009 round of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) testing reveal a couple of reasons why. Figure 1 plots average scale scores of each state for NAEP tests in reading and math in that year. The figure shows that some states do much better on average than others, suggesting that meeting the challenge of increasing student achievement, and attaining excellence, differs across the states. Notably, scores on both subjects have a strong positive correlation within each grade level. For example, the top part of Figure 1 shows that Massachusetts outpaces all states in fourth-grade math (scale score 252.3) and fourth-grade reading (scale score = 233.7), whereas other states such as Mississippi, Arizona, and California lag far behind in those subjects.

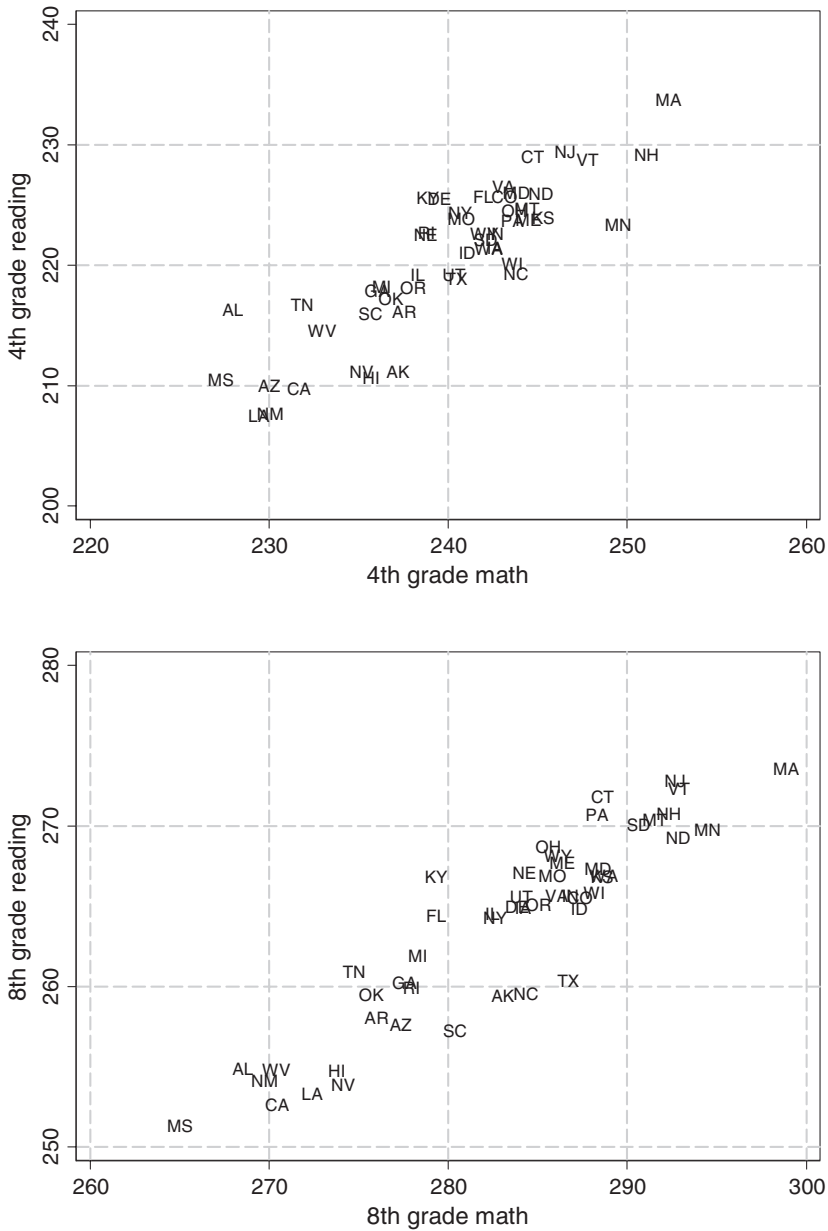
Similarly, as Figure 2 illustrates, the equity problem, reported here as achievement gaps between students receiving free or reduced cost school meals (e.g., from poor families) and their peers (e.g., not from poor families), also varies by state. Considering the fourth-grade results in the top of Figure 2, Indiana, North Dakota, and Wyoming have some of the lowest gaps among the states, whereas California, Connecticut, and Illinois have some of the highest. Taken together, Figures 1 and 2 show that any effort to address equity and excellence should recognize that some states face steeper challenges than others. Although every state could do better, some require much more effort, smart investment, and assistance to improve current conditions. Further, the results underscore the importance of examining overall achievement but also disaggregating scores to examine gaps between student groups. Connecticut, for example, is a relatively high performer in Figure 1, but notice in Figure 2 that its achievement gaps are relatively large.

### Teaching Diverse Students

A second dynamic challenge facing the states is the growing diversity of the nation's students. An obvious source of these changes has been the expansion of immigrant populations in the United States, something that the nation's urban areas and states such as California, Florida, Illinois, and New York have experienced for decades. Now, other states and local communities have seen their immigrant populations, comprised primarily of Spanish-speaking students with family origins in Latin America, dramatically expand. As the Pew Hispanic Center notes,

from North Carolina on the Atlantic seaboard to Arkansas across the Mississippi River and south to Alabama on the Gulf of Mexico, sizeable Hispanic populations have emerged suddenly in communities where Latinos were a sparse presence just a decade or two ago. (Kochhar, Suro, & Tafoya, 2005, p. i)

The report notes that Mecklenburg County in North Carolina, for example, had fewer than 7,000 Hispanics in 1990, but by 2000 that number had reached 45,000; estimates from the 2010 census put the number at roughly 117,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).



**FIGURE 1** State scale scores for all students on fourth- and eighth-grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading and math, 2009. *Note.* The top panel of the figure, for example, shows that fourth-grade NAEP scale scores for Massachusetts (abbreviated “MA”) were 252.3 in math (horizontal axis) and 233.7 in reading (vertical axis). *Source:* Author’s analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2012b).

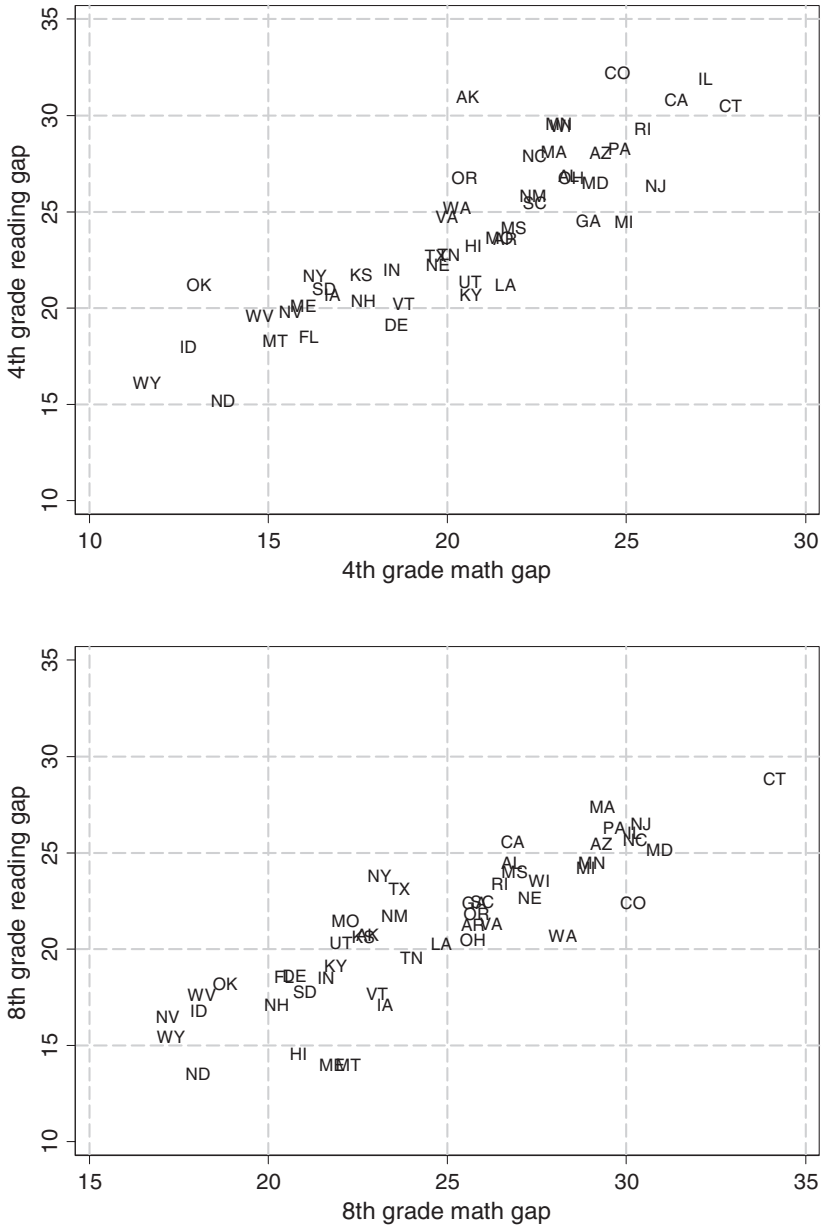


FIGURE 2 Achievement gaps by student income in state scale scores for fourth- and eighth-grade National Assessment of Educational Progress reading and math, 2009. *Note.* Larger numbers indicate greater achievement advantages for students ineligible for free and reduced-cost meals (e.g., not poor) over students who are eligible for these meals (e.g., poor). The bottom panel of the figure, for example, shows that nonpoor students in Connecticut (abbreviated “CT”) have a 34.1 point achievement advantage in eighth-grade math (horizontal axis) and a 28.9 point achievement advantage in eighth-grade reading (vertical axis). *Source:* Author’s analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2012b).

Those demographic trends have continued and likely will persist into the future. Recent census data from 2011 show that for the first time in history the number of children of color exceeded the number of white children among children younger than 1 year of age (Paulson, 2012). Considered alongside the prior challenge of improving academic achievement, these demographic facts are important because they show rapid growth in student populations that tend to be furthest behind academically, tend to come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and tend to lack access to the best schools and teachers. The country's demographic future suggests that achieving the nation's equity and excellence goals will become more rather than less difficult.

In addition to growing ethnic and language diversity, states and school districts also are educating more students with a diverse range of disabilities. The growth of students in this category has resulted in part from an expanded set of disability categories as defined in federal policy (Finn, Rotherham, & Hokanson, 2001). An additional issue is the lack of early screening for disabilities, which are easier to identify in younger children. As students age, the latest technologies and assessments have more trouble determining whether these students actually have a disability or simply lack basic reading and math skills (Finn et al., 2001). Misidentification has important consequences because it prevents students from receiving an appropriate educational program. Further, when students receive unnecessary but expensive special education services, states and districts end up wasting scarce financial resources.

### Managing Financial Stress

Although concerns about achievement and teaching diverse student populations have steadily grown since the 1970s, the nation's current fiscal situation represents a third more recent challenge. The Great Recession has crunched school budgets and foreshadows a future of increasingly tight fiscal conditions. Popular metaphors capture the sense of concern that exists. From predictions of falling off a "funding cliff" to enduring a coming "fiscal tsunami," schools are entering a new era marked by fiscal pressures likely to worsen (Hess & Osberg, 2010). Even after the Great Recession subsides, education will have to compete with expanding health care costs and other demands from politically active elderly populations who are skilled at protecting their favored programs. The absorption of education policy debates into more general-purpose state government venues—versus more special purpose entities like state boards of education—and led by governors and legislators who have become increasingly interested in education is one reason why advocates for greater education funding must engage with these other competing state priorities (Henig, 2009; Shober, 2012/*this issue*).

States have coped with the fiscal "new normal" in different ways. Retrenchment has been common as states and local school districts have eliminated or cut back programs (Hess & Osberg, 2010; Rentner & Kober, 2012). Despite those efforts, state leaders have also used the current climate to justify launching new initiatives, often to cut costs or find new efficiencies. Natale and Cook's (2012/*this issue*) analysis of virtual schooling nicely captures this dynamic. Online or blended learning seems to have received as much support for its fiscal benefits as for its educational ones. Shober (2012/*this issue*) shows how state politicians have used budget debates to push more fundamental changes rather than simply programmatic ones. In Wisconsin, for example, he notes that the state's budget situation gave Governor Scott Walker "rhetorical

cover to fundamentally overhaul decades of tense relations between school boards and teachers' unions" (p. 571).

Such efforts will not surprise scholars of agenda setting. These researchers have commonly noted that crises can create "policy punctuations" (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993) or "windows of opportunity" (Kingdon, 1995) that savvy politicians often leverage to advance bold and often controversial policy ideas or to remake the political landscape. In contrast to the Mazzoni model, which Finch (2012/*this issue*) cites in her analysis of RTTT in Tennessee, these other examples show that new revenue can be helpful but is not a necessary condition for policy change.

## DIVERSE APPROACHES

An important but oft-forgotten fact in discussions about education is that the states are structurally quite diverse in how they are organized to develop and implement education policy. On the surface most states look remarkably similar, as they fund education from state and local coffers (along with federal supplements) and possess common organizational entities such as school boards and state education agencies. Yet important differences emerge when one studies the bases of institutional authority, the connections between institutions within a state, and the balance between state and local power—important features of the governance system that Meier and O'Toole (2006) described. These systems lead states to produce sometimes very different policies and regulatory interpretations as they carry out their own policies and those of the federal government (Junge & Krvaric, 2011; Manna & Harwood, 2011; Manna & McGuinn, *in press*; Shober, 2010).

### State Governance

Probing the array of state-level entities that govern education reveals some of the institutional diversity that exists. Figure 3 summarizes the major actors that govern and oversee elementary and secondary education. The two key entities here are state boards of education (Minnesota and Wisconsin are the only two states without them) and state education chiefs (in all 50 states), sometimes called state superintendents of public instruction. The former play policymaking and oversight roles, akin to local school boards, whereas the latter, who run state education agencies, write regulations and guidance and attend to the daily implementation of state and federal policy. Chiefs and boards are the major, rather than the sole, actors, as some states also possess other diverse agencies or boards that oversee particular areas of K-12 schooling (Campbell & Mazzoni, 1976). These include institutions overseeing vocational education or teacher licensing, and even virtual education, as Natale and Cook (2012/*this issue*) explain in describing the governance of the Florida Virtual School.

Two facts about Figure 3 highlight the diversity of state approaches. First, state governors wield varying amounts of power over the makeup of state boards and the leadership of state education agencies. Nine states allow governors to choose both board members and chiefs, whereas six cut governors out of this process and instead allow voters to pick board members who then select the chief. Second, although 39 states use one of the four models presented in Figure 3, the figure's note explains that 11 states embrace some different combinations as well. In New York, for example, the state legislature appoints the board and then the board names the chief, whereas in South Carolina, which also has a board appointed by the legislature, voters elect the chief.



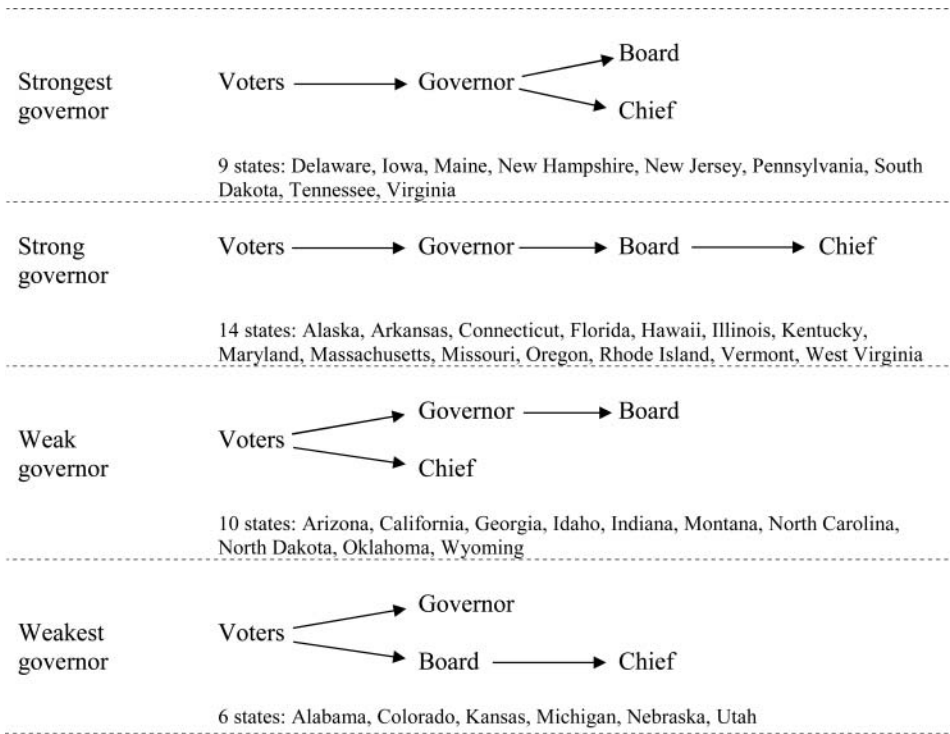


FIGURE 3 Models of state education governance, 2012. *Note.* These 11 states have other arrangements: Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, South Carolina, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin. “Board” refers to the state board of education and “chief” refers to the head of the state education bureaucracy, often called the chief state school officer. *Source:* Adapted from National Association of State Boards of Education (2012).

These diverse approaches sometimes frustrate governors who wish to act swiftly and aggressively to alter state policies and priorities. Shober (2012/*this issue*) provides a concise yet thorough analysis of the transition to this state of affairs, as governors once took a very hands-off approach to education, until becoming more active and engaged following the 1970s. Among other things, the Charlottesville education summit in 1989, a meeting of all governors and President George H. W. Bush, helped governors increase their power and establish themselves as more vocal spokespeople on elementary and secondary schooling (Manna, 2006). Being more publically visible and more likely to hear concerns or receive blame for poor school performance, governors have sought to obtain greater policy control from previously more insulated state boards and chiefs. In the process, the governors have accelerated the absorption of education policymaking and oversight into more general-purpose institutions of state government (Henig, 2009). The fragmented state-level governance that exists in the United States contrasts sharply with provincial-level governance in Canada. As Wallner (2012/*this issue*) describes, provincial ministers of education wield near-absolute authority with little or no interference from national leaders in Ottawa and few mechanisms for local resistance.

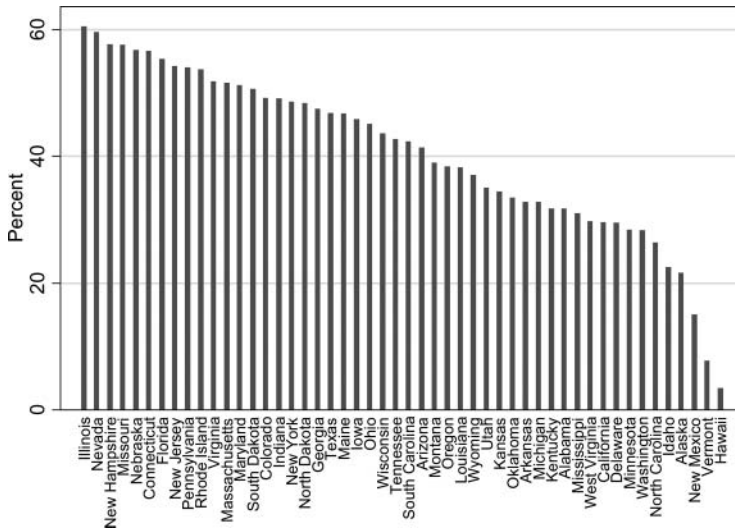


FIGURE 4 Percentage of K-12 education revenues from local sources, 2008–09 school year. *Source:* Author’s analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2012a).

### Commitments to Localism

An additional way to consider institutional diversity and lines of authority (Meier & O’Toole 2006) is to recognize the states’ varying commitment to localism. Shober (2012/*this issue*, p. 561) notes the differences when he describes the relatively centralized approach in Florida, which “contributed to Governor Jeb Bush’s ability to fast-track his favored education policies,” compared to the more decentralized systems in Ohio and Wisconsin. Data from all 50 states help reveal these cross-state differences.

Consider Figure 4, which describes the amount of revenues for K-12 education that come from local sources in 2008–09. The totals by state range from a high of 60.5 and 59.6% in Illinois and Nevada, respectively, to a low of 7.8 and 3.4% in Vermont and Hawaii. A look back in time illustrates how these patterns have changed. Even though funding differences still exist across the states, as Figure 4 shows, the amount and variability of local funding has declined. This is due to state court decisions and legislative policy changes that have attempted to equalize funding by decreasing local power. In 1978–79, for example, on average across the states 44.1% of K-12 education revenues came from local sources with a standard deviation, a measure of how deviant states tended to be from that average, of 16.9%. Thirty years later, in 2008–09, the average had declined to 40.5% and the standard deviation from that average stood at 13.3%.

One can see additional institutional variation by studying the number of local school districts that exist in each state. Figure 5 plots these data from 2008–09. They show a few states at the top—Texas, California, and Illinois, with 1,032, 960, and 869, respectively—followed by a downward progression that eventually ends with Delaware, Nevada, and Hawaii, at 19, 17, and one each. One interesting result is that the number of districts is imperfectly correlated with state population. Some relatively smaller states (e.g., Iowa and Kansas) are in the top half of the figure,

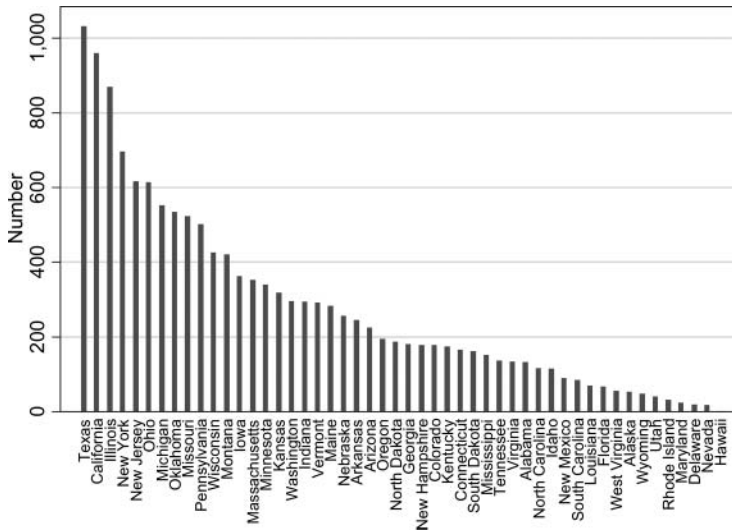


FIGURE 5 Count of local school districts, 2008–09 school year. *Note.* The count for each state includes traditional school districts and individual district components of supervisory unions. A supervisory union exists where several individual school districts share a superintendent and administrative services. *Source:* Author’s analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2012a).

whereas other somewhat larger states (e.g., Florida and North Carolina) are near the bottom. Finally, unlike the data on local funding, these numbers have remained relatively stable in nearly all states since at least the mid-1970s. Many more school districts existed in the first half of the 20th century; district consolidations dramatically shrunk those numbers by the 1950s and 1960s (Berry & West, 2010).

Other work has shown that differences in funding sources and the number of school districts are related to a state’s willingness to impose certain curricular requirements on local school districts. Manna and Harwood (2011) found, for example, that states providing more funding for elementary and secondary education are more likely to require additional science credits for high school graduation. That same study also found a negative correlation between the number of school districts in a state and the number of science credits required. State systems that are more locally oriented do appear to produce different policies, at least in some important areas. The contrast with Canada, which Wallner (2012/*this issue*) provides, again is instructive, given that the provinces dominate funding allocations and tend to wield much power over local curricular policies.

### Federalism’s Middle Managers

A final source of variation across the states is how they interpret and carry out their role as key middle managers in the nation’s federal system. Finch (2012/*this issue*) nicely summarizes this fact in noting that “the state’s role in education policymaking is unique: It serves as a balance

between broad federal goals and the needs of specific local contexts” (p. 591). Although harder to quantify, this role has become increasingly important since the 1980s especially, because before that time the main task of state education agencies was to distribute federal and state funds to districts and then to audit local actions to ensure that local communities spent those dollars legally. Today, these same funding and audit functions remain, but now state agencies pursue numerous additional substantive tasks focusing on developing and managing statewide testing systems, incorporating student achievement data into teacher evaluation procedures, and designing and supporting strategies for school improvement (Massell & Goertz, 2012/*this issue*; Natale & Cook, 2012/*this issue*).

The increasing role of governors as educational leaders, noted earlier, was one factor that created these new responsibilities, and a more assertive federal role in education has been another. As Massell and Goertz (2012/*this issue*) argue, one reason why state education agency officials have become increasingly interested in education research is that they have been charged with addressing complex challenges, such as helping improve the most struggling schools. Policies such as NCLB and RTTT have provided leaders of state agencies with new opportunities to reconsider their organizational structures and critical tasks as they confront the academic, diversity, and fiscal challenges noted earlier.

The concept of middle management is useful given the important role that public managers play in Meier and O’Toole’s (2006) model of governance. In general, those authors and others (Moore, 1995; Wilson, 1989) have described how public managers, which include agency leaders or officials running specific programs or subsets of larger ones, must make important choices as they confront the environmental factors that complicate their work. One management approach, labeled “M<sub>3</sub>” by Meier and O’Toole (2006), is to leverage these challenges to change core assumptions, policy priorities, and agency strategy. These leaders see complex environments as sources of strength and opportunity. In contrast, the authors explain how “M<sub>4</sub>” public managers cautiously assess these same environmental conditions and attempt to buffer their agency against outside pressures to maintain current agency priorities. Such managers may choose a more cautious route for many reasons including their own personal fears or their assessment that their agencies possess limited capacity to act creatively. Whatever the reason, politicians and policy advocates often criticize these more risk-averse managers who they consider out of touch and resistant to trying creative new approaches to confront the ever-increasing challenges of the day.

States vary in the mix of M<sub>3</sub> and M<sub>4</sub> managers that they employ and those differences produce substantive consequences. As Junge and Krvaric (2011) showed, state officials’ willingness to embrace flexibility in law (characteristic of the M<sub>3</sub> approach) versus reading the law more narrowly (an M<sub>4</sub> interpretation) leads states to develop different policies and regulations that guide school district behavior. The middle-management role of states, and the mix of these managerial types, is hugely important for the carrying out of federal policy. Junge and Krvaric (2011) stressed that the federal government does not really implement education policies such as NCLB or RTTT; rather, the states do. In short, federal policies operate as state-administered programs and that administration, guided by different combinations of M<sub>3</sub> and M<sub>4</sub> thinking across the states, can translate into very different opportunities or demands in local school districts (Manna, 2011).

One illustrative example that Junge and Krvaric (2011) raised is the implementation of school-wide Title I programs. This is an option that federal policymakers designed in NCLB (and prior versions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act) to let schools with many disadvantaged students use federal aid to support school programs that benefit all students in a school. That is

supposed to downplay fears that federal regulators will penalize schools or districts for using Title I money to benefit students ineligible for Title I services. Although federal laws and regulations have allowed this flexible use of Title I dollars in certain schools, some state education agency interpretations of the law have restricted local districts that may wish to take advantage of this flexibility. Fearing program audits, cautious middle managers at the state level have limited local actions that may seem perfectly consistent with the intent and letter of federal policy. Although in other states, more expansive interpretations of the law provide local districts with much freedom to try a diverse array of schoolwide models.

## NEW FRONTIERS

The challenges confronting state education leaders will likely grow rather than shrink in the coming years. The dynamic forces in the environment already discussed—involving concerns about academic excellence and equity, student populations becoming increasingly diverse, and fiscal stresses—represent fairly predictable, albeit challenging, conditions for state officials to manage. Other aspects of the future seem less certain yet have the potential to remake in important ways the nation's education landscape. Three of these new frontiers involve technology, nascent but expanding interstate efforts, and the continued evolution of education politics.

### Technological Change

Technological advancements are chafing against the institutional and policy arrangements that govern education in the states. Some authors have predicted that technology will prompt a revolution in everything from how the country oversees its schools, to the opportunities available to students, to the very definition of "school" itself (Moe & Chubb, 2009; Peterson, 2010). Although one would be foolish to ignore those potential impacts, readers should remember that reform enthusiasts for decades have predicted similar changes during prior administrative or technological revolutions—the Progressive Era and the advent of radio and television, for example—that nevertheless failed to fundamentally change the egg-crate model of education in which 20 to 30 students learn from a single teacher in a self-contained classroom (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Especially when budgets are tight, state and local education officials must carefully scrutinize promises from the burgeoning educational technology sector about the potential advantages of the latest gadget or tool promised to improve student learning. Without careful thinking among state and local procurement officers and curriculum development experts, the future may bring escalating hardware, software, or tech support bills yet little academic progress for students.

As the articles in this issue note, technological change is already prompting new questions and expanding opportunities in the states. As Natale and Cook (2012/*this issue*) show, state education agencies and state policies have struggled to keep up with the rapidly developing phenomenon of online education. Virtual schooling raises several policy and governance issues for states such as defining the virtual school population for purposes of allocating state funding; certifying virtual teachers (Need they be citizens of the state? Could they be foreign nationals who reside overseas?); maintaining academic honesty and integrity of virtual learning models so that the inevitable cheating or other scandals that occasionally emerge do not sink the entire enterprise; and, last, helping parents understand the comparative quality of virtual schools, just

as current accountability systems try to assign marks to traditional brick-and-mortar institutions. These are incredibly challenging and important issues in state leaders' hands, and they become potentially even more complicated when virtual models are proposed as charter schools. In some states, charter school policy remains in a relatively immature form, even though that model of schooling has existed in some places since the early 1990s. Policies and oversight mechanisms that may seem appropriate for traditional public schools or charter schools may be infeasible in virtual settings yet relatively understaffed state education agencies nevertheless must address these emerging issues (Massell & Goertz, 2012/*this issue*; Natale & Cook, 2012/*this issue*).

Amidst the thorny set of governance and policy issues that technology is raising for state leaders, Massell and Goertz's (2012/*this issue*) analysis also reveals an often overlooked, yet important, bright side that illustrates how technology can facilitate rather than complicate the work of state education agency officials. The growing interest in education policy research, including rigorous study of different teaching methods and academic programs—conducted by neutral third parties rather than program vendors themselves, it is important to note—has produced a rapidly expanding literature of studies and data sources that state education officials can easily access online. As rigorous research on the effects of education policies and interventions becomes more plentiful and available, state agency officials interested in using this research stand poised to benefit greatly as they conduct their work.

### Interstate Efforts

Another new frontier is the emerging interstate cooperation in major areas such as the development of academic standards and assessments. For example, the Common Core State Standards Initiative (Common Core) has the potential to force major changes in how individual states make policy and govern their schools. Conceptually, Common Core is what Meier and O'Toole (2006) called a networked arrangement in which institutions with independent bases of power voluntarily join forces to work toward a common end. In this case, network members include governors and chief state school officers with additional support from Achieve, a nonprofit organization. Of importance, in policy networks a member cannot compel any other member to do anything, and members can—and have in the case of Common Core—walk away at any time. Networked institutional forms create new possibilities and new governance challenges (Manna, 2010). Unlike hierarchies, which have more clearly defined chains of command, networks raise questions like, What criteria define who can join the network? What obligations do network members assume when they join? Who has control over the products that the network produces? What financial resources exist to sustain the network's activities? Wallner's (2012/*this issue*) analysis of cross-provincial efforts in Canada, most notably through the network known as the Council of Ministers of Education Canada, suggests some useful lessons that enthusiasts of interstate governance and policymaking in the United States should consider.

These questions are relevant for Common Core's future, and easy answers remain elusive. Take the matter of obligations, for example. States that wish to remain part of the network have promised to adopt the Common Core math and reading standards with minimal adjustments. Given the complicated web of education governance within each state discussed earlier, doing so will require state-level entities such as legislatures and state boards of education—not founding

members of the Common Core network—to agree to uphold requirements that have originated beyond the state without their formal input. In addition, regarding finance, supporters of Common Core have been concerned that too much federal money or involvement could raise concerns that it will become a vehicle for adopting “federal” rather than “national” education standards. Already, the awarding of points to RTTT competitors that had adopted Common Core has stoked those fears. If federal dollars run the risk of tainting Common Core, then it would be up to states themselves to sustain the effort financially, something that may be difficult in the current and likely future fiscal climate. The governance and funding questions become even more acute when one turns from the development of common standards to the development and use of common assessments, as states have different policies for test security, how and when students are tested, and when test items are released to the public.

### Contested Politics

Finally, the arenas that govern education have seen new political power centers emerge during the last few decades that are challenging traditionally dominant coalitions and long-standing policy commitments and assumptions. Today, an energized array of business leaders, nonprofit organizations, civil rights groups, private foundations, and educational entrepreneurs participate in vigorous political debates alongside traditional sources of organizational power, such as teacher unions and schools of education (McGuinn, 2012). Notably, members of the coalitions forming around different education issues often fail to reside along the traditional “left versus right” or “blue versus red” dimensions that orient much of the nation’s punditry and political talk. In education, advocates for urban minorities and free market enthusiasts may team up to push for greater school choice. Similarly, teacher unions and social conservatives sometimes find themselves on the same side in arguing for greater local (rather than state or federal) control of school curriculum.

The authors contributing to this issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education* recognize the increasingly important impact of an energized, contested politics of education. For example, Finch (2012/this issue) underscores the important role of homegrown foundations in the states, notably the Tennessee State Collaborative on Reforming Education founded by former U.S. Senator Bill Frist. Despite the sheer number of these state-level groups, they often operate out of the spotlight, which is captured by other organizations with larger national profiles such as the Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation, or the Bradley Foundation. Harrison and Cohen-Vogel (2012/this issue) tell a similar story in Florida about how former governor Jeb Bush’s foundation promoted policy changes in that state. Finally, Natale and Cook (2012/this issue) show how the rapidly growing virtual education sector appears to possess strong allies in state houses and governors’ offices across the nation.

Despite these gains from nontraditional groups, long-standing centers of political power are likely to remain influential. Whereas recently the collective power of teachers and their unions has eroded, Shober (2012/this issue) nevertheless recognizes that teachers are still a powerful political force given that they “are the largest sector of government employees in every state” (p. 572). Further, even as groups such as Chiefs for Change, a coalition of reform-minded chief state school officers, and other nontraditional state education leaders have emerged, Massell and Goertz (2012/this issue) show that line managers and staff in state education agencies still seek much

information from professional membership associations and institutions of higher education, which includes schools of education and other groups that are more traditional participants in education policy debates.

Nationally, the country's politics have become ever more divisive (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006; Poole, 2012). In education, those dynamics have become more visible in states, too, with Wisconsin's recent standoff and recall election pitting the state's teacher unions against Republican governor Scott Walker being a notable example. Certainly, the country benefits when debates about its educational future are energized, passionate, and public. The founders of the United States recognized the value of an engaged citizenry on matters of such high importance. Yet given that the nation's education challenges loom large and require serious attention, all groups engaged in the fray of state education politics should remember that easily identifiable silver-bullet solutions to these persistent challenges do not exist. A broader recognition of that fact in state political debates could help steer them in more productive directions.

## CONCLUSION

This issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education* provides a powerful reminder that the states remain pivotal institutions in the nation's system of education governance. Although local school districts and teachers themselves wield the most power to influence students' daily experiences, state government actions are most consequential for producing the policies that influence those classrooms. State constitutions define such a role for states, and further, states become even more, not less, important when the federal government passes new initiatives, as major federal policies are administered by officials in state education agencies. It is important to note that the states vary in their governance arrangements and policy priorities. Future discussions about the states' role should recognize these somewhat conflicting notions. The states share a common set of responsibilities for improving education, yet how they tend to those duties will continue to involve a diverse mix of governing arrangements and policies.

## AUTHOR BIO

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