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School's In: Federalism and the National Education Agenda

reviewed by Lorraine M. McDonnell — November 09, 2006

Title: School's In: Federalism and the National Education Agenda
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Although the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation may pose significant implementation challenges for many educators, the spate of recent books on the topic suggests that it represents a promising new research opportunity for politics of education scholars. They have analyzed NCLB through different lenses focusing, for example, on the shifting interest group environment and its effect on the substance of federal education policy (DeBray, 2006); NCLB as a revolutionary expansion of the federal role (McGuinn, 2006); and NCLB's likely impact from the perspective of school principals (Abernathy, 2007). Paul Manna's book, *School's In*, examines federal education policy and the emergence of NCLB using federalism as the lens. In doing so, Manna seeks to distinguish his work from other accounts of NCLB by presenting a conceptual model that extends beyond this specific case to help explain how the U.S. federal system creates opportunities for policymakers to advance their agendas even into areas where their influence is tenuous.

In his analysis, Manna develops the concept of *borrowing strength* that "occurs when policy entrepreneurs at one level of government attempt to push their agendas by leveraging the justification and capabilities that other governments elsewhere in the federal system possess" (p. 5). Manna argues that the passage of NCLB was possible because state governments had earlier enacted reforms organized around standards and assessments. Those policy entrepreneurs promoting NCLB could mobilize around the *license* or arguments states had already made to justify the involvement of higher levels of government in classroom processes and outcomes, and around the *capacity*, or resources and administrative structures, that state reforms had created. Manna notes that although federal officials were able to borrow strength from the states in the case of NCLB, the process can also work in the other direction. For example, state officials may take advantage of the license provided by a president using the bully pulpit to advance reform arguments as a point of leverage in promoting their own policy agenda.

Manna outlines a set of predictions about the circumstances under which policy entrepreneurs are likely to borrow strength from other governmental levels, and about the conditions under which states will seek to extract concessions from federal officials (e.g., when state policymakers think their federal counterparts have overestimated state license or capacity). In assessing how federalism has shaped the nation's education policy agenda over the past 40 years, Manna uses a political development approach, identifying the constraints and opportunities that past policies have created for future choices, and taking into account both incremental and more rapid change. His analysis draws on a variety of quantitative and qualitative data, including content analyses of presidential speeches, congressional hearings, and public laws; public opinion surveys; a database on political advertising; and 60 interviews with elite members of the Washington, D.C. policy community.

A number of Manna's major conclusions—including his finding that, beginning in the 1990s, the federal government's involvement began to touch the core function of schools and that its expanded license to act was directly related to the widening role of state governments in education during the 1980s—have also been documented by other analysts (e.g., McDonnell, 2005). Similarly, Manna notes that in their analysis of state-local relationships, Fuhrman and Elmore (1990) countered the claim that influence in the federalist system is zero-sum, with one governmental level's increase in influence coming at the expense of another. Rather, they found that entrepreneurial local school districts can use state policies as leverage to promote their own priorities through much the same process as Manna's notion of borrowing strength. His analysis of federal agenda-setting, with its caution that neither a solely top-down nor bottom-up perspective is sufficient, also complements the forward- and backward-mapping strategies derived from decades of implementation research on the relationship between inadequate federal capacity and state and local policy.

So Manna's contribution is not one of significant new insights about the evolution of the federal role in education. Rather, it is to provide a conceptual framework linking the education case to the broader research literature on agenda-setting and federalism. As a result, his account is more systematic and coherent than earlier ones.

For most education scholars, NCLB is a promising research opportunity because of its scope and the extent of its reach into individual classrooms. However, research on NCLB also has the potential to contribute to theory-building and to

increase scholarly understanding of stability and change in policy domains beyond just education. It is too early to know how well Manna's concept of borrowing strength will elucidate agenda-setting in other policy areas characterized by shared authority across government levels. Nevertheless, *School's In* both benefits from its grounding in the broader political science and policy analysis literature, while moving the often isolated politics of the education field nearer to mainstream social science inquiry. So just as NCLB positions federal policy closer to the core of schooling, Manna's book helps move research on education policy from its often peripheral status to where it can illuminate its own domain as well as the broader arena of U.S. domestic policymaking.

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