

The Evolution of Educational Reform Undertaken by Individual States in the U.S.

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1. Introduction

In the U.S. today, federal mandates that hold individual states accountable for students' academic performance are putting states under increasing pressure to implement educational reforms. Section 2.1. will discuss the evolving impact of these federal mandates on state-level educational reform. This will be followed by a description and analysis of state-level educational reforms in individual states in section 2.2 and similar reforms across multiple states in section 2.3. Finally, suggestions for improving state-level educational reforms will be offered in section 3.

2. What is the concept of state reform in education as it is presently evolving?

2.1 The impact of the federal government, new presidents, and new federal laws on the on the educational climate; particularly ESSA's effect on state-level educational reform

First, the election of a new president can promote a new political climate and impact the educational climate, specifically including the mindset of teachers working for schools throughout the nation. Hales, Graves, Durr, and Browne (2018) gauged preservice teachers' confidence in relation to factors associated with their chosen profession after the election of President Donald Trump and found a reported decrease in confidence about the role of the government in education under the current presidential administration. Specifically, these preservice teachers expressed concerns about a lack of respect and support for the teaching profession and the physical safety and emotional well-being of students in schools. Furthermore, the respondents were generally not confident in the

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future outlook of governmental support and funding. However, the republican respondents were more confident of the government's future impact on education.

Second, federal law related to education can impact state reform as well. Under the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, signed into law on December 10, 2015 by former President Barack Obama (U.S. Department of Education, n. d.), state plans need to provide assurance that teachers meet state standards for certification or licensure (Skinner & Kuenzi, 2015). Assurance 14, an important provision of ESSA asks states to affirm that all teachers are fully certified (Sindelar, Pua, Fisher, Peyton, Brownell, & Mason-Williams, 2018). If they are unable to comply, they must complete a statement to ensure that these teachers hold a bachelor's degree and are enrolled in an alternative route program in which they (a) receive intense, sustained, and classroom-focused professional development, (b) receive intensive supervision and mentoring, (c) are teacher of record for no more than three years while uncertified, and (d) are making progress toward full certification. Sindelar, Pua, Fisher, Peyton, Brownell, and Mason-Williams (2018) point out that unlike the NCLB era when rural states and districts developed strategies to train, recruit, and retain teachers with available resources, states with the less prescriptive nature of ESSA do have an opportunity to seek innovative and context-based solutions to the problem of teacher shortages particularly in rural areas. However, Weiss and McGuinn (2017) warn that this flexibility could be too much of a burden to states, as it is a reprieve and more power and responsibility has been gained through ESSA.

With ESSA, not only individual states but whether an area in a given state is rural or urban is considered. According to Rude and Miller (2018), rural schools and communities are referenced in ESSA in five different categories with respect to federal policy initiatives: (1) involvement provisions to ensure rural stakeholder participation, (2) diversity provisions designed to encourage equitable allocations among varied geographic designations, (3) inclusion of rural as priority in defining need, (4) set-aside provisions to ensure proportional distribution of resources to rural schools, and (5) waiver or specialized consideration provisions to ensure that rural school applications are competitive with urban schools. These provisions ensure that rural school districts operate on a level playing field with respect to receiving federal resources through ongoing programs such as Title I-improving basic programs for educationally disadvantaged learners, Title II-teacher and school leader incentive funds, Title III-language instruction for English learners and immigrant students, Title IV-Technology

enhancement grants, and Title V-policy driven activities among others.

At the tertiary level, the U.S. Department of Education announced on April, 2018 that Brookhaven College, part of the Dallas County Community College District is the first to receive final approval to enroll students in the Educational Quality through Innovation Partnerships experiment, which would give the Department flexibility to waive specific statutory or regulatory requirements associated with disbursing Title IV student aid to assess the efficacy of innovative educational solutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b). For the first time, students will be allowed to use federal student aid to enroll in programs offered by innovative, nontraditional education providers that are partnering with accredited colleges or universities. U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos claims that the students are looking for new, more efficient and lower-cost ways to earn workplace-relevant credential, often times while raising a family, and until now, options only existed outside of the federal financial aid system. As a result of restrictions outlined in the Higher Education Act, a college or university receiving federal student aid cannot allow a non-accredited education provider to deliver more than 50 percent of an educational program. However, the experiment provides an exemption from the normal federal student aid rules, allowing a nontraditional provider to exceed the 50 percent capacity, thereby providing low-income students with greater access to new types of programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b). The experiment applications were evaluated on the following criteria: (1) innovating to improve outcomes, (2) equity and access, (3) quality assurance, (4) affordability, and (5) student and taxpayer protections (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b).

2.2 Current state reforms: Emphasis on student achievement and stakeholder collaboration

The ESSA is impacting individual states, and responsiveness and local needs as observed in the aforementioned experimental program by the U.S. Department of Education is evident. Some of the unique elements of California's approved ESSA plan include: (1) California's new accountability and continuous improvement system information that provide information about how local educational agencies and schools are meeting the needs of California's diverse student population; and the fact that (2) California conducted extensive outreach and gathered input from thousands of California's education stakeholders to develop its state plan (U.S. Department of Education, 2018a). Furthermore, multiple subjects and administrative services credential preparation

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programs are changing in response to California's newest grade, Transitional Kindergarten (Nicholson, Lin, Maniates, Woolley, Groves, & Engdahl, 2018). The researchers point out that elementary school teachers and their principals need to understand the foundations of high-quality developmentally responsive early childhood classrooms, and also point out that much conversation is needed regarding the consequences of implementing TK as a standalone change rather than part of a comprehensive coordinated systems level reform.

Variations in state plans can be observed when comparing Utah and Massachusetts. Specifically, there seems to be a focus on student achievement focusing on individuals for Massachusetts as compared to the focus on closing performance gaps in Utah which seems to be focused on performance in relation to different ethnic groups. Some of Utah's approved ESSA plan include: (1) a long-term goal of reducing gaps by one-third by 2022 in student mathematics and English language arts achievement in grades three to eight with the state publishing data on progress on an annual basis; and (2) the Utah State Board of Education is collaborating with the Utah System of Higher Education and the Utah Partnership for Transforming Education Preparation to improve teacher preparation, performance measures, and licensing programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2018a). What the state plans share in common also with California is that thoughtful communication is necessary, among teachers, administrators, and partnered organizations. Related to partnerships and communication, some of Massachusetts's unique elements of the approved ESSA plan include: (1) strategies to help transform the lowest-performing schools and districts which includes state and local partnerships, and empowering school and district innovation and bold intervention authority; and (2) measurements of the percentage of juniors and seniors in high school who complete broad and challenging coursework including Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate and honors courses in order to incentivize participation in rigorous coursework and to reduce equity gaps among student subgroups enrolled in advanced courses (U.S. Department of Education, 2017c).

In states such as Arizona, North Carolina, and Alaska, a focus on collaboration and student achievement can be observed as well. First, some of Arizona's unique elements of the approved ESSA plan include: (1) allowing elementary and middle schools to earn additional points in its accountability system for accelerating student achievement, including increasing student performance in math, decreasing the number of minimally proficient students, improving the performance of certain student subgroups and/or using

an inclusion model for special education; and (2) allows high schools to earn additional points in its accountability system for preparing students to be college and career ready, including students performing well in CTE courses, passing college-level courses, earning an industry credential and or completing a work-based learning internship, among others (U.S. Department of Education, 2017d). Second, in North Carolina, beginning in 2007, three rural counties collaborated with the State Employees' Credit Union Foundation to subsidize construction of housing projects and built new multifamily apartment complexes with local education leaders investing in creating a sustainable rural community, which enabled teachers to pay less rent, and rental profits were used to supplement district budgets (Verdin & Smith, 2013). Preliminary reports show a downward trend in teacher turnover rates since the housing projects were built (Verdin & Smith, 2013). Third, in Alaska, where remote districts are only accessible by plane or boat, the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project was created through collaboration with Alaska Department of Education and Early Development and the University of Alaska system in order to prepare more effective teachers by ensuring a robust teaching pool and increasing teacher retention through mentoring, which has helped with teacher retention (Sindelar, Pua, Fisher, Peyton, Brownell, & Mason-Williams, 2018).

There is evidence of individual states applying innovative approaches to educational reform. Osborne and Langhorne (2018) argue that the nation's fastest-improving cities such as New Orleans, Washington, Denver, and Chicago have embraced both charter schools and charter-like innovation or renaissance schools: public schools with real autonomy, real accountability for performance, and a variety of learning models from which families can choose, and points out that Texas is a state successfully pushing its urban districts to emulate such models with \$120 million in grants and assistance over two years. One ambitious reform offered in Texas is called a Transformation Zone in which districts compete statewide, and six urban districts have won planning grants to create such zones which will have independent governing boards that oversee autonomous public schools. According to Osborne and Langhorne (2018), the zones can turn failing schools over to nonprofit organizations, including charter management organizations, create partnerships between such management organizations and failing schools, and create new schools, whether district or charter operated. Using seven percent of the state's federal Title I funding for schools with a majority of low income students, one million dollars per school will be granted to those zones. Under House Bill 1842 passed in 2015, if a school is labeled improvement required by the state's accountability system

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for five years, the state must close it or take over the entire district, appointing a new school board. By creating partnership schools, districts will get a two-year hiatus before sanctions are imposed, and selected partners must have acceptable academic performance and financial ratings for the last three years. For nonprofits, partnering will bring access to district facilities and often better financing deals.

2.3 Reforms across states: teacher evaluations

Across states, customized approaches for utilizing human resources are observed as well. Specifically, evaluation systems for teachers have been under scrutiny, and a majority of states have overhauled their teacher evaluation instruments in recent years (Ruffini, Makkonen, Tejwani, & Diaz, 2014). Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, and Keeling (2009) point out that teacher evaluations are too lenient and they fail to adequately differentiate between teachers at different levels. The researchers claim that recent teacher evaluation changes are the result of dissatisfaction with evaluation systems that have largely failed to distinguish between effective and ineffective teaching. For instance, all new administrators in Arkansas who are designated as the person responsible for evaluating teachers who are employees of a school district or open enrollment charter school must successfully complete the Framework for Teaching Proficiency System test or FOCUS (Dodson, 2018). The evaluator training in Arkansas involves 20 hours of video and training content, nine modules of Framework for Training, detailed rater training on each component and performance level in FfT Components for Domains two and three, and over 100 hours of master scored videos (Dodson, 2018). South Dakota public schools began using FfT during the 2014-2015 school year, and all public schools in the state must at least meet the minimum requirements of this model (South Dakota Department of Education, 2015). Dodson (2018) examined how public school principals in seven U.S. states perceive the proficiency exam they must take and pass in order to evaluate their teachers, and 832 out of over 7,000 working principals across states responded. The results showed that most principals were not satisfied with the proficiency test that they must take to evaluate their staff, and many called for the elimination or drastic overhaul of their proficiency exam. Most principals wanted better quality videos they must watch to evaluate teaching lessons, and they also wanted the test to be less subjective, suggesting room for reform.

3. Conclusion: Suggestions for improving state-level educational reforms

In section 2.1, it was argued that the political climate can influence the educational climate and impact teachers in different ways depending on his or her political views. It was also pointed out that through ESSA, the federal government is attempting to provide states and local communities with flexible and innovative educational solutions relevant to rural communities and education at the tertiary level. In section 2.2, it was argued that particularly because of ESSA, individual states tend to focus on academic performance of students and each state has its own plan to encourage collaboration among educators and institutions. In section 2.3, it was argued that there has been dissatisfaction with teacher evaluations, suggesting room for improvement in how to train school principals to evaluate teachers effectively. From the findings, from section 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3, the key components to improving state reform are: (1) for the federal government to continue to offer flexible forms of support through federal laws and programs related to education, and (2) for individual states to utilize federal and local support collaboratively with their individualized ESSA plans to serve students for their optimal academic achievement.

Teacher retention is related to collaboration among faculty members, to improve students' academic achievement. Ulferts (2016) found that teachers' intent to continue teaching in the same rural schools and districts was most powerfully influenced by nonpecuniary factors including degree of community appreciation and the degree to which teachers perceive the community as being committed to improving and supporting education. This is in line with the concept of Person-Organization fit (Youngs, Pogodzinski, Grogan, & Perrone, 2015) or the compatibility between people and an organization that occurs when at least one of them provides what the other needs or they share similar fundamental characteristics or a combination of both. As with collaboration between the U.S. Department of Education and individual states, Jacob (2017) argues that given the current political climate and the limited discretionary resources available to the Secretary of Education, it is unrealistic to imagine that the U.S. Department of Education would play an active role in state-level school reform efforts. However, at the same time, Jacob (2017) argues that the department can play an important role by identifying the lowest performing states and by providing biennial information on the progress of these states both in terms of what reforms they have implemented and the change in various outcomes.

School turnaround efforts show mixed results, suggesting that collaboration needs to involve not just mainly the leaders but all stakeholders to be able to make thoughtful improvements that consider local educational contexts and needs. For example, there is good evidence that turnarounds in Massachusetts have been quite successful, which may not be surprising given its well-regarded accountability system, its generous support of public education, and its highly professional state department of education (Schueler, Goodman, & Deming, 2016). Specifically, the first two years of the takeover of the Lawrence Public School district, driven by the state's accountability system, produced large achievement gains in math and modest gains in reading. On the other hand, turnaround efforts in Michigan, North Carolina, and Rhode Island have been regarded as mostly ineffective (Heissel & Ladd, 2017). For example, when North Carolina elementary and middle schools underwent turnaround efforts, it led to a drop in average passing rates for math and reading and an increased concentration of low-income students in treated schools. Treated schools brought in new principals and increased the time teachers devoted to professional development. The program also increased administrative burdens and distracted teachers, potentially reducing time available for instruction. Teacher turnover increased after the first full year of implementation (Heissel & Ladd, 2017).

Similarly, in New Orleans, charter management organizations (CMOs) have been used successfully to manage failing schools (Ruble, 2015). On the other hand, the same approach had no impact on student performance when implemented in Philadelphia or Tennessee, although the researchers noted that the schools they managed may have done worse without them (Gill, Zimmer, Christman, & Blanc, 2007). Finally, the necessity to pay close attention to local context and needs must be emphasized. Continual state reforms involve inextricable and dynamic relationships with federal and local levels of education.

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