

MAKING SENSE OF EDUCATION POLICY AT THE STATE LEVEL

A conversation with Sara Dahill-Brown

Kappan's editor talks with political scientist Sara Dahill-Brown about the new realities of educational decision making under the Every Student Succeeds Act.

By **Rafael Heller**

KAPPAN: The transition from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) represents a major professional and intellectual challenge for education policy wonks. For nearly two decades, a lot of reformers looked at everything through a federal or national lens, without giving much thought to the ways states differ from one another. But suddenly, under ESSA, those differences matter. To have an influence on K-12 education policy today, what do people need to know about state-level politics?

SARA DAHILL-BROWN: NCLB did gloss over states' idiosyncrasies, and that made it easy for people to build their careers advocating for all-purpose reform strategies — school vouchers or charter schools, universal PreK, or whatever. Whether they went to Nebraska, Alaska, or Maine, they could make the same

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sales pitch, even if it didn't really make sense in that state. For example, advocating for an expansion of school choice in rural Arizona or rural Idaho is probably not the most impactful strategy you could pursue. But if you work for a reform group that promotes school choice, you lobby for school choice, period.

Under ESSA, though, if you want to have influence on education policy, you're encouraged to try to understand the local context. Rather than asking yourself, how do I persuade people to adopt the strategy I know about and am committed to — school choice, say — you have to ask what strategy is the highest priority for this *particular place*? You can't keep relying on the one-size-fits-all mentality that NCLB encouraged. You have to take a more careful look at local needs and priorities.

Plus, you have to take a close look at local approaches to governance. To get anything done at the state or local level, you have to understand how policy is enacted and implemented there. What political institutions, actors, and traditions matter in Nebraska, say, as opposed to Maine or Alaska? You have to know not just what the local needs and challenges are but also how the local players negotiate with one another and what they will accept as legitimate. The fact is that governance works very differently from state to state.

KAPPAN: But once you start looking closely at individual state contexts and governance structures, the picture gets really complicated, really fast. ESSA highlights the fact

that we have 50+ separate state systems, each one completely different from the rest in terms of how decisions get made, who has what kinds of authority, how schools are funded, how districts are organized, and on and on.

So, if you want to understand how education policy works in any given state, where do you even begin? NCLB made things really simple: You just had to understand federal policy making and learn about the Department of Education's favored strategies. But how do you make sense of the dizzying variety of state policy debates that ESSA has unleashed?

DAHILL-BROWN: It's super-complicated, which is why, in my book, I've suggested some basic terminology to help make it easier to understand what's going on in any given state. Specifically, I think it's useful to start by looking at three aspects of education governance: The first is to look at how "consolidated" or "fragmented" the state's school system is, or how many districts and other subunits it's divided into. Second is to look at the extent to which education politics are treated as "exceptional" — whether the school system is relatively free from or bound up with partisan politics. And third is to see how much local control there is — that is, to what extent do schools and/or districts make their own decisions about things like funding, curriculum, and teacher qualifications? There are certainly other things to consider, but if you look at these three dimensions, that should give you at least a basic understanding of education politics in the given state.

KAPPAN: Can you give us some illustrations? For example, which state systems are more or less consolidated or fragmented?

DAHILL-BROWN: Florida, for example, is a pretty consolidated system. It's the fourth most-populous state, but it has just 67 county-based districts, so those districts are large, relatively speaking, in terms of both population and geography. Or take Hawaii, which has just one school district that covers the whole state. That's on the far end of the spectrum, as consolidated as it gets. On the other hand, New Jersey is an example of a very fragmented system. It's a relatively small state geographically, but it's split into nearly 600 school districts.

There are a few reasons why it matters how consolidated or fragmented the system is. One is that the larger the number of districts, the harder it is, administratively speaking, for state education agencies (SEAs) to monitor, supervise, and support them. So that's likely to affect the SEA's ability

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to control policy implementation, and it makes it harder for individual districts to communicate with the SEA about their needs (though that may not be true for every district. For example, the Houston ISD is pretty large, so it's able to get its voice heard and exert political pressure in the state capital. But most of the thousand or so other school districts in Texas are small and can't afford to send lobbyists to Austin).

Fragmentation also tends to have an effect on socioeconomic and racial segregation — the more subdivided the state, the easier it is for people to move across district lines. In New Jersey or Alabama, for instance, people who have the means can move just a couple of miles down the road and enroll their kids in a new school district. Fragmentation also raises the level of difficulty when attempting to desegregate schools; changing a student-assignment plan is difficult enough at the district level, but when there are many small districts, reducing segregation would require state intervention or a cooperative effort across district lines.

KAPPAN: Can you give an example to illustrate your second point, about how connected the school system is to electoral politics?

DAHILL-BROWN: One state where decision making about education has historically been pretty separate from traditional partisan politics is Wisconsin, where I used to live. The superintendent of public instruction is elected in a nonpartisan election — that is, the candidate's party affiliation isn't on the ballot. Plus, the election takes place in the spring, at a time when the other elections taking place are mostly local school board elections, so party leaders aren't out in force telling people to vote and who to vote for. Also, in Wisconsin, the superintendent is a constitutionally designated officer of the state, meaning they have their own authority and the power to push back against the legislature or the governor. For an example on the other end of the spectrum — where school policy making is totally integrated with state politics — you might look at Alabama, where both local and state school board elections are partisan. That means that voters are cued to support one slate or the other but also that elected education leaders are part of party organizations that connect them with other state and local leaders.

But I think it's important to recognize that neither of these necessarily means politics are any more or less involved in shaping education policy — anytime members of the public choose leaders or negotiate over school funding or curricula, there will be politics. The question here is whether political *parties* are directly involved, because they tend to shape the conflicts we have in education and

the coalitions that come together to resolve them. So, for instance, in places where the schools aren't as bound up with partisan politics, that doesn't mean people don't get into conflicts over the schools. It just means those conflicts might pit reform groups against teachers unions, rather than Democrats against Republicans.

KAPPAN: And can you give an example of a state with a high degree of local control?

DAHILL-BROWN: Keep in mind that NCLB compelled all states to assert themselves in ways that compromised older traditions of local control — over curriculum, assessment, teacher evaluation, and more. So local control isn't what it used to be. But even so, when you look at how states implemented NCLB, you can see some variation in how SEAs leveraged their authority. Again, consider Wisconsin. Historically, it's a state where local control has been strong, so it shouldn't have been a surprise that it set its initial goals for Adequate Yearly Progress relatively low, which meant that the SEA didn't have to sanction as many schools as we saw in other states. Relatively speaking, Wisconsin stayed hands-off.

KAPPAN: But as you describe in your book, local control has been eroding for a very long time, since well before NCLB. At every level of government — federal, state, county, or municipality — the long-term trend has been to consolidate power and decision-making authority, right?

DAHILL-BROWN: That's true. Probably the best illustration of that pattern is the gradual consolidation of school districts across the country. Pretty much every state now has far fewer school districts than it did at the beginning of the 20th century. Why is that? In large part, it's because states significantly increased their fiscal contributions to public schools in the aftermath of the Great Depression. When you pay for something, you want to know it works. But it turns out to be really difficult for a state legislature and education agency to gather data on and keep track of 10,000 districts. Consolidating districts made it much easier to oversee them. And then, over time, states gradually exerted more and more authority over everything from

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high school graduation requirements to teacher licensure to decisions about how money can be spent — you get one pot of funds for transportation, another for assessment, and so on.

So, compared to 100 or even 50 years ago, local school districts have experienced a loss of power in relation to the state government. Ironically, local districts today tend to have more *capacity* and employ more people than they did in past decades. But relative to the states, they've lost a considerable amount of power. The extent to which states assert themselves in certain areas (finance, high school graduation, teacher licensure . . .) varies a great deal, but on the whole, states have become more powerful.

KAPPAN: You've argued, though, that ESSA has created meaningful new opportunities for local advocates — everybody from parents to teachers, school administrators, and community leaders — to become more actively engaged in educational policy making than they have in a very long time.

DAHILL-BROWN: I believe it does. ESSA's still fairly new, but a lot of folks have begun to realize that they can participate in the political process in ways that didn't make as much sense under NCLB. That may not be true in every state — in some places, education governance is so tightly controlled and partisan that it's hard for ordinary citizens to get involved. But in a lot of the country, there's real deliberation going on about how best to proceed with curriculum, accountability, assessment, teacher evaluation, funding, and so on.

If you were a parent or a teacher or a local school board member under NCLB, you probably felt that decisions were being made far away, in a place where you had very little control or influence. But one of the things ESSA achieves is to let people know that they have real leverage and real opportunities to influence policy. Regular folks can advocate for the inclusion of a particular nonacademic indicator in the state accountability plan, or to register their views on a particular school turnaround model. It may take a while before we see the full impact of that shift, but folks who maybe aren't professional education reformers are getting the message that it's worth engaging at the local and state levels.

In political science, we like to point out that mobilization feeds off of a sense of efficacy. If people feel that they have the potential to make a positive impact, then they'll put forth real efforts to make it happen. And right now, I think a lot of folks are mobilized and engaged, not just by

ESSA but by the broader political climate. So, we're seeing an unprecedented number of teacher walkouts and strikes, large numbers of teachers running for office, and other emergent social movements. A lot of people are more engaged than they were four or five years ago, and I see that as a positive for education.

KAPPAN: You end your book on an optimistic note, describing the opportunities people now have to get involved in local politics in ways they haven't been able to do in 20 years. ESSA gives them a chance to speak up and build coalitions and influence the local school board or the legislature or the governor. But what about the *challenges* created by ESSA? For instance, isn't there a real danger that powerful and well-funded interest groups will dictate state and local policies and shut ordinary people out of the political process?

DAHILL-BROWN: I do lean toward a hopeful view of local and state politics under ESSA. The law has opened up some policy windows, allowing states to begin to rethink testing and accountability in useful ways, and to build institutions that are more inclusive. We're still at a pretty early stage in the cycle of policy adoption and implementation, and though a lot of schools and districts haven't felt much change yet, I think we can see the beginning of a shift.

A great example is New Mexico, where the new governor campaigned overtly against the existing ESSA plan. That wouldn't have made as much sense under NCLB. Since the election, she has proposed some major revisions, including changes to the state's teacher evaluation system, which was regarded as one of the toughest in the country. Whether you agree or disagree with the specific reforms, that broader political engagement creates the potential to surface conflicts and bring about lasting political resolutions.

At the same time, there is the possibility that policy churn could accelerate under ESSA, particularly in states where education governance is tightly linked to partisan politics and where political power is shifting. This could create extra uncertainty for parents, educators, and students. After the 2018 election, a lot of state houses flipped from red to blue (or purple), and it became unclear whether governors and legislatures would continue with the ESSA plans that had just been approved.

As to the danger that powerful and wealthy groups will dictate local and state policy making, I think that's an issue we have to acknowledge and confront in every arena of American politics. ESSA removes a major impediment to democratic engagement by creating space for local and

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state decision making, but it doesn't address gross income and wealth inequality, for example, or do anything to launch campaign finance reform. So, sure, I can think of some well-funded reform networks that are committed to advocating for school choice and charter schools, and I expect that they'll continue trying to influence school board elections and to win over state legislators, behaving just like lobbyists in health care, energy, and other sectors. But thanks to ESSA, those groups are going to find themselves with more competition and more counterpressures in more places as people are mobilized to set their own priorities and design their own approaches to school improvement.

Of course, another major challenge I worry about is the one that always comes up in discussions of ESSA: What will happen now that the federal government isn't working as hard to make sure that states treat all students equitably? I don't think there's any great substitute for vigorous federal efforts to ensure equity. National civil rights groups can do a lot to hold states accountable, though. In political science, we often talk about a "boomerang effect," where a national organization will publish a report that highlights a problem in a particular state, applying pressure from the outside, and then their state contacts will take that report back home and use it to apply pressure to their legislators or their local or state school boards or the governor. This doesn't have the force of law — it's really just a form of naming and shaming — but in the absence of strong federal leadership, it can provide powerful ammunition and support to advocates operating at the local or state level.

KAPPAN: What about the capacity of SEAs to implement ESSA plans, support districts, and otherwise take a more prominent role in school improvement? How big of a challenge has this been for them?

DAHILL-BROWN: For most SEAs, I think the transition has been hard to manage. That's not to demean their staff, though. There are a lot of dedicated, smart people working in state education agencies. But the fact is that most SEAs had their budgets slashed during the Great Recession. Now they've been tasked with reinvigorating their school systems and liaising more consistently with community groups and stakeholders, but they haven't fully rebounded in terms of funding or staffing levels, so they tend to be stretched pretty thin.

One place where we've seen an obvious sign of stress on SEAs is in the process of drafting and revising state ESSA plans. For example, in 2018, during the period when the U.S. Department of Education was demanding a lot of changes to the plans that states submitted, there were

several instances in which states simply didn't respond to the department's criticism. Now, you could read that as the SEAs choosing to resist federal authority — Connecticut actually pushed back on the department's criticism — but in cases where criticism simply wasn't addressed, I suspect that SEAs didn't have the *capacity* to respond.

KAPPAN: Judging by their ESSA plans, are states pursuing dramatic new approaches to testing, accountability, and school improvement? Or are they just tinkering with the systems they created under NCLB?

DAHILL-BROWN: What I've seen, along with other researchers, is that most states haven't been particularly ambitious or innovative as yet. Generally speaking, the changes they've made to their accountability systems have been more modest than a lot of folks had hoped for. So, for instance, states are reconfiguring their school report cards and reexamining their school turnaround models. Basically, they're making incremental adjustments to existing systems.

As Andrew Saultz, Jack Schneider, and Karalyn McGovern argue in this issue of *Kappan*, that shouldn't come as a surprise, since ESSA doesn't really differ from NCLB in its underlying logic, which relies on quantitative evaluations of student, teacher, and school performance. But I also think we shouldn't overlook the significance of some of the changes states have made to their accountability systems or the ways in which this process is generating dialogue about schools and engagement with education politics.

Yes, plans are still oriented around quantitative measurements, but they're starting to include some important things like evaluations of school climate, social-emotional learning outcomes, absentee rates, and school disciplinary practices. In lots of states, we're also beginning to see broader conversations about what ought to be the purposes of public schooling and about how best to assess school quality, going beyond test scores and growth measures. Under NCLB, public conversations about school became increasingly focused on a narrow set of outcomes and a narrow set of policy proposals. Already, those priorities and orthodoxies are being challenged, if not upended, by the political processes that ESSA has generated.

It's tough to say how much this will matter in the long run, but I do think it's significant that these debates are underway in a lot of states. As state ESSA plans are implemented, and as people become accustomed to the fact that those plans can be amended through advocacy at the state level, I think that what ESSA means for states and schools can evolve. Real change takes time, and people have to fight for it.

