



Dahill-Brown, S. E. (2019). *Education, equity, and the states: How variations in state governance make or break reform*. Harvard Education Press.

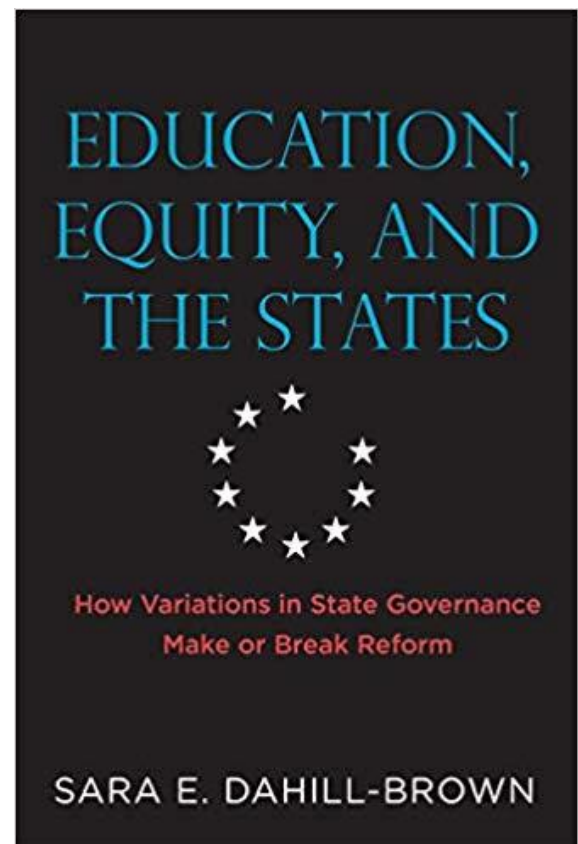
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Anyone familiar with research on education policy can tell from the title of this volume that the author took on an ambitious project. The topics of education, equity, and state government intersect in ways both old (should schools be segregated by race?) and new (will parents choose schools based on growth scores?). In *Education, Equity, and the States*, Sara E. Dahill-Brown takes the reader on a trip through the history of America's education systems, visiting key events and actors before delving into the richly diverse political structures that exist at the state level. The author makes neither a case for reform nor takes sides on any political debate; rather, she spells out the myriad ways in which the governing of education differs from one state to another.

One challenging aspect of teaching or writing about education policy is that most individuals know only one education system: the one in which they received their own schooling. They know their own experiences extremely well – or think they do – and find it hard to imagine alternative systems that might be just as effective. Noticing the differences



between, and changes within, state education policies and reflecting on how they might affect the behavior of principals, teachers, and students is a new exercise for many. Success in this exercise would depend on understanding how the thousands of American school systems have evolved over time and then using that knowledge to analyze the ways in which current institutions shape the school experiences of today's students.

Sara Dahill-Brown takes on this challenge and gives the reader insight into how political scientists think about education as a largely state-level government service that many believe should not only be equitable in its provision, but also in its outcomes. She draws on her experiences as a student in Utah, a teacher in Texas, a doctoral candidate in Wisconsin, and an associate professor in North Carolina, as well as on her research on No Child Left Behind (Dahill-Brown & Lavery, 2012) and higher education (Dahill-Brown, Witte, & Wolfe, 2016) to produce a book that is useful to readers with nearly any degree of familiarity with U.S. education policy. For those who are uncertain of the causes and effects of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the book presents them clearly and succinctly. For those following debates about whether more funding makes a difference in academic outcomes, the book includes references to the most important studies. For educators wondering how their professional environments became what they are, or citizens trying to make sense of who is in charge of their schools, or political scientists wanting descriptions of how actors and institutions square off against one another in the arenas of policymaking, there is plenty here to chew on.

Organized in seven chapters, the book combines history, theory, and anecdotes to make the case for studying education policy at the state level. The book opens with the story of union leader Albert Shanker and the role he played in the development of charter schools.

Dahill-Brown uses this history not only to show how the education policy process can follow unexpected and complicated paths, but also to introduce a framework for analysis. By distinguishing governance from government, the chapter directs the discussion away from political disputes over education and towards the pros and cons of different ways of distributing power.

Particularly commendable about this framework is how it treats policy as not just an outcome of governance, but as a force that acts on it by redefining institutions and constituencies. The benefits of including “policy as an actor” shine through in the second and third chapters where Dahill-Brown describes the evolution of U.S. public education. Her historical treatment identifies the institutions that shaped policy, and by recognizing how policies changed the institutions and constituencies that created it, the reader develops a better understanding of the origins of current debates. For example, after describing the political tensions preceding the passage of the National Defense of Education Act (NDEA), Dahill-Brown observes that,

it set a precedent for targeted federal assistance, spurred matching investments from local and state communities, presaged the outcome of the 1964 congressional debate over general versus categorical aid, included provisions that supported the expansion of testing to identify gifted students, and raised concerns about curriculum and standards more broadly” (p. 83).

Indeed, while NDEA was a small policy by modern standards, it changed the game for nearly all the players in education policymaking.

In the second half of the book, Dahill-Brown delivers the main contributions to the field, explaining the significance and varieties of fragmentation, exceptionalism, and local

control that exist among the 50 states. The fragmentation of its governance is one condition that has long stymied efforts to bring more equity to American education. Federalism encourages participation, self-rule, and the tailoring of instruction to a community's needs, but it also creates variation, which may result in inequality. Federal efforts to smooth out unequal school funding strengthened certain institutions and constituencies by making new resources available; but because education services are delivered through thousands of local school districts, equity has remained ever out of reach. Dahill-Brown uses two metropolitan areas, Oakland and Memphis, as case studies to illustrate how challenging it can be to provide racially and socioeconomically integrated schools even decades after the Brown decision.

The second obstacle to equity that the author investigates is the American tradition of keeping education policymaking out of the main political arena, a phenomenon that the author, along with Henig (2013), calls "exceptionalism." Her discussion of exceptionalism takes the reader deep into the weeds of political institutions and the different arrangements from one state to the next. In some states, school boards have partisan elections and in others they do not. Some elect their school boards on the general election day while others do not. Some states allow school districts control over their budgets while others entrust them to other authorities. When it comes to the governor's relationship with state education leaders, there is more variation still. In the end, it seems as though every state is an exception.

Dahill-Brown smartly rescues the reader from frustration, however, by closing the chapter with two examples of states representing extremes in exceptionalism. The first is Wisconsin, where education leaders are highly insulated from general politics, resulting in reforms that evolve slowly. The second is

Virginia, where education leadership is woven into the general state and local political institutions. The result is fierce, marquee political battles over education policy and sometimes drastic reforms. As someone who teaches courses in education policy, I see this chapter as a useful introduction for research projects that will compare other states on these institutional arrangements and their implications for policy.

Returning to the topic of local control, Dahill Brown describes struggles between state and local authorities to make decisions such as those about textbook adoption, teacher licensure, graduation requirements, and accountability. These examples serve to introduce arguments about what sort of environment produces the greatest policy density at the state level, and how the persistent value of local control is a powerful tool used by nearly all constituencies at one time or another. By this point in the book, readers should have let go of the common assumptions about Republicans always wanting local control and Democrats always favoring federal power, and realize that at least in the politics of education, the call for local control is not so much an ideological position as a reliable defense against nearly any policy one might oppose.

The book really shines in the author's deftly articulated explanation of why studying education policy at the state level is both fascinating and frustrating. Beginning with the argument that education is a topic that nearly everyone cares about deeply and believes they understand thoroughly, Dahill-Brown brings the discussion back to how national policy is filtered through 50 different sets of policy processes. Large-scale efforts to reform education are numerous, and the author warns that because each state has a different governing structure, achieving any particular policy outcome requires different strategies in different states. But in all cases, argues the author, opening lines of communication and

building civic capacity will result in policies that are more legitimate. If readers only have time for 20 pages, this argument located in the final chapter is the section to read.

Overall, *Education, Equity, and the States* encourages, or even insists, that education policy researchers and reformers bring their focus back to state governments. Failing to do so risks overlooking key veto points that exist in some states but not others. States are a common unit of analysis for education researchers, but many of us neglect to consider the complicated variation in political institutions. Instead, we rely on obvious control variables, like Elazar's political culture, party control, and percentages with a college education, a fault easily found in my own research (Giersch, 2012, Giersch & Dong, 2018). In this book, Dahill-Brown makes clear that truly understanding the variation in education reforms in the United States means that we should consider the differences between states in their fragmentation, exclusiveness, and local control.

In some places, the book stopped short of giving topics a thorough treatment, however. Considering the title, I found the text to be strong on education and states but weaker on equity. Although present in each chapter, discussions of equity, especially concerning student outcomes, seemed too few. Of course, simply establishing a working definition of education equity might require an additional chapter, and then a few more to make use of it.

Related to that point, the book gives surprisingly little attention to school choice, perhaps the most controversial education policy question currently faced by state governments and bearing significant implications for equity. As charters and vouchers become more common, what does that mean for the effects of fragmentation, exceptionalism, and degrees of local control on policymaking? It is easy to imagine privatization of education services resulting in still greater fragmentation of authority and separation of school decisions from mainstream politics. The implications of school choice for local control are more complicated in that it shrinks the authority of local, state, as well as federal policymakers and gives more power to parents, school administrators, and education management organizations. Now that charter schools have been around for more than a quarter century, they deserve to play a larger role in a book about education equity and state government.

At the same time, these limitations also present useful opportunities. By pointing to important differences in governance, Dahill-Brown gives the reader a starting point from which to explore variations in education policy and student achievement that are possibly the result of the structural differences featured in this book. With more state-level education data becoming available every day, instructors could use *Education, Equity, and the States* as a foundation to guide students through original research that explores unanswered questions in this text, particularly those related to school choice.

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