Learning from a decentralized education system

Microplanning of education

Understanding the federal role in U.S. education policy.

What role should the central government play in decentralized education systems? Answering this question is critical to improving student outcomes across the globe, as governments seek the best way of maximizing local involvement in schools while also improving standards and accountability.

Around the world, many countries have decentralized their education systems in recent years. In the face of this global trend, it is worth giving a closer look at education in the United States, a system that was decentralised from its inception and now has more than 14,000 local school districts. While it is impossible to draw direct lessons from one country to another, there is still something to be learned from the struggle to address inequality, protect civil rights, ensure accountability, and guarantee a voice for all stakeholders in the decentralised U.S. school system.

The swing of the pendulum

Throughout U.S. history, state and local governments have held primary responsibility for administering public education. Local control has many benefits, given the diverse needs of communities across the country, but we also, unfortunately, observe a great deal of inequality in the current education system. Consider the map in Figure 1, which illustrates the percentage of students living below the federal poverty line, by district. The variation within and across states on this one
dimension alone is staggering.

This variation is in large part a function of income inequality and residential patterns in the United States, including income and racial segregation. But it is also in part a product of how states define school districts. Within their borders, state leaders decide how district boundaries are defined and how districts are managed. Indeed, for the vast majority of American history, state and local education agencies have held primary responsibility for making and implementing education policy, including deciding what to teach, how to organize and fund their school systems, and how to hold schools accountable for student performance.

In 2001, the federal (national) government took a dramatic step towards standardizing policies across states and districts under the No Child Left Behind Act, with the rationale that re-centralisation was needed to improve overall academic performance and to address persistent achievement gaps between white and minority students (these gaps are correlated with socioeconomic inequality between racial groups). But the law faced many critics, and the pendulum has recently swung back again in the opposite direction. In December 2015, Congress passed a new law that grants much more flexibility to states again—the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

In the context of these historic and present-day debates over decentralisation, the role of different levels of government in promoting high-quality education in the U.S. is far from a settled issue.

**How to protect the civil rights of students?**

One key role the federal government plays is protecting the civil rights of minority students. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional in the landmark case *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Since this decision, the U.S. federal government has continued to play a role in protecting the civil rights of African American students and other minorities. Most notably, in 1965, Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which provides federal funds to schools that serve a large proportion of students from low-income backgrounds.
Further, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) in the federal government’s Department of Education was established. Any individual may file a complaint with the OCR if they “believe that an education institution that receives Federal financial assistance has discriminated against someone on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, disability, or age.” Through the OCR, the federal government holds state and local education agencies accountable for protecting the civil rights of the students they serve.

In addition, beginning in 2001 and continuing through the present, federal legislation has required that schools report student achievement by subgroup. Schools must report average standardized test scores for racial minority groups, English-language learners, students in special education, and students from low-income backgrounds. The federal government requires this transparent reporting of student achievement across these different groups to ensure that schools are held accountable for closing achievement gaps.

Even with these established roles for the federal government in terms of protecting students’ civil rights, state leaders and the federal government continue to clash over the extent of the federal government’s authority in this area. Recent debates over protecting transgender students’ rights reflect this ongoing tension.

How to ensure rigorous accountability at the local level?

Although states now enjoy great authority over developing their own school accountability plans, the federal government retains a role in overseeing state plans and in requiring that states use evidence-based research to inform their design.

Under the new federal law, states must submit their accountability plans to the federal government for review and approval. Although this mechanism potentially grants the federal government significant oversight authority, the stringency of federal oversight may vary depending on the leadership of the federal Department of Education. For example, some have questioned whether the current administration will simply “rubber stamp” state proposals, or rather, whether they might attempt to push their own agenda during this review process.

However, even if federal oversight is relatively weak, federal law still requires states to develop specific components of their accountability plans using evidence-based research. States must design policies based on research that meets the criteria established in federal law. To facilitate the use of evidence-based research, the federal government funds rigorous research through the Institute of Education Sciences and maintains an online database of research in the What Works Clearinghouse. By requiring the use of evidence and taking steps to promote the creation and dissemination of research, the federal government supports states in developing rigorous policies even while states have a substantial degree of flexibility in designing accountability systems.

How to guarantee a voice for all stakeholders?

In a decentralised system, the federal government can also work to create transparent processes that “build the capacity of stakeholder groups”—including the disadvantaged—to participate in policymaking decisions. The Obama administration, for example, initially required states to demonstrate engagement with a long list of stakeholders, including civil rights organizations, in order to receive federal approval of their accountability plans. The Trump administration later softened this requirement, however, indicating that federal standards for transparency may vary depending on the
political ideology of the party in power.

The federal government must also follow requirements designed to increase transparency and allow for public input. When the Department of Education proposes legally binding rules, they are subject to a public notice and comment period during which anyone can submit a comment on the proposed policies. In turn, the Department of Education is required to respond to these comments and indicate whether and how they addressed the comments during the revision process. On one such proposed rule, the Department received over 21,000 comments.

Conclusion

This discussion is by no means a complete overview of how the federal government in the U.S. holds states accountable for student performance in a decentralized context. Nonetheless, the policies and programs discussed here exemplify some of the ways in which a central government can promote high quality, equitable public education even when sub-national governments enjoy substantial flexibility in developing accountability systems and in administering primary and secondary schools.

Notably, the efficacy of federal oversight and federal requirements is contingent on the federal government’s authority and legitimacy. If the federal government lacked the power to enforce consequences for schools found in violation of a federal civil rights law, for example, the Office of Civil Rights would be relatively powerless in practice. In the U.S., the federal government’s role in education is highly contentious, but thus far the Department of Education retains sufficient authority to engage in the type of accountability measures described here. In other contexts around the world, whether the central government can hold subnational units of government accountable in a decentralized system is an open question—and one that should be carefully considered in the global effort to ensure inclusive and quality education for all.

References for further reading


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