See Government Grow: 
Education Politics from Johnson to Reagan
By Gareth Davies


As reviewed by Luther Spoehr

Gareth Davies, a historian at Oxford University, brings care and precision to his study of the process that produced federal education legislation and regulation in the United States from the mid-1960s into the 1980s. His book illustrates both the possibilities and the limitations of this approach to the history of education policy.

Davies starts out by telling how President Lyndon Johnson, after his 1964 landslide victory over Barry Goldwater, made the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 integral to his War on Poverty. Previously, federal involvement in education had been minimal, even after Congress responded to the Russians’ launch of Sputnik by passing the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958.

Initially, ESEA money had few federal strings attached; there was little oversight or accountability. The amount of money involved was relatively small—federal aid never amounted to more than 10 percent of the total cost of education—and vocal constituencies in districts around the country fought for every available dollar. Quoting historian James T. Patterson on the growth of “rights consciousness,” Davies notes that those constituencies often defended ESEA and demanded its expansion with the language and logic of the civil rights movement.

Davies’s biggest contribution comes in his discussion of the post-Johnson years, when he criticizes the master narrative that portrays post-1960s American politics as “a sustained reaction against Great Society liberalism.” While not denying that such a reaction took place, he finds that in education “the persistence and even growth of big government during a supposedly conservative era” matters more. Congressional votes are revealing: four-fifths of House Republicans voted against ESEA in 1965; when it was renewed in 1974, “conservative opposition had all but disappeared.”

Strong chapters on school desegregation, bilingual education, education for the disabled, and school finance all support Davies’s argument that “in the 1970s, reform often emanated from…within the federal bureaucracy, from the lower federal courts, and through the energetic efforts of congressional staffers, lobbyists, and public interest law firms.” Education reform’s “comparative detachment from…electoral politics” allowed the push for change to continue.

Reformers were opportunistic. Nobody who wrote or supported the Civil Rights Act of 1964 thought that the term “minority” included so-called language minorities. But in 1970 the new head of the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), J. Stanley Pottinger, saw his opportunity and took it. New regulations eventually became law, and at the Supreme Court the solicitor general (strict constructionist Robert Bork!) successfully defended the “Lau remedies,” regulations stemming from Lau v. Nichols (1974) requiring, among other things, that students be instructed in their native language until deemed ready for English-only classrooms.

The same “minority rights” arguments appeared in the policy debates that led to the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (famous as PL 94-142). Davies observes that no “mass mobilization” of the disabled demanded change, and “the White House was completely absent from the story.” The essential participants were progressive public-interest lawyers, agreeable lower courts, and local school districts anxious that they not be stuck with the entire special education bill.

By the time the reader gets to the Carter-Reagan years, Davies has established his main point: in the 1970s, prior reforms were well protected, and disparate groups pushed, sometimes successfully, for more. In 1979 President Jimmy Carter made good on his promise to establish a separate Department of Education (more for political than educational reasons). Campaigning against Carter in 1980, and consistent with his claim that government was the problem, not the solution, Ronald Reagan vowed to dismantle the new department, only to find once in office this was easier said than done. Opposed by powerful institutionalized interests (who were aided by his own subtly subversive
secretary of education, Terrel Bell), Reagan decided that the game wasn’t worth the candle. Then, with the luck that attended much of his career, Reagan made education reform his own when the National Commission on Excellence in Education announced in 1983 that the nation was “at risk.”

Still ahead were the “standards movement,” culture wars, the “education presidencies” of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, and, of course, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). These are beyond the scope of Davies’s book. But the increasingly convoluted, intricate pattern of “policy innovation” he describes foreshadows future policymaking trends.

Davies’s dissection of these complexities scuttles any notion that things turn out as they do because a single powerful person or group wants it that way. His narrative spotlights the compromises, unintended consequences, miscalculations, and ad hoc adjustments that make laws and regulations the products of chance and circumstance. At the same time, his story fits neatly into another master narrative, one about the decline of federalism in the United States. With “states rights” and “local control” discredited by association with segregationists, people resisting federal involvement in education lacked an ideology to justify their stance and the political means to sustain it. Davies notes, “conservatives have…decisively [abandoned] the small government faith of their forefathers.”

Davies is consistently persuasive; his research is prodigious, particularly in his exploration of government archives, as well as memoirs and oral histories by policy participants. But his approach has significant limits. Although Davies says his “analysis is predicated on the assumption that compensatory programs…have fallen short of the buoyant expectations of the mid-1960s,” and notes that even at the time there was a “lack of convincing evidence that federal dollars were improving the quality of American education,” he does not explain why those expectations existed, or why dissenting voices went unheeded. Writers and educators who generated outrage or excitement, such as Jonathan Kozol, Herbert Kohl, Ivan Illich, and others, go unmentioned. James Coleman’s famous 1966 report, dubious about the ability of schools to promote equality, gets less than a full sentence. Were policymakers unaware of these views?

In short, Davies shortchanges the role of the Zeitgeist and ignores important parts of the context (schools, for instance) where policy played out. His narrow vision lets him dodge the question that should ultimately engage historians of American public education: to what extent, if any, were schools, teachers, and students better or worse off as a result of federal involvement in education policymaking? Good as it is, See Government Grow also shows why we need to keep “education” in the study of “education policy.”

Luther Spoehr is lecturer in the departments of education and history at Brown University.

Want to bring more learning to your service learning program?

The Civically Engaged Reader is a ready-to-use resource for service learning and volunteer programs whose students want to better understand the meaning of—and motivations for—their service.

Designed to provoke discussion and reflection, The Civically Engaged Reader contains:

- Forty-seven provocative readings by a diverse group of authors ranging from Aristotle to Dave Eggers, Maimonides to Toni Morrison
- Introductory essays on associating, serving, giving, and leading
- Discussion questions and tips to help groups read and reflect on civic activity

For more information or to order copies of The Civically Engaged Reader, visit the Great Books Foundation online at www.greatbooks.org/civics or call 800-222-5870.