

# A Contemplative Approach to Education Policy

*Book offers framework for informed decisionmaking*

**Educational Goods: Values, Evidence, and Decision-Making**  
by Harry Brighouse, Helen F. Ladd, Susanna Loeb, and Adam Swift

University of Chicago Press, 2018, \$27.50  
(paperback); 192 pages.

As reviewed by David Steiner

School superintendents and state education chiefs often find themselves in a peculiar position when making policy decisions that could deeply affect children's lives. Although these local and state officials are besieged by a cacophony of opinions from those who hope to advise, influence, undermine, expose, or (rarely) applaud them, they must ultimately act alone, realizing that every major decision is made with incomplete information, involves tradeoffs, and inevitably bears unintended consequences. Given the emotional and political investment of parents, legislators, and taxpayers in these decisions, these officials are acutely aware of how radically imperfect their policy choices are.

Guidance for those charged with these weighty decisions has come in the surprising form of a calm, judicious tome written in the style of a polished essay in analytic philosophy, replete with Aristotelian-like categories and topped off with citations from contemporary empirical research on the impact of specific educational interventions. In *Educational Goods*, the authors—two philosophers and two social scientists—offer “a framework for thinking about the goals of education” and for making decisions based on those ends. In an Oxford University–style tutorial, they present the concepts of “educational goods” (the knowledge, skills, disposi-

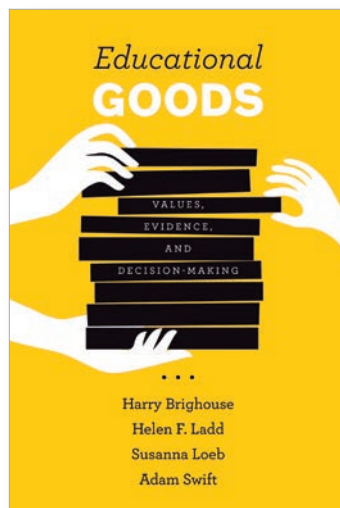
tions, and attitudes we hope to instill) and the “capacities” built by these goods (such as economic productivity, democratic competence, and personal fulfillment) that allow an individual to flourish. In reflecting on these desired goods and capacities, the authors also factor in normative values (such as equality and how goods should be distributed to serve social justice) and ultimately analyze the multiple relationships and tradeoffs among all of these goods, capacities, and values.

Also factoring into this framework are what the authors term “independent values,” which they define as worthy ends that sometimes compete with educational goods for resources and public priority. For instance, the interests of parents in how they rear and shape their children might be at odds with what is “good” educationally. And “childhood goods”—certain experiences of childhood, such as purposeless, care-free play—have intrinsic value, independent of what kind of adult the child will become.

The authors intend the book for “decision makers in the field of educa-

tion policy,” which prompts the question: How many such individuals will be willing to read a text that demands sustained attention to political theory? As a former state education commissioner (perhaps the only one who ever studied political theory at Oxford), I hope that many of them will. The book is at times esoteric, to be sure, but my tenure in Albany would have benefited from having taken more time to distinguish (as the authors do) between decisions that are “data driven” and those that are grounded in appropriate educational values and then “data informed.” Pressing the reader-policymaker to distinguish carefully between educational goods and values, and the crosscurrents of implicit tradeoffs between them, is salutary. It slows one's thinking and renders it more disciplined and possibly improved. Even the deceptively simple admonition to “Assess the options in the light of the [relevant] values and evidence” would be worth pasting onto the computer screens of education policymakers. To give but one of several examples, the authors offer a nuanced discussion of ability grouping in schools that highlights the potential tensions between the value of improving the performance of the weakest students and the consequences of increasing the gap between them and the most gifted, since the latter are likely to reap the greater gains from ability grouping.

The second half of the book seeks to apply the theoretical framework to three policy case studies in the areas of school finance, school accountability, and school autonomy and parental choice. Here, the authors' effort is somewhat less successful.



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First, in the thicket of empirical discussion, one loses track of the through lines from the earlier theoretical chapters. A patient and attentive reader might be able to reconstruct them, but the authors could and should have used tables or other organizing devices to save us the work. Just how, for example, choices about charter-school regulation align with the framework developed in the earlier chapters eludes us far too easily.

Second, the discussion often becomes indistinguishable from a conventional policy debate, at which point one's antennae go up. For instance, a long discussion of charter-school results cites two of the important CREDO research reports but omits a crucial third one that shows hugely disparate impacts of different types of charter schools (with those operated by nonprofit charter management organizations vastly outperforming "mom-and-pop" and other charter sectors such as for-profit and online charter schools). The inclusion of this report would likely have prompted a more positive treatment of charter-school performance.

To offer another example, much of the authors' early discussion of school spending assumes a strong correlation between expenditure levels and education

outcomes, even though research shows that the two correlate poorly. (Clearly, education spending cannot go to zero and still produce outcomes, but international data make it clear that beyond a certain expenditure level, putting more funds into a deeply dysfunctional system yields rapidly diminishing returns).

The second half of the book also serves to make clear what has been close to the surface all along: careful, analytic thinking can take us only so far in a field so deeply characterized by uncertainty and clashing values. Again

and again, the authors bring a section to a close suggesting that a careful consideration of multiple values and empirical evidence will produce "morally responsible decisions"—but then acknowledge that those same decisions remain "always problematic," since they inevitably involve "trade-offs among valued outcomes." The implication is that by using a framework such as the authors', the decisionmaker will at least have acted ethically—and perhaps that is all that can be asked.

The four authors are distinguished academics, and their careful analysis of the goals and values and, to a lesser extent, the current research in education policy, speaks to another era, one in which those trained in analytic thinking at premier universities found themselves entrusted with the opportunity and the time to draw upon that thinking while being somewhat protected from the slings and arrows of political fortune. In the end, because the authors are properly humble about the reach of theory, the policy scope of their book is heavily circumscribed.

Our very finest education policymakers are akin to chess masters—they make their choices with a practiced sense of what evidence must be taken seriously, which values are paramount, which tradeoffs are worth making. They do not analyze the implications of every possible move, because if they did, they would never reach a decision. But such people, and such a combination of skills, are extremely rare. If education policymakers, and indeed the readers of *Education Next*, are willing, they have much to gain from a dip into the first few chapters of this book. They will breathe the air of careful thinking and acquire a greater understanding of the genuine difficulty of making sound, informed judgments in education policy.

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"I'm only getting a D in history, so technically I'm not doomed to repeat it just yet."