

# Understanding the Education Policymaking Process in the United States

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Contributor: Margaret Dawson-Amoah , Shelby L. Smith , Desiree O’Neal , Isabel Clay , Elizabeth Ann Alonso-Morris , Adam Kho

Considering the broad implications of education policy, it is important to understand the various facets of the education policymaking process. There are different stages of the process (i.e., issue definition, policy adoption, implementation, and evaluation) which, at times, can be difficult to comprehend when considering the competing goals of education and multiple stakeholders. Understanding the process can also be difficult due to the historical and contemporary influences of power and racism at play within and outside of society’s educational landscape—especially within the United States context. The process is highlighted as an iterative one which provides room for adjustments and changes across different contexts. By navigating the complex landscape of education policymaking, one can be better equipped to understand the intricacies of policymaking and its transformative capacity.

education

policy

policymaking

decision making

Public education in the United States has been and continues to be a site of struggle. This struggle stems from the various roles that individuals believe public K-12 and higher education should serve, which are informed by cultural, religious, political, and economic considerations <sup>[1]</sup>. Given that these considerations shape decisions regarding who is educated and what is taught <sup>[1]</sup>, it is important to understand the policymaking process that continuously defines and redefines education in the United States.

To comprehend the policymaking process, it is first necessary to understand what a policy is. While policy occupies a perpetual state of ambiguity <sup>[2]</sup>, it can be understood as “a value-laden process through which a political system handles a public problem” (pp. 3–4, <sup>[3]</sup>). Overall, policies can be understood as tools made by political institutions or organizations for the improvement of systems and structures in society. In the United States, educational institutions, local school districts, states, and the country implement various policies in education. These policies influence how schools are governed, operate, are funded, allocate resources, decide on curriculum, employ teachers, and more. These decisions impact everyone, from families and surrounding communities to teachers and administrators.

Although education policies can lead to positive impacts, they also have the potential to be harmful and disproportionately impact the most vulnerable populations <sup>[4][5]</sup>, particularly those from historically disadvantaged and marginalized communities <sup>[6][7]</sup>. One of the most notable examples of this policy tension came in 2001 when the United States federal government passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), a reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) <sup>[8][9]</sup>. NCLB was a bipartisan effort, which “sought to advance

American competitiveness and close the achievement gap” between low-income, racially minoritized students and their more affluent and advantaged peers (para.4) [8]. Through the act, states were required to develop and implement accountability standards for school achievement that districts needed to meet in order to receive federal Title I funding [10][11][12]. While NCLB made positive strides towards improved school accountability and student achievement measures for certain student groups [8][9][13][14][15] and increased federal funding for students overall [16][17], it also inadvertently disadvantaged already under-resourced schools through its implementation [9][14][15][18][19][20][21]. Additionally, the policy is critiqued for its contribution to a culture of high-stakes, standardized testing that narrowed curriculum and instruction [9][15][19][20]. Overall, the negative impacts of NCLB reinforced many of the social and racial disparities that the policy was trying to reduce. Although NCLB was succeeded by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, the policy’s outcomes and lasting impact highlight how the cultural, political, and economic considerations embedded in education policy not only dictate what education is but also who it is for [1].

In recent years, education policies in the United States have become increasingly contentious because of the intersection with culture, religion, politics, and economics. Due to this trend, many researchers and education stakeholders have tried to address and push back against education reform efforts that have disproportionately negative impacts on students who are low-income, racially minoritized, have disabilities, and who are LGBTQ+. Within this context, this chapter discusses the policymaking process in the U.S. and its role in shaping education. The next sections provide an examination of policy goals and who shapes policies.

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