ISSUE BRIEF MAY 2022

A Brief History of Modern Education Policy

Erin Heys PhD & Sarah Swanbeck MPP

This issue brief series is part of the California 100 initiative. The purpose of this brief is to foster conversations about the future of education in California. You may read the full report here.

Overview

California lawmakers typically use a 'market logics' or 'continuous improvement logic' to guide their education improvement approach, but how did these logics come about? Market logic, in particular, has a very long history that stems from the federal policy environment. In this issue brief, we briefly review how the federal government has been at the forefront of defining major education policy reforms across two eras with drastically different problem definitions: The 1950s and 60s era of financial equity, and an era of market-based logic that took off in the 1980s and that remains in place today. We also briefly review how California has come to embrace the continuous improvement logic as a strategy forward to improve the state's education system.

A Brief History of Modern Education Policy

Throughout the mid-20th century, the Civil Rights movement and Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty narrowed in a central problem with the education system, in that educational inequality was the result of structural constraints that produced racial segregation and poverty (Kantor & Lowe, 2006). To address the problem, the federal government focused on addressing such inequalities with equity-oriented funding programs. For example, the federal government funded programs like Head Start to provide early childhood education and health and nutritional services for young and economically disadvantaged children, and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provided compensatory education funding to districts serving low-income students. The federal government also passed the Higher Education Act, which provided access and funding to student aid programs (Gordon, 2015).

Congress' strategy to focus on the 'inputs' of schooling via federal funding was interrupted in 1980, when a landmark report, *A Nation at Risk*, was released and catalyzed a national debate on school reform. The report framed a new problem in education: Schools were not adequately preparing students for the challenges of the 21st century economy, were inefficient, underperforming, and in need of reform, especially if the US was to remain economically competitive in a globalized economy. The report assigned blame for the problem to school leaders and teachers, asserting that it was schools that were responsible for the academic outcomes of students rather than social forces such as poverty, a narrative that had previously dominated throughout much of the mid-20th century (Kantor & Lowe, 2006). This narrative shifted lawmakers' focus on the *inputs* of education (such as school resources) to the *outputs* of education, such as student test scores. Such reframing was successful at laying the groundwork for a nationwide school reform movement that led states to experiment with state standards and testing regimes to lift student and school performance, which grew throughout the 1980s (Mehta, 2013).

The next few decades laid the foundation for a new 'market logics' approach to education policy making that were part of a larger 'neoliberal' movement to reform the function and role of the state to 'do more with less' (Mintrop, 2018). The 1990s saw major changes in state-level policy, with several states, including California, experimenting with standards-based reforms and first generation accountability systems (McDermott, 2003; Mintrop & Papazian, 2003). Other education reforms rooted in market-based logics were taking off at this time as well, including charter schools and vouchers. By the mid-1990s, the federal government further encouraged states to develop accountability models by providing seed money for learning standards aligned to student standardized tests and evaluation systems (Forte, 2010; Mehta, 2013).

These efforts resulted in a cultural shift sweeping across policymaking circles, which laid the groundwork for a national market-based policy model to take root. In 2001, federal lawmakers from across the ideological spectrum, civil rights groups, members of the business community, and other powerful interest groups successfully passed the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, a national accountability model for the nation's schools (DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; Mehta, 2013; Rhodes, 2011). With NCLB, the design of accountability coalesced into a centralized model governed by the federal government and extended to all public schools, with national mandates for standards, testing, sanctions, incentives, and school choice (Forte, 2010). NCLB established market logic—and accountability policy, in particular--as a 'paradigm' in education policymaking that continues to maintain its foothold in the U.S. and internationally as well (Mehta, 2013; Verger et al., 2019).

In the years since passage of NCLB, the federal government has continued to encourage market logic in school reform. For example, the Obama administration funded programs such as the Race to the Top grant, Investing in Innovation (i3) grants, School Improvement Grants (SIG), and the Teacher Incentive Fund. In order to receive funding for these programs, school districts and state agencies submitted competitive applications to the federal Department of Education. Recipients were often encouraged to leverage reforms for school improvement rooted in the market logics paradigm. For example, the School Improvement Grants encouraged school districts to use 'turnaround' strategies to life school improvement where districts could choose from a menu of options including firing and replacing school leadership and teachers, replacing public schools with charter school operators, or simply closing low-performing schools altogether.

State lawmakers, educators, education advocates, parents, and other stakeholders often have competing perspectives of market logics in education, and market-based reforms have become one of the most contentious issues in modern day education policy. California educators and lawmakers, in particular, have often taken issue with the market logic policy agenda for its lack of capacity building and technical assistance, especially for low-income schools that needed more financial resources in order to improve achievement for disadvantaged students, and for its strong top-down and disciplinary federal control (Fusarelli, 2004; Sunderman, Kim, & Orfield, 2005). Moreover, several decades of research on market logic policies such as NCLB accountability revealed mixed evidence that the policy was able to move needle on student performance (Lee & Orfield, 2006; Lee, 2008; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016a). There have also been growing concerns that such policies can have harmful unintended consequences for the disadvantaged students such policies are designed to serve (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016b).

In 2015, the federal government replaced NCLB with a more flexible accountability system under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that gave states more leeway in designing policy strategies to meet school improvement goals. Leading up to the passage of ESSA, California had already moved to a more decentralized accountability model in 2013 by passing the state's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), an equity-based formula that allocated additional revenue to school districts serving disadvantaged students while also giving local actors more autonomy over how to spend resources with 'local control' (Cabral & Chu, 2013). Through the LCFF, the state's top policy actors laid the groundwork for a more decentralized, professional model of school improvement under the federal ESSA law, following suit with the state's long tradition of direct democracy and former Governor Jerry Brown's call for 'subsidiarity'. This also provided the foundation for the state's experimentation with 'continuous improvement' logics to take off (Darling-Hammond & Plank, 2015; Furger, Hernandez & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Loeb & Plank, 2008).