A-024 [SUP-449]: Politics and Education Policy in the U.S.
Mondays and Wednesdays (10:10am-Noon), Larsen G08

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“It is impossible to talk about education apart from a conception of the good life; people will inevitably differ in their conceptions of the good life, and hence they will inevitably differ on matters of education; therefore the discussion of education falls squarely within the domain of politics.”

- Aristotle’s Politics

1. Course Description

Education is inherently political. The experience of schooling contributes to the socialization of citizens, and curricular choices inevitably legitimate some forms of knowledge while excluding others. Educational attainment is a key determinant of the economic success, and therefore the political influence, of individuals and social groups. The public school system is among the largest employers in the national economy, and public education typically commands a substantial share of state and local government budgets. It is no surprise, then, that education policy debates are often contentious.

This course examines the politics of education policy in the United States. It introduces the key institutions (e.g., school districts, states education agencies, Congress, the executive branch, and the courts) and actors (e.g., elected officials, teachers unions, the business community, parents, and the general public) shaping American K-12 education in order to shed light on current policy debates and their implications for students. We survey past conflicts over education governance, recent policy changes, and the successes and challenges facing ongoing reform efforts. Throughout the semester we draw on concepts from political science to understand the development of the American education system while using education policy as a case study to learn about the American political process and the nature of political action generally.

The course is strongly recommended for students in the Education Policy and Management program as a broad overview of education politics and policy in the United States. It should also be useful for Ph.D. in Education and Ed.L.D. students and for doctoral students in other programs with an interest in applied political analysis. The course is open to advanced undergraduates with a strong interest in education policy. A basic familiarity with the American political system is helpful, but there are no formal prerequisites or caps on enrollment.
2. Course Structure

The course is organized by substantive topic, with topics introduced in a loosely chronological manner. Often, however, we follow a topic’s development to the present day when it is first introduced. Theoretical readings from political science and related disciplines are included throughout the semester to provide conceptual frameworks useful for understanding the development and implementation of specific policies.

The focus of the course is the politics of American elementary and secondary education from 1954 to the present. This broad span is divided into two periods characterized by the dominant thrust of efforts to reform the governance and performance of American schools: 1) Democratic Reforms (1954-1983); and 2) Excellence Reforms (1983-2016).

Individual class meetings are devoted either to interactive lectures or to structured small- and large-group discussions. Classes of each type are identified with an “L” or a “D” on the schedule below. Discussion classes often focus on a political or legal case, providing an opportunity for students to apply their knowledge to a concrete issue, problem, or decision.

3. Expectations and Evaluation

Attendance and preparation: The first and most important expectation for this course is regular and prepared attendance. If you must miss a class, you should contact a Teaching Fellow as soon as possible (with a full week’s notice strongly encouraged). You are also expected to watch a video of the class you miss and submit a 500-word response to the assigned readings and the video within one week. All required readings should be completed prior to the class for which they are assigned. In addition, you should plan to spend time reflecting on and drawing connections between the readings, guided in part by guides posted on the course website.

Laptop policy: A growing body of evidence indicates that the use of laptops and other electronic devices, even when used only for note-taking, can hinder engagement and learning. Furthermore, laptop use for other purposes (e.g., email, social media, etc.) can be a source of distraction for other students. The use of laptops is therefore prohibited in sessions identified with an “L” on the syllabus. Laptops are permitted in classes identified with a “D” on the syllabus in order to permit access to electronic versions of the readings, but their wireless capabilities should be disabled for the duration of all class meetings. If you would like to request an exemption from this policy for any reason (e.g., a disability or other educational need), please email me prior to our second class meeting on September 6.

Discussion groups: To foster engagement with the course readings, each student will be assigned to a weekly discussion group. Students are strongly encouraged to sign up for a group that meets in person but also have the option of signing up for a group that meets online. Each group is required to post a brief summary of their discussion of the assigned readings by 10pm on the evening before each course meeting marked on the syllabus.
with an “L.” For groups that meet online, each individual student should instead post a brief comment. Repeated non-participation (or cursory participation) in your discussion group will be reflected in the participation component of your final course grade. Discussion groups will be reshuffled at least once during the semester. The first group postings are due prior to our third scheduled course meeting on September 11 (i.e., by 10pm on September 10).

**Tracking current events:** All students are expected to follow coverage of education issues in at least one national newspaper (e.g., *New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today*) and in education-specific news sources (e.g., *Education Week* and Chalkbeat) on a regular basis. I will often bring relevant articles and commentary to your attention, and I encourage you to let me know when you come across material of interest. Commenting on the relationship between media articles and assigned readings is also a valued form of discussion group participation.

**Written assignments:** The written assignments for the course comprise two short papers (with an option to write a third) and a take-home exam.

The short papers take the form of 1,000-word policy memos or 1,500-word analysis papers; students are required to write two papers in total, at least one of which must be a policy memo. Students may choose to write a third paper of either type, in which case we will drop the lowest of their three short paper grades. Paper prompts are distributed at each of the 12 class meetings marked on the syllabus with a “D.” Students choosing to write in response to one of those prompts must submit their paper via the course website by the following Friday. Students must submit their first paper by October 20.

The take-home exam is distributed at 9am on December 6 and due by 5pm on December 8. It will require you to answer short-response questions and to draft a policy memo similar to those assigned during the semester, but on a topic that requires the synthesis of material across topics. The exam is open-book and open-note but must be completed independently. Doctoral candidates and others who expect to pursue research on the politics of education have the option to write a research paper proposal of roughly 3,500 words in lieu of completing the final exam.

Detailed expectations for each written assignment will be discussed in class and posted on the course website.

**Collaboration on written assignments:** Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to both academic and policy work. For all assignments in this course other than the final exam (which should be completed independently), you are encouraged to discuss the topic on which you choose to write with your discussion group, other students, and the teaching staff. However, you should ensure that the work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own writing and reflects your own approach to the topic. You should also adhere to course policies with respect to the citation of course materials and outside sources. If you receive specific help with your writing (e.g., feedback on
drafts), you should acknowledge this assistance. Whether or not you have received such assistance will not influence the evaluation of your work.

**Evaluation:** Course grades will be calculated as follows:

- Attendance and Participation: 15%
- Short Papers: 50%
- Final Exam/Paper: 35%

4. **Required Texts and Reading Materials**

The following required texts are available for purchase from numerous online vendors:


The remaining readings are available in the course iPa© or via links provided on the course website. Readings listed as “Additional Resources” are not required but available as a reference to students interested in additional perspectives or evidence on the relevant topics; they may also be a useful starting point for final paper research.

**Syllabus Codes:**

- L: Lecture-based class
- D: Discussion-based class
- RT: Required Text
- IP: iPa©
- Web: Link provided on course website
5. Topics and Readings

Aug. 30: The Origins and Expansion of Mass Education in the U.S. (L)


Additional resources:


Sept. 6: The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (L)

*The Federalist Papers*, No. 51. [Web]


Christopher Cross, *Political Education: National Policy Comes of Age* (Teachers College Press, 2003), pp. xiii-xv. [IP]


**Additional Resources:**


**Sept. 11: School Desegregation (L)**

*The Federalist Papers*, No. 78. [Web]


Read or listen to at least one of the following two sources:


**Additional Resources:**
Brown v. Board of Education (1954) [Web]

Milliken v. Bradley (1973) [Web]

Davies, See Government Grow, 104-142 [RT]


Sept. 13: Race-based School Assignment: Parents Involved in Community Schools (D)


Additional Resources:


**Sept. 18: Student Rights and Judicial Oversight of School Discipline (L)**


**Additional resources:***


**Sept. 20: Student Speech Rights: The “BONG HiTS 4 JESUS” Case (D)**


**Sept. 25: Access for Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners (L)**

*The Federalist Papers*, No. 10 [Web]

Davies, *See Government Grow*, pp. 143-93. [RT]


Grant, *Hamilton High*, pp. 77-113. Start reading now; finish before Wednesday’s class [RT]

**Additional resources:***


Samuel Bagenstos, “The Judiciary’s Now-limited Role in Special Education,” in Dunn and West, *From Schoolhouse to Courthouse*, pp. 121-141. [IP]
**Sept. 27: Hamilton High and School Discipline Reform (D)**


Grant, *Hamilton High*, pp. 77-113. [RT]

Selected resources from the U.S. Department of Education’s “School Climate and Discipline Guidance Package”: “Dear Colleague Letter” and the “Overview of the Successful School Discipline Initiative.” [Web]


**Additional resources:**


This American Life (2014), *Episode 538: Is This Working?* [Web]

**Oct. 2: The Rise of Teachers Unions (L)**


**Additional resources:**


Oct. 4: School Boards and Urban School Politics (L)


Charles M. Payne, So Much Reform, So Little Change: The Persistence of Failure in Urban Schools (Harvard Education Press, 2008), pp. 121-152. [IP]

Additional resources:

Kenneth Wong et al, The Education Mayor: Improving America’s Schools (Georgetown University Press, 2007), pp. 11-27. [IP]


Oct. 11: Debating Agency Fees (D)


Selected briefs from Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association (2016): Social Scientists; School Districts; Daniel DiSalvo; and Gloria Romero et al.
Part II: The Excellence Reforms: From A Nation at Risk to NCLB (1983-2015)

Oct. 16: “A Nation at Risk” and the Politics of Test-based Accountability (L)


Additional resources:

Andrew Rudalevige, “No Child Left Behind: Forging a Congressional Compromise,” in Paul E. Peterson and Martin R. West, eds., No Child Left Behind? The Politics and Practice of School Accountability (Brookings Institution Press, 2003), pp. 23-54. [IP]


Davies, See Government Grow, 246-276. [RT]

Oct. 18: Debating Test-based Accountability and the Impact of NCLB (D)

Note: The first two readings are abridged versions of articles by the same authors listed as additional resources; the full articles are well-worth reading if you have time.


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**Additional resources:**


**Oct. 23: School Finance Litigation (L)**

Davies, *See Government Grow*, 194-217. [RT]

John Dinan, “School Finance Litigation: The Third Wave Recedes,” in Dunn and West, *From Schoolhouse to Courthouse*, pp. 96-112. [IP]

C. Kirabo Jackson, Rucker Johnson, and Claudia Persico, “Boosting Educational Attainment and Earnings: Does Money Matter After All?” *Education Next*, vol. 15, no. 4 (2105), pp. 69-76 [Web]. Please also read this critique of the Jackson et al. study and the authors’ response.

**Additional resources:**

*San Antonio v. Rodriguez* (1973) [Web]


**Oct. 25: Rethinking Rodriguez? Understanding and Addressing Inequality in School Spending (D)**


Inequality Within Districts:

Saba Bireda and Raegen Miller, “Walking the Talk: Closing the Loophole in the Comparability Requirement of ESEA, Title I,” Center for American Progress (2010). [Web]


**Additional resources:**


**Oct. 30: Improving Teacher Quality and Diversity (L)**


Frederick M. Hess and Juliet Squire, “‘But the pension fund was just sitting there…’ The politics of teacher retirement plans,” Education Finance and Policy, vol. 5, no. 4 (2009), pp. 587-616. [Web]


Additional resources:


Nov. 1: Teacher Evaluation Reform (D)


Nov. 6: School Choice: Theory and Politics (L)


Paul E. Peterson, *Saving Schools: From Horace Mann to Virtual Learning* (Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 183-228. [IP]

**Additional resources:**


Nov. 8: A Tale of Two Takeovers: New Orleans and Lawrence (D)


Nov. 13: Federal Education Policy under President Obama: Competitive Grants, Waivers, and the Common Core [L]


Additional resources:


**Nov. 20: Debating the Every Student Succeeds Act (L/D)**


**Nov. 27: Designing an ESSA-compliant Accountability System (D)**

Christopher Jencks, “Whom must we treat equally for educational opportunity to be equal?” Ethics, vol. 98, no. 3 (1988), pp. 518-533. [Web]


Selections from Bellwether Education Partners ESSA State Plan Review Project.

**Additional resource:**

Nov. 29: Public Opinion, Politics, and the Future of American Education Policy (D)


**Additional resources:**