

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY
College of Education and Human Development

Course Title: *Education Policy: Process, Context and Politics*
EDUC 870
Fall 2010

Instructor: Dr. Penelope M. Earley
Class Date & Time: Wednesday 4:20 – 7:10
Class Location: Robinson B 222
Contact Information:

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Office Hours: By Appointment: M-F 9:30 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course examines theories of and research on public policy decision making in education at the local, state, and national levels and its impact on education institutions, students, and the public. Particular attention is given to which government entities have authority over education decision making and the resolution of competing policy arguments within the political arena. Prerequisite: Admission to the Ph.D. program or permission of instructor.

STUDENT OUTCOMES

At the conclusion of this course, students should be able to:

1. Understand and explain the responsibilities of various levels of government for pre-K – 16 education.
2. Analyze and describe the impact of social, legal, and political forces on the functioning of education in the United States.
3. Analyze and articulate differing policy arguments and perspectives regarding education.
4. Understand the various research frames and methodologies used to study education policy.

RELATIONSHIP TO PROGRAM GOALS AND PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

There are no specialized standards specific to education policy studies. However, most, if not all standards for educators expect professionals to be aware of the political, social, economic, legal and cultural context of public education in the United States. This course provides students with that background and understanding.

NATURE OF COURSE DELIVERY

This course is taught using lectures and discussions.

TEXTS, READINGS, AND RESOURCES

Required

Sykes, G., Schneider, B., & Plank, D.N. (Eds.) (2009). *Handbook of Education Policy Research*. New York: Routledge.

Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th ed). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association

Additional Resources and References

Allington, R. L. (2002). *Big brother and the national reading curriculum: How ideology trumped evidence*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Brafman, O. & Brafman, R. (2008). *Sway: The irresistible pull of traditional behavior*. New York: Broadway Books.

Cross, C. (2003). *Political education: National policy comes of age*. New York: Teachers College Press.

DeFattore, J. (1992). *What Johnny shouldn't read: Textbook censorship in America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University.

Education Policy Analysis Archives, available on line (<http://epaa.asu.edu>)

Heck, R.A. (2004). *Studying educational and social policy: Theoretical concepts and research methods*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Kingdon, J.W. (1995). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies* (2nd ed.). New York: Harper Collins.

Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities children in America's schools*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Ravitch, D. (2003). *The language police*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Sabiter, P.A. (Ed) (2007). *Theories of the political process* (2nd ed.). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, available on line (<http://www.schev.edu>).

Stone, D. (1997). *Policy paradox: The art of political decision making*. New York: W.W. Norton.

The Constitution of the United States, available on line
(<http://www.house.gov/Constitution/Constitution.html>)

The Constitution of Virginia, available on line
(<http://www.legis.state.va.us/laws/Constitution.html>)

United States Department of Education, available on line (<http://www.ed.gov>)

United States Supreme Court, available on line (<http://www.supremecourtus.gov>)

Virginia State Department of Education, available on line (<http://www.pen.k12.va.us>)

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- Students are expected to read all assignments before class and if a class is missed to get notes and any handouts from a colleague.
- Students are expected to participate in discussions of the readings (either in the class as a whole or in small groups)
- Please turn off your cell phone during class (this is an IM, texting, email checking free class)
- Specific assignments:
 1. *State constitution presentation*. Review and present to the class a brief summary highlighting the education provisions in a state constitution other than Virginia (this is not a written assignment). You will select your state on Sept. 8 and the presentation is **due on Sept. 15. (15 points)**
 2. *Poster session presentation*. Read a chapter in the Sykes et al. text *not* assigned for class (EXCLUDING the commentaries). [Assigned chapters are: 03, 04, 07, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 20, 22, 23, 25, 27, 29, 36, 47, 51, 53, 57, 58, 59, 67, 69]. Prepare a brief summary, review, and critique of the chapter in the form of an academic poster presentation or round table. You will present your poster at one of four sessions held throughout the semester. You must provide a handout for everyone who attends and send a copy to the instructor before the session at which you present. Your presentation may be no more than 25 minutes (15 to present and 10 for Q&A). **Poster/Roundtable sessions will be held on October 13, October 27, November 17, and December 01. Four students will present on each date. (20 points).**
 3. *Policy framing proposal*. Prepare a 1–2 page proposal for your final policy framing paper (see #4 below). The proposal will present your focal policy problem or issue and describe the policy level at which decisions about this policy are being made. It will also describe the frameworks you are considering for your framing paper, and the pros and cons of each in this context. **Proposal is due October 20. (15 points).**
 4. *Policy event summary and analysis*. Attend and write a 1–2 page summary and analysis of either a local school board meeting or other policy event (the latter must be approved in advance). If you do not attend a school board meeting, the policy event must be open to the public and one at

which you are not a participant. Watching a school board meeting on TV does not count as attending. **Due Dec 01. (20 points)**

5. *Policy framing paper.* Your final policy framing paper will be written as a policy brief for a hypothetical policymaker at the local, state, or federal level. (Be sure to specify which level you are targeting.) The paper will first present the policy problem or issue you have chosen to address, including the nature of the problem and the nature of the debate about the problem. It will then present and defend a policy framework for interpreting evidence about the debate. Based on that framework, it will discuss what types of evidence one would need to make a sound policy recommendation. It may be useful to provide examples of strong or weak evidence as related to your topic, if such examples exist. The paper should draw upon and cite relevant course readings and should be no more than 5 pages: up to 1 page to outline the problem/issue, and the remainder to describe and defend the policy framework and its empirical implications. **Due Dec. 08 (30 points)**

EVALUATION

An evaluation rubric for this class is attached. All written work must be completed on a word processor and must be within the page limits established by the instructor. All papers must be formatted according to the *APA Manual of Style*.

Grading Scale:

| | | | |
|------|--------|------|--------------|
| A = | 96-100 | A- = | 92-95 |
| B+ = | 89-91 | B = | 80-88 |
| C = | 79-75 | F = | 74 and below |

COURSE SCHEDULE

September 01—Introduction to public policy and education

- Introductions
- Review of syllabus & class schedule
- Introduction to policy studies in education
- Discussion of the U.S. Constitution and authority for K-16 education
- **Assignment for Sept. 08:** Read in Sykes, et al. Chapter 23 (Mead) and Chapter 57 (Cohen-Vogel & McLendon).

September 08—Federal, state & local authority for education in the U.S.

- Education policy & the legal system
- Overview of Federal policy history in K-12 education
 - Cohen-Vogel presents three frameworks to explore the enactment of NCLB, which one do you think is best (most helpful for understanding)? What isn't accounted for in these theoretical frameworks?
- Selection of state constitutions
- Selection of chapter and date for poster/round table presentation (be sure to have backups in mind)

- **Assignment for Sept. 15:** Read in Sykes, et al.: Chapter 58 (McDermott), Chapter 59 (Sykes, et al.) Chapter 25 (Jacobsen); and (2) Read the constitution for the state you selected and be prepared to give a 5-6 minute report on the provisions in it.

September 15— Does the tail wag the dog? (What’s the dog and what’s the tail?)

- Review and discuss poster assignment and policy paper assignments
- Presentation of state constitutions: What is similar and what is different?
- Discussion of state and local role in education policy decisions
 - What are the challenges for using state/district-level governments to form national education policy?
 - Has the historic role of district- or community-level governance of K-12 education outlived its usefulness?
 - What are the implications of the work by McDermott, Sykes, et al., and Jacobsen for efforts to create national K-12 standards, curricula, and examinations
- **Assignment for September 22:** Read in Sykes, et al.: Chapter 7 (Weimer), Chapter 10 (Orland), & Chapter 22 (Rosen).

September 22—Challenges of policy analysis and policy research

- How does or can research inform policy?
 - Both Weimer and Orland describe a distinction between policy research and policy analysis: What are sources of possible bias in each?
 - Rosen presents a different lens to look at education policy and the scholarship that supports it. How does Rosen’s approach differ from Weimer and Orland? Which approach makes the most sense of the policy world as you know it?
- **Assignment for October 06:** Read in Sykes et al.: Chapter 3 (Hanushek), & Chapter 4 (McDonnell).

September 29—No Class (Remember to attend a school board meeting or other policy event)

October 06—Economics, political science and education policy

- Discussion of the strengths and limitations of using economic or political science frames.
 - What are the assumptions of an economic approach to studying policy?
 - What are the assumptions of a political science approach to studying policy?
 - Are policy decisions rational?
- **Assignment for Oct. 20:** Read in Sykes et al.: Chapter 11 (Borman), Chapter 14 (Desimone), Chapter 16 (McDonald),& Chapter 13 (Pigott). Policy Framing Proposal Due Oct 20.

October 13— Poster/Round Table Presentations (4)

October 20— Education policy research methodologies

- The very political nature of education policy research.

- Borman discusses the political environment that led to decisions by the federal government to favor SBR over other types of empirical studies. Pigott suggests that research syntheses and meta-analysis are useful research strategies. What policy topic or topics might be studied using randomized trials? Why?
- Desimone suggests there are a number of ways to think about education policy research. Think of some policy problems that might lend themselves to her recommendations. McDonald discusses policy evaluation. Although evaluation studies are favored by many in the policy community, some scholarly journals will not accept them as examples of research. Why might that be?

October 27—Poster/Round Table Presentations (4)

- **Assignment for Nov. 03:** Read in Sykes et al.: Chapter 20 (Mickelson), Chapter 51 (Farkas), & Chapter 69 (Jones et al.).

November 03—Education policy and social justice

- Does policy have a moral purpose?
 - Chapters by Mickelson, Farkas, and Jones et al. each approach the policy challenges of equality from a different place. Does the education policy community have an obligation to study and formulate policy options to address social and economic inequalities? If so, what are ways to approach the issues?
- **Assignment for Nov. 10:** (1) Be prepared to discuss the results of the midterm elections. (2) Read in Sykes et al.: Chapter 27 (Honig), Chapter 29 (West), Chapter 36 (Plecki et al.), & Chapter 47 (Reteille et al.)

November 10—Does research have the answer

- Discussion of the results of the mid-term elections
 - What does the result of the election tell us about the policy expectations of citizens and their attitudes about government policy overall? Do any of the chapters you have read help inform this discussion?
- Policy research themes and options
 - Honig implies that policy theory is context specific, how does this relate to the work of West on choice.
- Is money the answer?
 - Many policy makers and others accept the assertion that good teachers influence student performance in a positive manner. They further argue that higher salaries will attract better teachers. How do the chapters by Pelecki et al. and Reteille et al. help us think about this policy challenge?

November 17—Poster/Round Table Presentations (4)

- **Assignment for Dec. 09:** Read in Sykes et al., Chapter 53 (Plank et al.) & Chapter 67 (Fuller). **Policy Framing assignment due Dec. 09 before class.**

November 24—Happy Thanksgiving Eve – University closed

December 01—Poster/Round Table Presentations (4)

- **Assignment for Dec. 08:** Policy Framing Paper & Discussion

December 08—Putting the pieces together

- A common theme in educational policy studies is the tension between state autonomy vis a vis the goals and expectations of schools and federal interest and over site.
 - Plank and Kessler discuss the ebb and flow of state authority in the US and other countries. Fuller argues that we can learn a great deal by studying decentralized reforms. How do these respective points of view help frame and inform policy debates?
 - Remember to turn in your policy event summary/analysis this week
 - Discussion of policy framing assignments
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Important Information for all students

The College of Education and Human Development expects all students to abide by the following:

- ✓ Students are expected to exhibit professional behavior and dispositions. See www.gse.gmu.edu for a listing of these dispositions.
 - ✓ Students must know and follow the guidelines of the University Honor Code. See http://www.gmu.edu/catalog/apolicies/#TOC_H12 for the full Honor Code.
 - ✓ Students must agree to abide by the university policy for Responsible Use of Computing. See <http://mail.gmu.edu> and click on Responsible Use of Computing at the bottom of the screen.
 - ✓ Students with disabilities to seek accommodations in a course must be registered with the GMU Disability Resource Center (DRC) and inform the instructor, in writing, at the beginning of the semester. See www.gmu.edu/students/drc or call 703-003-2474 to access the DRC.
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Grading Guidelines: EDUC 870 Education Policy: Process, Context, and Politics

| Grade/Points | Quality of Work | Completeness of Work | Timeliness | Participation |
|------------------------------------|--|---|--|--|
| A 96 – 100 A- 92 – 95 | Exceptional quality and insight; a rare & valuable contribution to the field. Convincingly on target; demonstrates evidence of understanding and application; clear and concise writing; the reader is not distracted by grammar and/or spelling and citation errors. | 100% complete and error free Accurate & seamless writing; virtually a complete product | 100% on time Almost always on time; rare but forgivable tardiness (such as serious personal or family illness). Instructor is notified in advance that a paper may be late. | Outstanding; facilitates and promotes conversation focused on the topic; questions & comments reveal thoughtful reaction. Good team participant Well above average doctoral student; actively helps move group toward goal. |
| B+ 89 – 91 B 80 – 88 | Competent; provides credible evidence of understanding and application; some lapses in organization, citations and/or writing clarity. Evidence of understanding presented but incomplete; writing indicates gaps in logic; grammar and/or spelling errors distract the reader. Weak or insufficient citations. | Moderate shortcomings; minor elements missing that distract the instructor's ability to see the product as a whole. Evidence of effort but one or more significant and important points are missed or not addressed. | Assignments late more than once or without prior conversation with instructor; not necessarily chronic. More than half the assignments are late, but none are excessively late. | Reliable and steady worker; questions and comments reveal some thought and reflection. Doesn't contribute often, but generally reveals some thought and reflection. Follows rather than leads group activities. |
| C 75 - 79 | Undergraduate level and quality; unsophisticated; assignments show little or not connection to course content or concepts. | Insufficient evidence of understanding and application; important elements missing or difficult to find. | Excessively or repeatedly late. | Weak or minimal participation; passive; often sidetracks group. |
| F below 74 | Unacceptable | Difficult to recognize as the assigned task. | Missed or not submitted. Incompletes not made up. | No constructive participation; destructive; demeaning toward other points of view. |