

**GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY**  
College of Education and Human Development

Course Title: *Education Policy: Process, Context and Politics*  
EDUC 870  
Fall 2012

Instructor: Dr. Penelope M. Earley  
Class Date & Time: Wednesday 4:20 – 7:10  
Class Location: 2021 Thomson Hall  
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 public policy decision-making in education at local, state, and national levels, and its impact on education institutions, students, and public. It focuses on government entities authority over education decision-making, and resolution of competing policy arguments in political arena.

Also considered are theories of and research on public policy issues. 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* (6<sup>th</sup> 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.

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

DelFattore, J. (2010). *Knowledge in the making: Academic freedom and free speech in America's schools and universities*. 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* (2<sup>nd</sup> 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* (2<sup>nd</sup> 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). The dates for this assignment will be determined the first night of class. **(15 points)**
  2. *Poster session presentation*. Read a chapter in the Sykes et al. text *not* assigned for class (EXCLUDING the commentaries). 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 approximately 45 minutes (30 to present and 15 for Q&A). **Dates for the poster sessions will be determined the first night of class (20 points).**
  3. *Policy brief proposal*. Prepare **a 1–2 page outline** for your final policy brief (see #5 below). The proposal will present the focus of your policy problem or issue and describe the policy level at which decisions about this policy are being made. It will also describe the framework/s you are considering for your final paper and why. Due date to be decided the first night of class. **(10 points).**

4. *Policy event summary and analysis.* Attend and write a 2-3 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 or other event on TV does not count as attending. **Please submit shortly after attending the event, (20 points)**
5. *Policy brief paper.* Your 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 date to be decided the first night of class. (35 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, 6<sup>th</sup> Ed.*

Grading Scale:

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

## COURSE SCHEDULE

### **Class 1—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:** Read in Sykes, et al. Chapter 23 (Mead) and Chapter 57 (Cohen-Vogel & McLendon).

### **Class 2—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:** 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 10 minute report on the provisions in it.

### **Class 3— Does the tail wag the dog? (What's the dog and what's the tail?)**

- Review and discuss poster assignment and policy paper assignments
- Possible guest speaker
- 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:** Read in Sykes, et al.: Chapter 7 (Weimer), Chapter 10 (Orland), & Chapter 22 (Rosen).

### **Class 4—Challenges of policy analysis and policy research**

- Discussion of the forthcoming general election and candidate's positions
- How does or can research inform policy?
- How do you identify *advocacy based* policy analysis?
  - 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:** Read in Sykes et al.: Chapter 3 (Hanushek), & Chapter 4 (McDonnell).

### **Class 5—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?

- What kinds of research methods do these analyses normally use?

- **Assignment:** For class 7, read in Sykes et al.: Chapter 11 (Borman), Chapter 14 (Desimone), Chapter 16 (McDonald), & Chapter 13 (Pigott). Policy Framing Proposal Due Oct 19.

#### **Class 6— Discussion of the Electoral College**

- Why was it created
- How does it work
- Should it be continued or eliminated
- What does this mean for the November election?

#### **Class 7— 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?

#### **Class 8—Policy Researcher Panel**

#### **Class 9—Poster/Round Table Presentations (tentative date)**

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

#### **Class 10—Discussion of General Election Outcomes (State and Federal)**

- **Assignment:** For Class 12 read in Sykes et al.: Chapter 27 (Honig), Chapter 29 (West), Chapter 36 (Plecki et al.), & Chapter 47 (Reteille et al.)

#### **Class 11—No class (Remember to attend a school board meeting or other policy event)**

#### **Class 12— 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:** Read in Sykes et al., Chapter 53 (Plank et al.) & Chapter 67 (Fuller). **Policy Framing assignment due.**



**November 28—No Class. Happy Thanksgiving!**

**Class 13—Poster/Round Table Presentations (tentative)**

- **Assignment:** Policy Paper Discussions
- **Deadline for all papers**

**Class 14—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?
- Discussion of policy framing assignments

**Important Information for all students**

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

- Students must adhere to the guidelines of the George Mason University Honor Code [See <http://academicintegrity.gmu.edu/honorcode/>].

Please note that:

- Plagiarism encompasses the following:
  1. Presenting as one's own the words, the work, or the opinions of someone else without proper acknowledgment.
  2. Borrowing the sequence of ideas, the arrangement of material, or the pattern of thought of someone else without proper acknowledgment.

(from Mason Honor Code online at <http://mason.gmu.edu/~montecin/plagiarism.htm>)
- Paraphrasing involves taking someone else's ideas and putting them in your own words. When you paraphrase, you need to cite the source.
- When material is copied word for word from a source, it is a direct quotation. You must use quotation marks (or block indent the text) and cite the source, including the appropriate page number.

- Electronic tools (e.g., SafeAssign) may be used to detect plagiarism if necessary.
  - Plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct are treated seriously and may result in disciplinary actions.
- Students with disabilities who seek accommodations in a course must be registered with the George Mason University Office of Disability Services (ODS) and inform their instructor, in writing, at the beginning of the semester [See <http://ods.gmu.edu/>].
  - Students must follow the university policy for Responsible Use of Computing [See <http://universitypolicy.gmu.edu/1301gen.html>].
  - Students are responsible for the content of university communications sent to their George Mason University email account and are required to activate their account and check it regularly. All communication from the university, college, school, and program will be sent to students solely through their Mason email account.
  - Students must follow the university policy stating that all sound emitting devices shall be turned off during class unless otherwise authorized by the instructor.
  - Students are expected to exhibit professional behaviors and dispositions at all times.
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*Campus Resources*

- The George Mason University Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) staff consists of professional counseling and clinical psychologists, social workers, and counselors who offer a wide range of services (e.g., individual and group counseling, workshops and outreach programs) to enhance students' personal experience and academic performance [See <http://caps.gmu.edu/>].
  - The George Mason University Writing Center staff provides a variety of resources and services (e.g., tutoring, workshops, writing guides, handbooks) intended to support students as they work to construct and share knowledge through writing [See <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/>].
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Grading Guidelines: EDUC 870 Education Policy: Process, Context, and Politics

<b>Grade/Points</b>	<b>Quality of Work</b>	<b>Completeness of Work</b>	<b>Timeliness</b>	<b>Participation</b>
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.