

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

Course Title: *Education Policy: Process, Context and Politics*  
EDUC 870  
Fall 2014

Instructor: Dr. Penelope M. Earley  
Class Date & Time: Wednesday 4:30 – 7:10  
Class Location: 1017 Thomson Hall  
Contact Information:

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

**Course Description:**

A. Prerequisites/Corequisites:

Admission to PhD in education program, or permission of instructor.

B. Course description from the university catalog:

Examines public policy decision-making in education at local, state, and national levels, and its impact on education institutions, students, and public. Focuses on government entities' authority over education decision-making, and resolution of competing policy arguments in political arena.

**Course Learning 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**

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.

DeFattore, 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) and treat one another with respect.
- Students are expected to turn in all assignments on time unless prior arrangements are made.
- Please turn off your cell phone during class (this is an IM, texting, email checking free class)
- As a courtesy to other students, please munch on snacks at break rather than during class
- Specific assignments:
  1. *State constitution presentation.* Review and present to the class a brief summary (about 10 minutes) highlighting the education provisions in a state constitution other than Virginia (this is not a written assignment).  
**Presentation Date: Sept. 10. (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 30 minutes (20 to present and 10 for Q&A). **Dates for the poster sessions are: Oct. 1, Oct. 29, Nov. 05, and Nov. 19 (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 theory or conceptual framework/s you are considering for your final paper and why (look ahead to Chapters 28 and 57 in Sykes et al. for policy theories or perspectives).  
**Due: Oct. 1. (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 but no later than Nov, 19 (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/s or theory/ies for understanding the policy issue. 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. No personal pronouns should appear in the policy brief. **Due Nov. 29. (35 points)**

**\*\*Please email electronic copies of all written assignments to me by noon on the day they are due\*\***

### **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 (see rubric on last page of this syllabus):

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

### **GMU Policies and Resources for Students:**

- a. Students must adhere to the guidelines of the George Mason University Honor Code [See<http://oai.gmu.edu/honor-code/>].
- b. Students must follow the university policy for Responsible Use of Computing [See<http://universitypolicy.gmu.edu/policies/responsible-use-of-computing/>].
- c. 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.
- d. 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/>].
- e. 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/>].
- f. Students must follow the university policy stating that all sound emitting devices shall be turned off during class unless otherwise authorized by the instructor.
  - g. 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/>].

### **Professional Dispositions**

Students are expected to exhibit professional behaviors and dispositions at all times.

### **Core Values Commitment**

The College of Education & Human Development is committed to collaboration, ethical leadership, innovation, research-based practice, and social justice. Students are expected to adhere to these principles. <http://cehd.gmu.edu/values/>

**For additional information on the College of Education and Human Development, Graduate School of Education, please visit our website [See <http://gse.gmu.edu/>]**

### **Course Schedule**

#### **Class 1 Aug. 27—Introduction to public policy and education**

- Introductions
- Review of syllabus & class schedule
- *APA* tip of the week
- 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), Chapter 28 (Datnow & Park) and Chapter 57 (Cohen-Vogel & McLendon).

#### **Class 2 Sept. 03—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?
  - Compare these frameworks with those presented by Datnow and Park.
- Selection of state constitutions
- Selection of chapter and date for poster/round table presentation (be sure to have backups in mind)
- Review and discuss poster assignment and policy paper assignments
- **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 Sept. 10— Does the tail wag the dog? (What’s the dog and what’s the tail?)**

- 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 Sept. 17—Challenges of policy analysis and policy research**

- *Additional time for state constitution presentations if needed*
- How does or can research inform policy? Lessons from School Board Member research
- 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 Sept. 24—Economics, political science and education policy**

- Discussion of the politics of the forthcoming November elections
- 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?

**Class 6 Oct 01— Poster Sessions (4 @ 30 minutes each)**

- Policy Brief proposal/outline due.
- **Assignment:** For class 7, Read in Sykes et al.: Chapter 20 (Mickelson), Chapter 51 (Farkas), & Chapter 69 (Jones et al.).

**Class 7 Oct 08— 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?

**Class 8 Oct 15—Policy Researcher Panel**

- **Assignment:** For class 9, read in Sykes et al., Chapter 1 (Vinovskis), Chapter 5 (Lauren & Tyson), & Chapter 6 (Dixon et al.). Review information on Oct 22 guest speaker:  
<http://education.illinois.edu/people/epol/janders>

**Class 9 Oct 22—Guest, Professor James D. Anderson**

**Class 10 Oct 29—Poster Sessions (4 @ 30 minutes each)**

**Class 11 Nov. 05—Poster Sessions (4 @ 30 minutes each)**

- **Assignment:** For class 12, read in Sykes et al.: Chapter 11 (Borman), Chapter 14 (Desimone), Chapter 16 (McDonald), & Chapter 13 (Pigott). Policy Framing Proposal Due Oct 19.

**Class 12 Nov. 12— 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 13 Nov. 19—Poster Sessions (3 @ 30 minutes each)**

- **Assignment:** Read in Sykes et al., Chapter 53 (Plank et al.) & Chapter 67 (Fuller). **Policy Brief paper due Monday Nov 24.**

**November 26 --No Class. Happy Thanksgiving Eve!**



**Class 14 December 03—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 oversight.
  - 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 brief assignments

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<br>96 – 100       | Exceptional quality and insight; a rare & valuable contribution to the field.   | 100% complete and error free                              | 100% on time   | Outstanding; facilitates and promotes conversation focused on the topic; questions & comments reveal thoughtful reaction. Good team participant |
| A-<br>92 – 95       | Convincingly on target; demonstrates evidence of understanding and application; clear and concise writing; the reader is not distracted | Accurate & seamless writing; virtually a complete product | Almost always on time; rare but forgivable tardiness (such as serious personal or family illness). Instructor is | Well above average doctoral student; actively helps move group toward goal.   |



|               |  |   |   |  |
|---------------|--|---|---|--|
|               | by grammar and/or spelling and citation errors.  |   | notified in advance that a paper may be late.   |  |
| B+<br>89 – 91 | Competent; provides credible evidence of understanding and application; some lapses in organization, citations and/or writing clarity.                                   | Moderate shortcomings; minor elements missing that distract the instructor's ability to see the product as a whole. | Assignments late more than once or without prior conversation with instructor; not necessarily chronic. | Reliable and steady worker; questions and comments reveal some thought and reflection.                                   |
| B<br>80 – 88  | Evidence of understanding presented but incomplete; writing indicates gaps in logic; grammar and/or spelling errors distract the reader. Weak or insufficient citations. | Evidence of effort but one or more significant and important points are missed or not addressed.                    | More than half the assignments are late, but none are excessively late.                                 | Doesn't contribute often, but generally reveals some thought and reflection. Follows rather than leads group activities. |
| C<br>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<br>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.                                       |