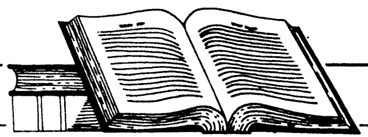
Book Reviews



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The Politics of Curriculum Decision-Making: Issues in Centralizing the Curriculum

M. Frances Klein (Ed.)
Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991, 236 pp.

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M. Frances Klein's *The Politics of Curriculum Decision-Making: Issues in Centralizing the Curriculum* crossed my desk the first week of September 1991, as millions of American students and teachers headed back to classrooms. That week I also caught several back-to-school media events—for example, a PBS special on "Teach for America" (TFA), a "Today Show" exposé of an inner-city school, and a book on school reform by Edward Fiske, former education editor of the *New York Times*. These afforded sharply focused, if superficial, images of the worst and best of American schools, an interesting backdrop for Klein's scholarly (and appropriately fuzzier) portrayal of curriculum politics and the condition of schools.

Klein's authors (mostly curriculum experts) address the current answer to a perennial question in curriculum theory, "Who makes curriculum decisions?" and they discuss the impact of that answer on educators, students, and the curriculum itself. Most include in their (unstated) definitions of curriculum not only content and materials, but also schools' goals and objectives and strategies for assessing whether they have been met. Klein argues that curriculum also encompasses teaching techniques, grouping strategies, and learning activities and the use of school time and space—in other words, nearly everything planned for children at school.

By casting this wide net, the volume grapples with one of the hottest issues in education policy: What has been the impact of increasingly centralized control and what, if anything, ought to be done about it? Chris Pipho provides a concise state-by-state overview of policy centralization. Others trace the impact of state and federal policies that have intruded farther than ever before into schools and classrooms (e.g., regulations governing categorical programs, textbook adoption procedures, curriculum guidelines, teacher evaluation standards, testing and accountability mechanisms, and academic bankruptcy provisions).

Two themes stand out: First, centralized control has done more harm than good, and, second, returning authority to local educators provides the greatest promise for undoing this harm. There is little equivocating here. Chapter after chapter describes the familiar list of consequences of prescriptive state policies: narrowing and trivializing school knowledge, de-skilling and demoralizing teachers, and reducing learning opportunities for students. A number of authors note how centralized schooling policies reduce site-based decision making and the professionalization of teaching to working out the technical details of state directives. Many

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contributors (e.g., Gary Griffin, Martin Brooks, and Robert McClure) believe that policies that foster locally based, professionally directed decision making and increase the decision-making capacity of locals would improve matters considerably.

Now consider this mostly familiar analysis against recent media images. PBS's chronicling of Wendy Kopp's first TFA cohort portrayed the predictable clash between smart, idealistic, and caring but abysmally underprepared teachers and daily life in central-city schools. Recruit after recruit expressed overpowering frustration with an inability to teach, conveyed most poignantly by one young woman's telling of how her concern shifted from educational philosophy to simple survival. None seemed convinced that they could make a difference in schools; none seemed convinced that they would continue teaching.

The "Today Show" featured exposé-style videotape shot last spring at Milwaukee's North Division High School with a minirecorder hidden in the senior class president's book bag. In classroom after classroom teachers—mostly mild-mannered, middle-aged Whites—*were simply not teaching*. Some read while students slept, bantered, and played dice. One smiled helplessly as students walked out midway through class. Another chatted cynically with students about their classmates. In the hallways, chaos reigned, with no adults in sight. Learning seemed to be the farthest thing from anybody's mind.[1]

Fiske's *Smart Schools: Smart Kids* provided an upbeat contrast. His book offers story after story of districts, schools, and teachers who, although working in isolation, are adapting promising reform ideas into practices and programs that fit their local circumstances. Fiske heralds these stories as a grass-roots revolution, arguing that such changes—if integrated and supported systemically—promise to transform the standardized, factory-model school into an institution far better suited to the diverse, thinking society we are becoming.

These popular accounts of the worst and arguably the best of American schools underscore the importance of Klein's scholarly discussion of the effort to "fix" schools with more centralized control. The book lends support to Fiske's claims that standardized schooling is stifling and obsolete and that when locals have an opportunity to adapt good ideas to their own contexts, astonishingly good schooling can occur. Moreover, the book provides solid, if sobering, insight about why what Fiske advocates is so difficult. William Schubert thoughtfully lays out historic tensions between centralized and local control; Tyll van Geel and Audrey Schwartz revisit larger social theories that press toward one or the other; Frances Klein and John Goodlad highlight the complexity brought about by the multiplicity of legitimate players in school decisions (from parents and communities to elected officials to professional educators) and the difficulty of sorting out what decisions should be made by each. They argue, as many have before them, for blending expertise and sharing power between centralized and local authority.

But wait a minute! What about those teachers at North Division High? Is their neglect simply the de-skilling effects of centralized policies? Would turning curriculum decisions back to *these* teachers be a responsible remedy? And what about those underprepared, if sincere, TFA novices? Can their incompetence be blamed on centralized curriculum, teaching, and testing? Would they do better with greater curriculum authority?

Some might argue the case, but I suspect few would agree. These examples, real in fact and vivid in the public eye, should discourage single-minded "magic bullet" approaches to curriculum policy and school reform. Few state or federal policymakers seek control (particularly curriculum control) for its own sake—as some of the authors in Klein's volume verge on saying. Rather, good intentions to "fix" dysfunctional schools and compensate for ill-prepared teachers drive most centralized policy. But, lest this sound like a defense of centralization, consider that the stories of North Division High and the TFA novices reveal the impotence of centralized policies in the places and on the people they are most intended to affect. Neither the classrooms at North Division nor the TFA teachers evidenced the effects of any central-

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ized curriculum policies—good or bad. In both cases, personal survival, not policy, drove their decisions about what students experienced (or did not experience). Rather, the effects of centralization are felt most in schools attempting to generate locally appropriate answers to central curriculum questions: "What knowledge is most worth learning?" and "How can *our* school and classroom cultures productively engage all of *our* students with that knowledge?" As Klein's book helps document, centralized control has a chilling effect on these schools.

So the knotty question remains: How can responsible parties protect students from dysfunctional schools and underprepared teachers and, at the same time, promote their exposure to high-quality, contextually appropriate practices forged by well-prepared professionals? Only Goodlad approaches this very difficult core question, and then indirectly. Wise curriculum decisions, he suggests, require a case-by-case (rather than standardized) approach, blending levels of authority and expertise in ways appropriate to that case. Just decisions, he argues, require that the self-interest of any level (state or local) or any particular group (professionals or elected officials) not take precedence over the interests of the policy.

Many will view this approach as too impractical—even naive. After all, Goodlad lays out more of a vision than a prescription. In the end, however, that is the contribution of this book—to remind those seeking easy policy solutions (whether centralized, local, or shared) to rely more on caution, balancing wisdom and justice. The book illuminates both the political and substantive complexities of curriculum decisions and the futility of simplistic approaches to them. Unfortunately, it offers little to help readers discover particular balances of central authority and local autonomy that might protect the students in the lowest quality schools (such as North Division) from the abuses of deregulation and, at the same time, protect schools like those described by Fiske from the chilling effects of overregulation. Neither does the book suggest alternative policy processes through which such balances might be struck.

Note

[1] Ironically, earlier in the year NBC reporters had filmed North Division High teachers and students engaged in classroom learning activities, scenes that left reporters puzzled about the school's extraordinarily high failure and dropout rates.

Reference

Fiske, E. B. (1991). *Smart schools, smart kids.* NY: Simon & Schuster.

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