

EDUCATORS

Educators can influence state policies by using their political clout wisely, clarifying their motives, and generating grassroots support.

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Over the past 20 years, professional educators have become increasingly involved in the political process, yet their impact on curriculum decision making may be diminishing.

I recently studied the role of educational interest groups in the passage of curriculum-related legislation by the California legislature. My particular focus was on passage of a bill mandating competencies for graduation (A.B. 3408). I found that while the issue of mandatory graduation standards has been debated extensively by professional educators,¹ very little of this debate surfaced in the legislature.

For instance, the idea for the legislation did not come from education groups. The author of the bill was a legislator who had encountered declining educational standards years earlier when he was a teacher. Media reports supported his perceptions. The specific solution, graduation competencies, was suggested by an economist employed by a private research organization to study educational issues.

Once the legislation was introduced, education groups failed to officially voice their opposition to it. As one lobbyist put it, "You just couldn't flatly oppose it. The legislature and the general public just wouldn't understand; they'd think you were trying to protect incompetency."

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Other education representatives agreed. One, for example, spoke of the "appealing surface gimmick," which made the bill too appealing to the unsophisticated to challenge it. Another educator said there are certain issues on which his organization is equipped to exert its political clout through grassroots communication with legislators. Educational finance is one such issue; tenure is another. Curriculum issues, however, are both more subtle and less related to educators' self interests. Because of this, his organization was unable to mobilize its considerable political power. In his words, "On some issues we can't generate grassroots support. Then the legislature has a field day."

Legislators and their staffs did solicit input from education groups, and they responded favorably to many of the suggestions. Yet the influence of these groups should not be exaggerated. A prerequisite for being taken seriously was support for, or at least acceptance of, the general orientation of the bill. Thus, amendments proposed by education groups tended to be technical in nature. One lobbyist, when listing her contributions to the bill, cited an amendment that made procedures more specific for contacting parents whose children failed to meet competency standards.

Informal criticisms made by some interest groups were not taken seriously by legislators or their staffs, who felt the motivations behind the criticisms were not sincere or professional concerns. The legislators believed the educators' motives were those of other interest groups: the desire to avoid public accountability while gaining access to the public

treasury.

Professional education organizations acted as either powerless critic or helpful assistant. Neither role was especially important or effective in influencing the legislative process. Not surprisingly, given the absence of formal opposition from professional interest groups, A.B. 3408 passed one house of the California legislature unanimously and had only token opposition in the other house.

My findings contradict those of earlier studies, which show educational interest groups as playing a central role in the legislatures' educational policy-making process.² I found that such groups play, at best, only a minor, supporting role. This discrepancy may result from my somewhat unique focus. While earlier studies tended to focus on educational finance legislation, I specifically examined the passage of a bill designed to alter the school curriculum. It's possible that the legislative process varies depending on the particular type of issue being debated.³

In fact, there may be an inverse relationship between professional educators' abilities to influence finance legislation and their influence over curriculum questions. While obviously political behavior—endorsements, contributions, letter writing campaigns, and the like—may enhance an organization's political clout with respect to finance legislation, such behavior may destroy education groups' credibility as professionals. To the extent that education groups play allocative politics, their influence may diminish in areas such as curriculum policy making in which allocative politics is difficult or im-

possible to play and where influence must result from perceived expertise.

It is always hazardous to generalize from a single case, but if the passage of graduation competency legislation in California is at all typical, there seems to be cause for concern. Unless groups representing professional educators can play a more central role in legislative policy making, their debates over curriculum policy questions will be merely academic. More important, the policy-making process will be deprived of the valuable insights such academic debates can yield. ■

¹ ASCD, for example, has gone on record as opposing such legislation. See *Educational Leadership* 36 (May 1979): 554. See also: Gordon Cawelti, "National Competency Testing: A Bogus Solution," *Phi Delta Kappan* 59 (May 1978): 619-620 and other articles in that issue.

² See for example, S. Bailey, R. Frost, P. Marsh, R. Wood, *Schoolmen and Politics: A Study of State Aid to Education in the Northeast* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1962); Lawrence Iannaccone, *Politics in Education* (New York: The Center for Research in Education, Inc., 1967); and N. A. Masters, R. H. Salisbury, and T. H. Eliot, *State Politics and the Public Schools* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964).

³ Political scientists, in fact, have long argued that each subset of a particular area of policy making will have its own power structure and interaction patterns. See N. Polsby, *Community Power and Political Theory* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963). This study simply suggests that this general principle is applicable to educational policy making.

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