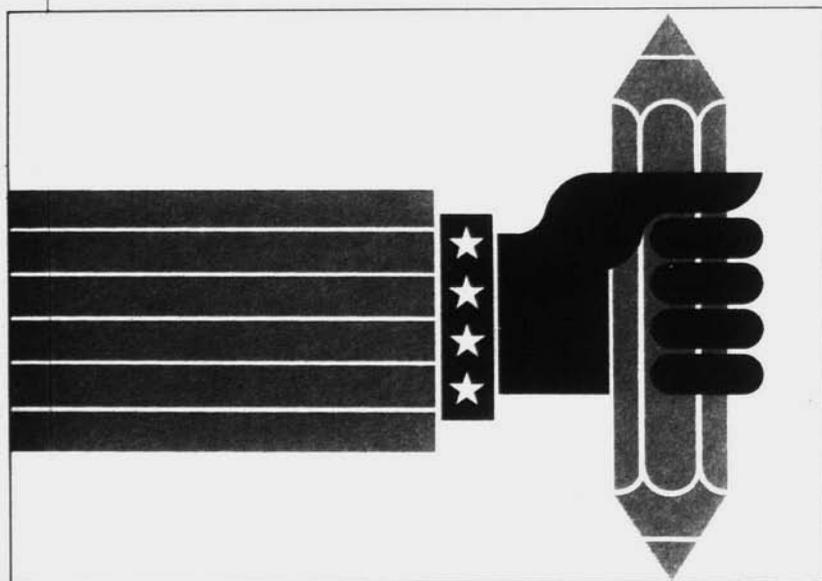


The Politics of Policy Making



DIANE G. BERRETH

Educators must shed their reluctance to “politic” and develop credibility with politicians so as to influence education policies.

Policy making is an inherently political process. We easily accept this truism, but the most recent surge of education policy making has caught educators off guard. Suddenly we are aware that the personal agendas, diverse perspectives, and compromises that characterize the politics of government are also true of the politics of education.

We have long recognized the place of politics in the development of national education policy; we are now faced with numerous examples of politics in state and local education policy making. Under the influence of the Reagan Administration, policy initiative has shifted to the states. Long

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quiescent state departments and legislatures now promulgate education policies with alarming speed.

For many of us, not only the arena but the actors are new. Today's policymakers include legislators, governors, and prominent private sector representatives. While this new inclusiveness is welcome because it heightens public interest in education, it has diminished the influence of educators on our own field. State commissions have sometimes excluded educators from membership because lay policymakers feel that educators lack credibility. They are dissatisfied with the job we have done, and they suspect us of institutional self-interest.

As for educators, we feel insecure operating outside our traditional purview. We do not know the majority of the people who are setting the policies we must implement. Our hesitancy to engage in politics has placed us in a reactive mode, scrambling from one new proposal to another. We find ourselves on the defensive, criticizing ill-formed policies without offering attractive options.

But educators *should* participate in the shaping of education policy. We possess both generalized experience and pedagogical expertise to bring to bear on issues. All policymakers have a background in education—their own—and that fact has always been a two-edged sword for educators. While it means that all of us have had a shared experience, it also engenders a feeling of expertise in every legislator who attended a public school. We must capitalize on our *own* experiences as students and as teachers: we have observed the process of *hundreds* of educations. Our pedagogical and content expertise enables us to predict what measures may succeed under what circumstances.

Moreover, despite feelings to the contrary, we educators are not politically naive. We have long worked in systems that, like other human enterprises, are characterized by power relationships in decision making. We do in fact work in the midst of personal agendas, diverse perspectives, and compromises. We are accustomed to dealing with them in our buildings and districts. However, we may be reluctant to acknowledge the politics inherent in our environments because to see ourselves as political conflicts with our professional identities. Our reluctance translates into a distaste for politics and politicians. And this distaste hampers us in dealing with elected, appointed, and bureaucratic policy-makers, who are not unaware of our attitudes. If we apply our experience and our respect for professionals to the arena of state policy making, we will be more effective. The actors may be new, but the scenarios are old.

To become active in shaping education policy, we must examine our beliefs about education and translate them into a vision for the future. When a policy is advanced, we can examine it in the light of these questions:

- What problem does this policy answer?
- What are the goals of the policy?
- Are they desirable goals according to my vision of education?
- What are the mechanisms proposed to achieve these goals?
- Will the policy achieve its intended effects?
- What other effects is it likely to have?
- What are the costs and benefits both socially and economically?²¹

Our answers to these questions provide a basis for action, which we then undertake, fully acknowledging the necessity of compromise.

In addition, we can influence other policy actors, both formally and informally, as individuals and through groups. We influence others on a one-to-one basis by talking with, writing to, or voting for policymakers. We also affect others through membership in groups. Professional associations as diverse as the National Education Association and the National School Boards Association influence education policy through the size and status of their membership.

Educators can begin now to build long-term relationships with policymakers outside education. Such relationships, based on trust and credibility, are most likely to influence policy. In 1976, Minority Staff Director Robert Andringa² of the House Education and Labor Committee stated that the influences that count most heavily in congressional decisionmaking are the

personal values of six to ten members of Congress and their staffs, the strong views of respected and trusted friends, assumptions about the budget, and the popular media.

By building credibility and using our expertise, we can increase our influence on policy making. Our opinions on the making of policy—and on when not to make it—will become more important. To ignore the politics of policy is to shut ourselves out of the process that shapes the lives of both educators and children. □

¹Adapted from Arthur E. Wise, "What Should ASCD Do?" Paper presented to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, February 1983.

²Robert Andringa, "What Counts With Congress?" *Education Daily*, Washington, D.C., April 1976.

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