APSA | Education Politics and Policy

The Organized Section in Education Politics and Policy of the American Political Science Association

Newsletter

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From the President

I'm delighted to introduce the third issue of the APSA Education Politics & Policy Section newsletter. Thanks to all the hard work of Emmerich Davies, our Communication Officer, we have a great collection of contributions. **Sally Nuamah** (Northwestern) discusses her book *How Girls Achieve* and argues that achievement measures should take into account the non-academic costs of schooling. **Jonathan Collins** (Brown University) offers suggestions for how to increase and improve civic engagement at school board meetings. Finally, Emmerich interviews Matthew Nelsen (University of Chicago), the winner of our 2021 Best Dissertation Award, for "Educating for Empowerment: Race, Socialization, and Reimagining Civic Education."

The section has been thriving. We had four well-attended panels at APSA 2021, thanks to the excellent choices of our past president Agustina Paglayan. We received a large number of submissions for APSA 2022, and I worked to put together a slate of high-quality panels on diverse topics within education politics and policy. You won't want to miss them at the 2022 APSA Conference in Montréal (Sept. 15-18). Currently, our membership stands at 313 people, and I'm confident it will continue to grow as scholars realize there is a space for political science focused on education. Our Spring Virtual Conference, which includes 6 interesting panels on topics ranging from higher education to political parties and education policy in Europe, will be held March 31- April 1. Also coming up is the deadline to nominate dissertations, books, or papers for section awards is March 31, 2022. See our website for more information about how to go about doing this.

While our section has been doing well, it has been a difficult year for many. There have been major international struggles, including the devastation wrought by the ongoing COVID pandemic and the tragedy of Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, U.S. politics remains as polarized and acrimonious as ever. In this context, education has been thrust into the spotlight with battles over COVID restrictions and critical race theory (CRT) raging in state legislatures and school board meetings. In these challenging times, there are opportunities for political scientists to shed light on the role of education politics. Scholars might consider the consequences of CRT legislation for political participation in local, state, and federal elections. Or they might explore whether the treatment of the Cold War in Russian textbooks has shaped Russian attitudes on the war in Ukraine. While international events are harrowing, it is a moment that is rich with important research opportunities for scholars of education politics and policy. I look forward to the future work that I know section members will produce.

Enjoy the newsletter. If you have suggestions for future newsletters, please reach out to **Emmerich Davies** (emmerich_davies_escobar@gse.harvard.edu).

Sincerely,

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Reimaging Girls Achievement After COVID

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Today, institutions of higher education across the nation are completely revamping grading systems to accommodate for the current COVID pandemic. In particular, institutions have shifted from traditional letter grades to pass/fail. While this represents a marked shift from before, students across the world are asking for more: they are fighting for universities to adopt universal pass policies.

Universal pass policies, they argue, ensure that no single student would be at a disadvantage as universities work to adjust to these extraordinary times. But, most universities have not bought into this claim. This ongoing debate between institutions and their students reveals a disconnect in not only what should be done about achievement amidst a pandemic, but also once it's over.

Current grading systems have been temporarily halted under the belief that, unlike the traditional grading structure, it "would eliminate any problems with fairness while allowing students and faculty to focus on creating a meaningful learning experience in anxious times." The problem with this rationale is that for many students these challenges were not new. Their challenges preceded this pandemic but were rarely addressed.

In my book, How Girls Achieve, I reimagine achievement as a measure not only of academic success but also the absence of damage from experiences with learning. In this case, to achieve is both to attain academic success and to build a healthy educational identity that allows a student to attain in different settings. I call this net achievement: the term net implies that the inequitable social, emotional and physical costs of academic achievement is taken into account. Conceiving of achievement in this way requires us to rid ourselves of false notions of merit that allow systems of racism and sexism to flourish by ignoring their impacts.

In the book, I document the inequitable costs of achievement for young women across the U.S., Ghana and South Africa over the course of a decade. I find that even in areas where women are achieving at the same or higher rates as their male counterparts, it costs them more socially, physically, and emotionally to cross that threshold. Furthermore, the rewards for their success are often mitigated by a post-graduate world that is not ready to receive them.

For instance, while girls achieve higher academic grades than boys in the U.S., and young women enroll in college at higher rates than men, over 60 percent of school-aged girls report feeling unsafe as a girl in their everyday life and/or viewed as a sexual object. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these experiences continue as they enter the workplace and negatively impact their ability to penetrate higher levels of economic and political power.

In South Africa, for example I followed a school that not only provided its students with sanitary pads for free, but also provided them to poorer schools that were unable to afford to do the same for its students. The

distribution of free pads for disadvantaged girls eliminated the unfair advantage that their more privileged counterparts enjoyed.

Likewise, I studied a school in Ghana that designed a protocol to enable girls to blow the whistle on male teachers who were known perpetrators of sexual abuse. This encouraged more girls to report sexual abuse and led to more abusers being fired.

To be sure, we all are struggling to adjust to the many changes COVID has already sprung upon us, and are looking forward to its end. But, we have also seen the way that institutions have been willing and able to rapidly respond to this moment on behalf of their students. While many of these efforts are currently viewed as temporary, serious consideration must be given to making them permanent - for even once this pandemic ends, our gender inequities in education will still be here. The reforms I discussed here are politically palatable, especially under the increased room to move COVID has afforded us. We must ensure they are sustained long after we return to normal in other aspects of life and policy.

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Moving Past the Culture War Battles at School Board Meetings

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Education politics has taken a front seat in the mainstream news feeds for all the wrong reasons. A so-called culture war has led to literal physical battles at school board meetings over COVID-19 precautions and the use of curriculum featuring elements of critical race theory. With school district leaders now facing serious attacks, it raises questions as to how districts can find ways to foster healthy public discourse around local education issues. Can school districts turn to civic engagement during a time when the loudest voices seem to lack civility? This essay offers potential pathways for establishing generative public deliberation moving forward.

School Board Boards Have Always Faced Public Contention

The notion that a school board meeting could be a literal battleground is not a new phenomenon. In the 19th century, Massachusetts became the first state to require that towns develop school committees to govern decisions around curriculum, instructional standards, and levying taxes to fund the operation. By design, school boards were meant to be spaces for reaching such decisions through democratic deliberations. Yet, we have well over a century's worth of sweeping federal court decisions (Brown v. Board, San Antonio v. Rodriguez, Board v. Rowley) that began as battles between parents and school boards. This latest round of sparring over COVID-19 restrictions, antiracist history curriculum, and LBGTQ student rights are the continuation of a deeper tradition.

How Can We Reduce Tension? Try Increasing Attendance

Despite the longevity of conflict, there are strategic steps that school boards can take to make meetings more civil. First, school boards should aim to increase the amount of attendance and public engagement happening at their meetings. This might seem counterintuitive, but it accomplishes an important set of goals. First, it enables school boards to leverage the fact that the traditional school board has been - and remains - the most popular form of education governance. Despite the antics of a few radical parent group members, people generally like their school boards. Increasing attendance overall increases the number of people showing up to meetings who are looking to address concerns in generative and civil ways.

Second, more attendance helps us develop better solutions for reducing the conflict. We desperately need to advance the study of public meetings. As of now, we have very limited, imprecise measures of meeting attendance. We know that, per-year, about 1-in-3 Americans self-report attending a local board meeting of some kind. Yet, we remain unsure exactly how many people attend school board meetings or what the average attendance level is per meeting. By increasing attendance, we create more opportunities for researchers to develop substantive samples that help us better understand who attends and why.

How Do We Increase Attendance?

There are immediate strategies that school boards can take to increase attendance at public meetings. We know that we can increase public engagement in education by creating hyper-local institutions like school councils and community advisory boards. We have also seen high levels of participation in special meetings to

decide important policy outcomes like school closures and takeovers. However, there is also experimental evidence that restructuring board meetings to allow for more public deliberation between the board and the public leads to an increased propensity to attend meetings. This restructuring also generated increased trust in school boards, which suggests that institutionalizing elements of public deliberation can increase a school board's legitimacy. These effects were most effective for members of marginalized racial and ethnic groups, and people in low-income households were no less responsive to the deliberative public meeting. School boards can readily increase attendance amongst those on the margins.

Participation Needs to Matter

School boards can take very practical approaches to increase public attendance at board meetings. However, these steps must be taken with the intention of implementing reforms that improve the educational experiences for students, especially our most vulnerable kids. Recent research suggests that inauthentic attempts at engaging the public in meetings on education issues increases distrust in policy leaders. There is also evidence that public engagement opportunities that result in real changes in education policy or how resources are used lead to higher levels of political efficacy. Recent evidence suggests that this is particularly true in low-income minoritized school communities. But, it all begins with school boards deciding to value public engagement and using meetings as spaces for meaningful discourse.

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Interview with Matthew Nelsen

Winner of the Best Education Politics and Policy Dissertation, 2021

1. How did you get into studying education and civic education in particular? What motivated you, either normatively or empirically, to study education politics and the impact of civics education on students in the United States?

   Before starting graduate school, I worked as a fifth grade teacher within the San Antonio Independent School District. My first year in the classroom corresponded with the 2012 presidential election. As part of the fifth grade social studies curriculum, I taught a series of fairly optimistic lessons about the importance of elections and the responsiveness of government. However, while teaching, I found that my students were giving a perplexed look that seemed to shed a light on my own naïvité as a white educator teaching in a Latino neighborhood. My students expressed that the lessons I was teaching about government did not reflect their lived experiences. These lessons *my students taught me* opened my eyes to an entire world of experiences that were not reflected within the curriculum I was teaching. My coworkers, extremely experienced educators with strong connections in the neighborhood, also really pushed me personally and professionally to center my students' voices in the classroom.

   Simultaneously, I was constantly seeing opinion articles from pundits talking about the political apathy of young people. My fifth graders were anything but politically apathetic. In fact, they had extremely well-developed insights about a number of policy domains, especially immigration and housing. They were, however, skeptical about the idea that participating in politics would make a difference in their lives.

   It was at this moment that I really started allowing my students to guide the conversations in class based on their own lived experiences. That is, might leaning into their anxieties about government while simultaneously exploring the agency of marginalized groups foster a sense of political empowerment? My students were visibly more invested in lessons of this kind, and this made me passionate about exploring ways to rediscover/revitalize the civic and egalitarian mission of America's public schools.

2. Could you talk about some of the challenges (if any!) and opportunities you found working with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) in your 2021 Political Behavior paper? How did you gain access to CPS? Was there opposition to the treatment arm of offering a different text rooted in critical pedagogy from administrators, schools, or teachers?

   Opportunities

   Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has a very rigorous research review board that must sign off on all research initiatives that take place within the district. While the process of gaining approval is quite time consuming, I think this experience really helped me develop a commitment to conducting grassroots research in partnership with community organizations. CPS likes external researchers to build partnerships with stakeholders within the district. This really pushed me to think about how my research might support the really great work the district's Social Science and Civic Engagement office was already doing. The relationships I developed with individuals within the district also provided points of contact to share my findings. Given my own experiences in the classroom, I am committed to conducting research that is meaningful to policymakers and practitioners (especially in educational

settings) and having CPS push me to develop those relationships while designing the project helped build connections that allowed me to share the results of my research with individuals more quickly.

I also found that the teachers who invited me into their classrooms were very supportive of the project—not just the 2021 paper but the larger book manuscript I wrote in the process. These teachers shared their syllabi, allowed me to observe their classrooms and conduct focus groups with students, and talked to me about their pedagogy and experiences in the classroom. A lot of the teachers I met while conducting this research shared many of the questions I wanted to tackle in the book so, in many ways, I felt that they were some of the biggest cheerleaders of the project.

Challenges

I had to navigate four separate IRB processes simultaneously while conducting this research: one at Northwestern, one at CPS, and two for the two suburban districts I conducted research in. In total, it took me about a year from start to finish to gain IRB approval from each district.

Since this was a lab-in-the-field experiment, I also had to travel to each of these schools. Chicago is a massive city, which meant that on some days I would wake up before 5:00am to ensure I was on a train early enough to make a, say, two hour commute on public transit from my home on the North Side of Chicago to a school essentially on the border of Indiana. Though this was time consuming, I came to know the city very well and this pushed me to write a book that is not only about civic education but the City of Chicago as a whole.

Another challenge that I navigated was sampling. I wanted to ensure that I was able to test for heterogeneous treatment effects among Asian, Black, Latinx, and white youth. Due to a number of factors (e.g., neighborhood/school segregation and the comparatively greater educational mobility of white Chicagoans), it required a great deal of persistence to conduct this experiment within schools that served high concentrations of white and Asian students. Even when I managed to obtain sufficient sample sizes across racial and ethnic groups, national origin also complicated some of the results of the study which I discuss at length in the book manuscript.

3. As you note, there is a long history from Du Bois to Freire on the importance of "seeing one's identity reflected in historical processes" (pg. 166) for critical consciousness. At the same time, schools and civics are but one part of the larger socialization process young people go through and but one place where young people see their identity reflected in historical processes. Are there other, potentially unexplored, avenues through which young people learn about the world and their place in it? And where does civics education fit into this larger puzzle?

   This is a more difficult question to answer. I think one goal of my research is to push us to think about what we mean about representation, whether that's in school curriculum or in pop culture. We know from existing research that prominent historical figures are often difficult for young people to relate to . My work seeks to demonstrate the potential of highlighting collective action narratives and less vaunted historical figures. All this to be said, I think as we start to think more about representation in government, the arts, culture, the workplace, etc., that it's essential to explore the multiplicities of experiences. In my mind, centering the narratives of those who have been most marginalized is a necessary precursor to identifying news areas of study with regard to socialization.

4. Do you think your 2021 Political Behavior article has any lessons for contemporary debates on critical race theory in schools, such as the election of Glenn Youngkin in Virginia or the banning of Maus in Tennessee?

   I think there are a few ways we can think about how my article can help us understand the current debate over critical race theory in schools. First, my research is able to respond to the concerns raised by (overwhelmingly white) parents that CRT is harmful to their kids. There is absolutely no evidence from my work that historical narratives that highlight the agency of marginalized groups and the methods they used to confront racism are harming white kids. In fact, my article shows that content of this kind does *not* influence intended participation among white youth one way or another. However, something I discuss in my book manuscript is that this content does push white youth to be more empathetic. That is, white youth who read the more critical textbook passages (as opposed to more traditional content) were significantly more likely to agree that Asian, Black, and Latinx people had made significant contributions to American democracy. Similar findings are echoed in the Ethnic Studies literature as well: learning about Black history, for example, is also meaningful and beneficial for white students.

   Second, I think my research takes a strong normative position on the role that schools *should* play in promoting a strong multiracial democracy. Throughout our nation's history, those who have sought to undermine attempts to make social studies education more inclusive have stressed the need to promote a common understanding of who Americans are as a people. Yet, in my mind, it is impossible for us to reach a common understanding of who we are without acknowledging the transformative contributions of those who have been most marginalized by this nation's government and culture. That is to say, I believe that schools have an obligation to teach narratives of this kind. This does not mean that we stop teaching young people about the nation's founding, or the three branches of government. It simply means that we hold space for young people to learn about those who fought for ways for America to better live up to its values.

   My research shows that teaching in this way is empowering for young people of color and fosters political empathy among white youth as well. These student outcomes are good for democracy and attitudes we should *want* our schools to foster.

5. Are you teaching at the moment? If so, what are you teaching? And does any of the research you did in this paper inform your teaching? And what will you be teaching at Miami?

   I teach a Social Studies Content for Teachers course at Northwestern University's School of Education and Social Policy in the spring. Much of the course grapples with central themes present in my research: the importance of public education within American democracy, the benefits of teaching the social sciences from multiple perspectives, and centering locally relevant topics in the classroom. In the process, I ask my students to reflect upon how engaging in these topics either challenges or reflects their own lived experiences as well as their pedagogical commitments as future K-12 teachers.

   Next year at the University of Miami, I will be teaching Race, Ethnicity, and Politics and Urban Politics during the fall semester.

6. What's next for you in terms of research projects? Is this part of a larger book project? Do you have complementary projects that you are working on?

The 2021 article is part of a larger book manuscript that is currently under review. I will also be discussing similar themes in an article within a forthcoming special issue of the American Academy of Political and Social Science (AAPSS) ANNALS on the Science of Civics. I am also working on projects on changing local political opinion in the Chicago area. As one example, in March 2021 a city council in Evanston, Illinois—a northern Chicago suburb—overwhelmingly voted to begin distributing $10 million worth of reparations funds to Black residents. Using this example, my co-authors and I assess competing theories for understanding how individuals develop ideas about emerging policy domains at the local level that have yet to be cemented within national party platforms. I am also interested in the effects of gentrification on political attitudes and behaviors. We first show that residents of gentrifying neighborhoods express different policy preferences than other Chicagoans, and that gentrifiers and non-gentrifiers in these neighborhoods express different preferences on some important issues. Second, we show that gentrifiers call the police at higher rates than the neighborhoods' longtime residents. These results suggest that gentrifiers not only hold distinct policy preferences, but they may also play an outsized role in local community institutions. Finally, utilizing an embedded survey experiment, we show that civic learning experiences where community leaders express concern about gentrification can push gentrifiers to adopt more sympathetic attitudes toward neighborhood changes.

You can find more about Matthew and his work at https://matthewdnelsen.com/

Recent Books, Articles, and Notable Achievements on Education Policy and Politics

Bar-Tal, Daniel, Vered, Soli. and Fuxman, Shai. 2021. Between Open-minded Critical Thinking and Closed-minded Allegiance: Educational Tensions in Societies Involved in Intractable Conflict. *Political Psychology*, 42: 3-28.

Bullock, John. (2021). Education and Attitudes toward Redistribution in the United States. *British Journal of Political Science, 51*(3), 1230-1250.

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COLLINS, Jonathan. (2021). Does the Meeting Style Matter? The Effects of Exposure to Participatory and Deliberative School Board Meetings. *American Political Science Review, 115*(3), 790-804. doi:10.1017/S0003055421000320

Erickson, Heidi H., Jonathan N. Mills & Patrick J. Wolf. 2021. "The Effects of the Louisiana Scholarship Program on Student Achievement and College Entrance." *Journal of Research on Education Effectiveness*

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Garritzmann Julian L, Röth Leonce, Kleider Hanna. Policy-Making in Multi-Level Systems: Ideology, Authority, and Education. *Comparative Political Studies*. 2021;54(12):2155-2190.

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Li, Tao, Mo, Kun. 2022. From connection to collusion: How college admissions bow to powerful alumni in China. *Governance*. 35: 25– 42.

Mangla, Akshay. 2021. "Social conflict on the front lines of reform: Institutional activism and girls' education in rural India". *Public Administration and Development*.

Mendelberg, Tali., Mérola, Vittorio., Raychaudhuri, Tanika., & Thal, Adam. 2021. When Poor Students Attend Rich Schools: Do Affluent Social Environments Increase or Decrease Participation? *Perspectives on Politics, 19*(3), 807-823.

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Schulze-Cleven, Tobias and Todd E. Vachon, eds. 2021. *Revaluing Work(ers): Toward a Democratic and Sustainable Future* (LERA Research Volume). Labor and Employment Relations Association / Cornell University Press.

Schulze-Cleven, Tobias. 2020. "Organizing Competition: Regulatory Welfare States in Higher Education." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 691: 276–294.

Stiers, Dieter, Hooghe, Marc, & Dassonneville, Ruth. 2021. Voting at 16: Does lowering the voting age lead to more political engagement? Evidence from a quasi-experiment in the city of Ghent (Belgium). *Political Science Research and Methods, 9*(4), 849-856.

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TERBEEK, Calvin. (2021). "Clocks Must Always Be Turned Back": Brown v. Board of Education and the Racial Origins of Constitutional Originalism. *American Political Science Review, 115*(3), 821-834.

Vargas, Thomas R. Forthcoming. Decentralization as a Political Weapon: Education Politics in El Salvador and Paraguay. *Comparative Politics*.

Wang, Suen. 2022. Gender equality without democracy? Higher education expansion and authoritarian values. *Governance*. 35: 259– 279.

Weinschenk, Aaron., & Dawes, Christopher. (2022). Civic Education in High School and Voter Turnout in Adulthood. *British Journal of Political Science, 52*(2), 934-948.

Grants, Awards, and Fellowships

Mneesha Gellman has been awarded the Huret Faculty Excellence Award from Emerson College for a one semester research leave in spring 2022 to continue her research on education and Indigenous politics. Dr. Gellman was also awarded a 2021-2023 Sociological Initiatives Foundation grant for her research on culturecide and language politics.