

Influence

A Study of the Factors Shaping Education Policy

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Editorial Projects in Education Research Center

December 2006



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, with support from the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, has conducted a study of the factors that have influenced the educational policy landscape during the past decade. Using a two-stage survey methodology, we asked leading education-policy experts first to identify and then to rate highly influential agents or “Influentials” across four different categories – Studies, Organizations, People, and Information Sources. We report influence scores and rankings for the leading nominees in each category.

As the study’s results demonstrate, there are strong interconnections among these four dimensions of influence. Certain institutions, for example, appear in multiple categories, represented as prominent organizations, the homes of renowned experts, and sponsors of leading studies and information sources. This report offers a first attempt at untangling the complex web of influence that has helped to shape education policy over the years.

The full report describes the study’s methodology in greater detail and provides in-depth profiles for the top-ranked nominees in each of the four influence categories. An appendix to the report also includes a complete listing of all studies, organizations, people, and information sources that received nominations in our survey of education-policy experts.

Influential Studies

We employed a two-stage survey of experts in the field of education policy to identify the most important studies of the past ten years and to rate their level of influence. For the top-tier studies, we also conducted a series of citation searches to determine the rates at which these works were cited in the news media and in the scholarly literature. These pieces of information were used to construct a three-dimensional Influence Index for the leading studies.

The studies ranking in the highest tier of influence – the “short list” – prove to be quite different from one another in a variety of ways. Some nominees conform to a conventional understanding of a study, as a relatively discrete work taking the form of a clearly identifiable core product like a report, monograph, or commission proceedings. The National Reading Panel’s 2000 report *Teaching Children to Read* very much fits this mold, as do: the two National Research Council reports that made the list (*How People Learn* and *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*); *What Matters Most: Teaching for America’s Future*, a report by the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF); and the American Diploma Project’s *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts*.

But when asked to identify influential studies, respondents often cited broader bodies or collections of work rather than individual reports and publications. Several researchers, for example, were nominated for strands of investigation on particular topics: Richard Elmore on school reform; Jay Greene on graduation rates; Paul Peterson on school choice and vouchers; and William Sanders on value-added methodology. The Education Trust, as an organization, was recognized in a similar manner for a series of reports highlighting the issue of teacher quality. The Tennessee Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio experiment (Project STAR) offers another twist within the set of nominees that could be labeled research

strands. Project STAR is represented by a variety of studies conducted by a number of independent researchers and institutions, all focusing on the state's class-size experiment.

Perhaps furthest removed from the traditional conception of a discrete study were the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Far from being a single piece of work, NAEP is a decades-long student assessment and data collection initiative of the U.S. Department of Education. Likewise, the international TIMSS study has at its core a large-scale assessment combined with the collection of background and contextual data, as well as major research components examining curricular content and instructional practices.

When all the votes are tallied, the National Assessment of Educational Progress rises to the top of the field with an overall Influence Index value of 100 points. The study earns this perfect score by receiving top rankings for each of the three individual influence elements (expert ratings, news coverage, and citation in scholarly journals). Its performance is particularly dominant in the areas of both news and journal citations. For example, NAEP receives more news media hits than the rest of the studies on the short list combined.

The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study ranks second in all three of the study's influence categories. Accordingly, TIMSS also claims the second-highest overall influence index value, with a score of 52 points. Ranked third is the National Reading Panel's *Teaching Children to Read*, which fares relatively well on expert ratings and journal citations.

A large portion of the studies, almost half of the leading group, are tightly clustered with scores between 28 and 31 points. In particular, this intermediate influence band is heavily populated by the commission reports that made the short list – *Preventing Reading Difficulties*, *What Matters Most*, and *How People Learn*. Project STAR, William Sanders' research on value-added methodology, and the Education Trust's work on teacher quality also appear in this range. The four remaining studies fall in a final cluster that captures strands of work by individual researchers (Elmore, Greene, and Peterson) and the American Diploma Project's 2004 study *Ready or Not*. Index values for this final set of nominees range between 22 and 25 points.

In order to examine influential studies in more depth, we also constructed an original database that contains information on a number of key characteristics for all nominated studies. This approach enabled a more advanced investigation of the nature of influence for the study category, helping us to answer two key questions: What makes a study influential? What sets the truly outstanding studies – the Blockbusters – apart from the crowd? We explore this “anatomy of influence” in the full report.

Influential Organizations

The most influential organizations represent an assortment of non-profit, governmental, membership, and philanthropic institutions. Influence scores and rankings for leading organizations are based on results from our survey of education-policy experts.

The top places in this leading group are occupied by two government entities and a philanthropy. All three finish in a virtual dead heat with scores between 98 and 100 points. The United States Congress, the branch of government holding primary authority for enacting education legislation, finishes in first place. Coming in a close second (with 99 points) is the U.S. Department of Education, the executive branch agency responsible for implementing federal policy and programs as well as coordinating with

state and local education authorities. Despite the fact that federal funding accounts for less than 10 percent of all public education dollars, our results suggest that expert respondents believe that the federal government has wielded significant influence over the direction of educational policy during the past decade.

The third-place organization, the top-ranked philanthropy on the short list, is the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (98 points). Established in its present form in 1999, the foundation has rapidly grown into the world's largest philanthropic organization, with an endowment of over 32 billion dollars in 2006. A recently-announced and highly-publicized gift from investor Warren Buffet, estimated to be worth about 37 billion dollars, will almost certainly add to the foundation's clout. In addition to high-profile international and global health initiatives, the Gates Foundation's Education Division has gained prominence for its high school reform initiatives, which have sparked a powerful small schools movement across the nation. Another philanthropic organization, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, can be found in the lower tier of this leading group with a score of 73. The Fordham Foundation's grant-making and activities support work on elementary and secondary educational reform in a variety of areas.

Non-profit organizations (NPOs) make up a substantial share of the leading organizations. Among the ranks of highly influential NPOs, we find the fourth-place finisher, the Education Trust. Other ranked members of the non-profit sector include Achieve, Inc. and the Center on Education Policy.

Three membership organizations occupy the center of this leading pack of nominees. The National Governors Association (fifth place) supports the work of governors and the states in the nation's capitol. Following right behind the NGA are the country's largest teacher unions, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, which represent the interests of teachers and education professionals nationwide.

Influential People

The thirteen individuals who make up the short list of highly-influential people span a range of roles, backgrounds, and institutional sectors. Unlike the other categories of influence, people change their affiliations over time. As a result, some of the nominees have held a variety of prominent public roles throughout their careers. In general, nominees can be grouped into four main categories: elected officials, representatives of government agencies, leaders of philanthropies and non-profit organizations, and academics.

The top-ranked person, based on expert ratings, is Bill Gates. Billionaire, founder of Microsoft, and co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, he has become a leading voice for educational reform. Many of Gates' strongest statements have focused on the challenges facing the nation's high schools and, more recently, the crucial role of education in America's ability to remain competitive in an increasingly global economy.

Gates is joined on the list by two other leaders of philanthropic institutions. Eighth-ranked Marshall (Mike) Smith has directed the education program at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation since 2001. Rounding out the short list is Chester Finn, Jr., president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (a leading organization), senior editor of *Education Next*, and weekly columnist in the foundation's *Education Gadfly*. Kati Haycock, who receives the third-highest influence score, serves as director of the Education Trust, a Washington, DC-based non-profit that is itself a highly-influential organization.

A large share of influential people are elected officials and leaders of government agencies. However, their influence scores range considerably, from near the top of the rankings (President George W. Bush, in second place with 94 points) to the lower tier of the leading group (Representative George Miller, in twelfth place with 77 points). Among nominated politicians currently in office, President Bush, Senator Edward Kennedy (fifth place), and Representative Miller all earned places on the short list for impacting education policy during the past decade, due in large part to their roles in shaping the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. The sixth-place spot on the short list is claimed by former President Bill Clinton, during whose administration the Improving America's Schools Act (the precursor to NCLB) was signed into law.

Several other leading nominees have held appointed offices in government. G. Reid Lyon, the fourth most influential person, headed the child development branch of the National Institutes of Health and was a primary architect of the federal Reading First initiative. Current U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings ranks tenth on the list. During her tenure, Spellings has been charged with continuing implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, which she also helped to shape during her earlier tenure as a domestic policy advisor in the White House.

State leaders are also heavily represented among influential people. Prior to heading the Department of Education throughout the Clinton administration, Richard Riley earned a reputation as a support of education issues during two terms as the chief executive of South Carolina. Sharing seventh place with Riley is four-term North Carolina governor James B. Hunt, Jr. During that period Hunt also served as the chair of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. The former-gubernatorial ranks are rounded out by Bush and Clinton, discussed previously.

Although several nominees in this category have distinguished backgrounds in academia, only one currently serves as a full-time academic. A professor at Stanford University's School of Education, Linda Darling-Hammond has built a reputation as a leading scholar and expert in educational policy and practice. Between 1994 and 2001 she served as the executive director of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.

Influential Information Sources

The list of top information sources includes an eclectic combination of traditional print publications, new media outlets such as electronic newsletters and blogs, governmental sources, a journal, and a non-profit organization. Our expert respondents clearly had a diverse view of what constituted an "information source."

The leading information source – the National Assessment of Educational Progress – also emerged earlier as the top-ranked influential study. NAEP offers a wide variety of information to the public in the form of statistical indicators, databases, descriptive and technical reports, research studies, on-line data tools, and brief publications designed for the general public. The National Center for Education Statistics and the U.S. Department of Education also appear among the more highly-ranked information sources on our short list (in third and fifth place respectively). This pattern suggests that the Department of Education exerts a strong and broad influence on the information that shapes public understanding of educational issues and policy strategies.

The second spot on the short list is occupied by *Education Week*, a weekly publication focused primarily on issues related to K-12 education. Two other highly-regarded newspapers also make the short list –

The New York Times (fourth place) and *The Washington Post* (seventh). Several new media operations also earn notice as influential information sources, although they rank at the lower end of the list. This group includes: Public Education Network's *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, the Fordham Foundation's *Education Gadfly*, and Eduwonk, the only blog that made the short list.

Also identified as leading information sources are the Education Trust and *Education Next*. The Education Trust's outreach efforts include speaking engagements and presentations by key staff members, its *Thinking K-16* report series, and special reports on a range of topics. Published by Stanford University's Hoover Institution, *Education Next* features articles from leading education researchers and prominent policy commentators. It is also the only peer-reviewed periodical ranked among the top information sources.

A Tangled Web of Influence

The question of what influences educational policy can be a difficult problem to untangle. Certainly, numerous interconnections exist among the leading studies, organizations, people, and information sources receiving high marks in our expert surveys. However, several clusters of influence prove particularly noteworthy.

A major sphere of influence exists within the public sector, revolving around the U.S. Department of Education. Itself the second-ranked organization, the agency has conducted (through its statistical branch, NCES) or commissioned several of the most influential studies. The Department also has close connections to a substantial share of the highly influential figures in education policy and is responsible for a number of leading information sources.

In the private sector, the Gates Foundation represents a major epicenter of influence, a highly ranked organization in its own right as well as a funder of other high-profile groups. The Education Trust and the Fordham Foundation can be found at the center of other nodes of influence, by virtue of their status as influential organizations and ties to highly-ranked persons, studies, and information sources.

Leading Influences in Education Policy (ranked by level of influence – high to low)			
Studies	Organizations	People	Information Sources
1. <i>National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)</i> . U.S. Department of Education	1. U.S. Congress	1. Bill Gates	1. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)
2. <i>Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)</i> . International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement and National Center for Education Statistics	2. U.S. Department of Education	2. George W. Bush	2. Education Week
3. <i>Teaching Children To Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction</i> (2000). The National Reading Panel	3. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	3. Kati Haycock	3. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)
4. Tennessee Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) experiment and related studies	4. Education Trust	4. G. Reid Lyon	4. New York Times
5. <i>Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children</i> (1998). National Academies' Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education (CBASSE)	5. National Governors Association (NGA)	5. Edward Kennedy	5. U.S. Department of Education
5. William L. Sanders on value-added methodology and the Tennessee Value-Added Accountability System	6. American Federation of Teachers (AFT)	6. Bill Clinton	6. Education Trust
7. Education Trust on teacher quality	7. Achieve, Inc.	7. James B. Hunt Jr.	7. Washington Post
7. <i>How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School</i> (1999). National Academies' Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education (CBASSE)	7. National Education Association (NEA)	7. Richard W. Riley	8. Education Next
7. <i>What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future</i> (1996). National Commission on Teaching and America's Future	9. Thomas B. Fordham Foundation	9. Marshall (Mike) Smith	8. Public Education Network (PEN) Weekly NewsBlast
10. Richard F. Elmore on school reform	10. Center on Education Policy (CEP)	10. Linda Darling-Hammond	10. Education Gadfly
11. Jay P. Greene on high school graduation rates		10. Margaret Spellings	11. Eduwonk
12. Paul E. Peterson on school choice and vouchers		12. George Miller	
12. <i>Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts</i> (2004). American Diploma Project		13. Chester E. Finn Jr.	

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