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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT INFORMATION

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A Fresh Look at the Changing Landscape of Educational Governance

Policy Perspective bridges the gap between the established beliefs and the new realities of educational governance in the United States.

In the American myth, there exists an image of the local school board. A dedicated group of apolitical citizens-a banker, a retired teacher, a storeowner, and a soccer mom-meet the first Tuesday of each month in the school cafeteria, eat homemade cake, sip coffee out of paper cups, and formulate educational and financial policy for local schools with littl interference from the state capital or Washington, D.C.

In reality this model is as outdated as inkwells and fountain pens. In today's technology-driven, consumer-oriented, highly politicized society, there is a new set of realities in American educational governance.

David Conley, associate professor of education at the University of Oregon and director of the Center for Educational Policy Research, paints a vivid picture of the changing landscape of educational governance in his latest book, *Who Governs Our Schools? Changing Roles and Responsibilities* (Teachers College Press, forthcoming).

By an agreement with Teachers College Press, a preview of this book is now available from the Clearinghouse in the form of a 36-page *Policy Perspective*.

A Revolutionary Shift in Control

A revolution has taken place in American education, Conley says. This revolution has reshaped power and authority relationships at all levels of educational governance and policy. In short, control has shifted from the local district or school level to the state and federal levels.

In his *Policy Perspective*, "The New Patterns of American Educational Governance: From Local Control to State and Federal Direction of Education Policy," Conley combines historical research, review of pertinent literature,

recommendations of alternative governance models, and his own informed opinion about trends in American K-12 educational governance. He offers a detailed account of the shift in control over the past thirty years.

"Nearly every state legislature has assumed more control over school funding and educational policy," Conley writes. "State assessment systems and accountability systems are being created in nearly every state to provide data on performance and to compare schools. In some states these efforts are subtle; in other states they drive education policy. Some states have even begun to link funding with expected student learning."

Educational improvement, once the prerogative of local boards, is also controlled, and often mandated, by the state. Conley points to a number of factors that combine to create momentum for a sustained state focus on educational reform:

- General belief by the public that schools need to change
- Loss of institutional memory and tendency to tackle complex issues with simple solutions fueled by term limits
- Loss of control of education as a public-policy issue that educators suffered over the past thirty years
- Attempts by political parties to exploit education as a political issue and the increase in partisan educational policy
- Decrease in the number of small school districts incapable of implementing complex, demanding state policies
- Emergence of statewide data systems that allow comparisons of schools and districts in ways previously impossible

The federal government, too, has been exerting greater influence over education. Our national educational policy, Conley explains, is developed around the assumption that standards and assessments are in place in every state and that they are valid measures of student learning and practical tools for comparing states and even nations. Conley goes on to further detail the federal government's influence and the increasingly political, and partisan, nature of educational policy.

Effects on Schools

As a result of the increased leadership of state and federal governments and the reduced role of local boards, Conley says that schools are more directly employed to achieve government's education goals and policies. Additional results of the trend toward greater control at the state and federal levels include the following:

- Government policies are affecting the curriculum taught in schools.
- Principals' roles are greatly affected when states make significant changes in educational policy. In areas such as accountability and assessment, principals become as responsible to the state as local superintendents and boards of education members are.
- School improvement is not as optional or locally defined as it once was.

The Need to Create New Governance Models

While the locus of control has shifted, it has not been completely relinquished

at the local level. Local control now means the capability to make decisions in accord with broad state and federal goals for education and to align local programs with those goals.

"While local districts continue to be important, even critical, players in educational improvement, they are not the drivers of improvement-related policies, nor do they or will they operate with broad discretion to determine which policies will be used to improve their schools," Conley writes.

Nevertheless, Conley believes that local superintendents, school board members, administrators, and teachers are important partners in programs to achieve the educational improvement desired by state and federal policymakers. He contends that it is time to reexamine the role, purpose, and decision-making authority of local districts and boards of education and to form new partnerships for educational governance.

Conley believes that changes in American educational governance demand a practical response, not a moral response. That response is to design the most appropriate and effective governance and policy system possible. He provides insightful details on several possible plans: state-district partnerships; top-down, bottom-up partnerships; regional networks; educational "franchises"; and the models provided by charter schools, vouchers, and other school-choice systems.

The Challenge Ahead

For any of these plans to work, everyone involved will have to reexamine long-held beliefs and assumptions about governmental relationships and responsibilities. They will have to find the means of governance that will be the most effective in the long run and not channel all their energies into solving the current educational crisis.

Conley believes this can be done. "It is not impossible to operate within a larger vision when making the daily decisions and solving the immediate problems that educational governance and policy systems confront," he writes.

If a concerted effort to redesign policy and governance mechanisms is not pursued, pressure to dismantle public education will gain momentum with the ultimate result being an incremental dissolution of the current governance system. The process will be complex, conflict-laden, and difficult, but it can be accomplished, Conley believes.

The next ten years will be critical as governors, legislators, state and local board members, educators at the district and school levels, and other participants in the system work toward a conscious redesign that calls for a new type of cooperation and new relationships. "If these adjustments can be made in a conscious, rational, deliberate fashion," Conley writes, "the potential to revamp, modernize, and improve educational governance and policymaking is great."

Conley's detailed description and insightful commentary make this *Policy Perspective* an important document for researchers and policymakers alike. To order "The New Patterns of American Educational Governance: From Local Control to State and Federal Direction of Education Policy," see the order form

on page 4. You may also view the complete text of this *Policy Perspective* on our website: eric.uoregon.edu

Policy Report Guides Action on Dress Codes and School Uniforms

Are some students showing up at school in clothes that make you uncomfortable? But are you wary of the controversy that might erupt if you decide to adopt a dress code or a policy requiring students to wear uniforms? If so, a new Policy Report by the Clearinghouse may be able to help you resolve your clothing quandary.

Policy Report: School Dress Codes and Uniform Policies, by Wendell Anderson o 2002 o 81/2 x 11inches o 20 pages o saddle stitch o $5.00 plus $4.00 S&H o Code: EPR004

In this 20-page publication, "School Dress Codes and Uniform Polices," Wendell Anderson explores a broad range of issues pertaining to student dress. In the first section, he offers some historical background on the evolution of student dress and dress-code policies.

Next, the report examines why school leaders have recently begun to revisit the issue of student clothing, noting the perceived relationship between student dress and school safety. In this section, Anderson outlines potential benefits of dress codes or uniforms. After explicating proponents' arguments, Anderson examines the reasons some people are opposed to strict dress codes or uniform policies.

Anderson states that research on this subject has been largely "inconclusive and mixed." In his brief synopsis of several studies related to the impact of student dress, he notes that "no clear trends have emerged." In part because dress codes or uniforms are instituted with other reforms, it is difficult to determine how much, if any, of the change is due to a specific variable.

For school leaders who want to ensure that their dress code will stand up to possible legal challenges, Anderson provides a brief overview of case law as it pertains to students' right to freedom of expression and dress. In a section particularly valuable for school officials, he identifies guiding principles to keep in mind when drafting a dress code. Also included is a sample dress-code policy.

A unique feature of this *Policy Report* is a state-by-state summary of legislation pertaining to dress-code/uniform policies. The listing is based on responses to a Clearinghouse poll of state education officials and a search of state websites. Twenty-eight states were found to have legislation pertaining to dress codes or uniforms in public schools.

Ultimately, the goal of school leaders should be to develop "dress codes and uniform policies that respond to the needs of their district or school without being unduly restrictive," while striving to "balance school safety and academic achievement with students' rights and individualism." A tall order indeed, but Anderson's coverage of the issue can be a valuable resource in surmounting this challenge.

To order a copy of "School Dress Codes and Uniform Policies," see the order form on page 4 or view the complete text of the *Policy Report* at eric.uoregon. edu

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Policy Perspective

The New Patterns of American Educational Governance
From Local Control to State and Federal Direction of Education Policy
by David T. Conley
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