

## **Evaluating the Intersection of Politics and Program Evaluation**

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The country elected Donald J. Trump to the highest office of the nation on November 9, 2016. The newly christened President-elect took the stage to deliver his acceptance address to a room full of supporters and millions of Americans at home. Trump's speech lasted 15 minutes and 14 seconds, and, within that timeframe, he only mentioned education or America's schools once. The mention went as follows, "We are going to fix our inner cities and rebuild our highways, bridges, tunnels, airports, schools, hospitals" (2016). The issue of education policy received only slightly more attention in his inauguration address January 20, 2017 with two mentions throughout its 17 minutes and 17 seconds (2017). The lack of specific education talk in each was not surprising because Trump had not focused as much on education throughout his campaign as economic issues and immigration concerns. What Trump did have to say on the campaign trail alluded to a traditional conservative opinion about school choice, voucher programs and hopes of defunding the Department of Education. Now as President, though, the details of those plans and beliefs became much more important for the education community and parents within those inner cities to which Trump made reference. With a Democratic administration exiting the White House and a conservative President and Congress coming in, the effects of these changes will trickle down to all levels of policy and programs, including those within the realm of education.

Programs created and implemented under the Obama administration will now begin to be analyzed and evaluated to determine what goes and what will come in as replacements. This

program evaluation will begin to take place in time with the legislative cycle, and, if history repeats itself, the programs implemented throughout the eight years President Obama served in office will all be on the chopping block. Such practices are not unique to the Trump administration, though. Traditionally, with any ideological shift, programs of predecessors from the other side of the political aisle are labeled as failures and replaced by new programs that claim to be able to fix the problems the previous group failed to address. This is where the arenas of program evaluation and politics meet. The question as a new administration dawns is whether or not the new programs that will be implemented will serve the students of this nation and the education community any better than what has come before. The problem is that there is an innate tension between politics and the realm of program evaluation. The two are inevitably intertwined, and this mixing begs the question of whether or not program evaluation can maintain a necessary apolitical nature while being influenced constantly by the politics of policy development and bipartisanship on the Hill. If it can't, then the individuals who receive services from these programs will be the ones that suffer. As the nation prepares for a new President and a new legislative cycle, programs and initiatives of the past such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and Common Core present a brief snapshot into the politics of administration turnover and the effects new Presidents have on education programming. By analyzing these three and the problems they identify as trying to solve, the detrimental effects of political influence on program evaluation, as well as innate failures of the evaluation process at the national level can be identified.

For the purposes of this paper, program evaluation is defined as the collecting of various kinds of information about a program that is then processed in order to judge the value of said program. Jeff Pyatte (1970) takes this definition one step further by explaining that there are six

elements in total of program evaluation: the agent (or person/body evaluating), the object (or what is being evaluated), input (the elements of collected information that is processed), the plan (how the inputs are going to be processed), the timeframe for the evaluation and the final product, or judgement about the program's worth (pgs. 387-388). All of these areas must be delicately balanced in order to produce the best evaluation with the most useful data. Sometimes, politics can complicate the quality of the evaluation, process, though. To start, the innate connection between evaluation and politics stems from the relationship between policy and politics. Public policy is inherently political because of the simple fact that it is crafted by politicians. On Capitol Hill, policy is the end result of legislators' political ideology. It is where this ideology takes form and influences the American public by influencing the law. In order to make policy, though, lawmakers use program evaluation as the basis to craft these policies. Consequently, politics are infused into the evaluation process. Eleanor Chelimsky (1987) speaks about this in her well-known paper, "What Have We Learned about the Politics of Program Evaluation." Chelimsky writes, "Evaluation, with its purpose of producing high-quality information to decision makers, thus automatically claims a role for itself in the political process, based on the idea that the best information, made available to decision makers, would surely be useful to them in making and executing public policy" (p. 199).

It is at this intersection of politics and program evaluation that problems begin. Because of their participation in the policy process, program evaluators must begin to learn how politics work and how they are to operate within the space carved out for them within the policy world. For example, evaluators must learn to reduce the time from research question to evaluation report due to the structure of legislative sessions. Policy cycles operate on a finite timeframe. Programs are authorized or reauthorized and budgets must be constructed all within a fairly

quick span of time. Due to these political pressures, legislative staffers often choose to support research methodologies that can fit into these timeframes, rather than the study that may produce the most in depth results (Chelimsky, 1987, p. 206). Often, complex methodology is replaced by faster forms of data collection in order to meet deadlines set by the schedule on the Hill. A byproduct of this is that policymakers end up receiving only the information they want in the format that they want, rather than the format those conducting the research would choose. This begins with the research questions being asked by the program evaluations. Questions related to a particular policy may not be the questions researchers would choose to ask. They also may not be the questions that will garner the most useful data to answer the questions about a program's efficacy. For example, descriptive questions are often not asked by policy makers. Further, overarching evaluative questions often cannot be sufficiently answered prior to the program authorization deadline. Thus, many programs are only truly evaluated after being implemented for some time, rather than prior to their being included within policy that is to be implemented nationwide (Chemlinsky, 1987, pgs. 204 and 211). Moreover, once this post-implementation evaluation begins, the questions asked are usually politically charged with policymakers seeking information that will serve their own ideological ends. Chemlinsky writes on this that many research questions asked by policymakers "have been sponsored and are intended to be used in the political environment, the framework means that the choice of the program to evaluate emerges *in real terms* from the political process, with the determination of the types of policy questions to be asked a function of the decision makers whether legislative or executive or both" (Chemlinsky, 1987, p. 202).

A side effect of the intertwining of politics and program evaluation explained above are that many programs end up authorized that aren't based on comprehensive evaluations. Part of

the problem is that due to the lack of evaluative questioning as discussed by Chelimksy (1987), evaluators are unable to predict the true effect of a program on its participants (Hanes, 1977, p. 24). Further, once in practice, it is even more difficult to judge the effects of the program on those that will encounter it in the future. Statistical replication of this kind is difficult due to the issue of changing populations. Therefore, long term data collection in the form of trend analysis would need to be completed while accounting for the differences in sample populations (including demographics). Analysis on this level takes time and funding, two things that are often in short supply for program evaluators, as already discussed. Further, there is a tendency to prioritize quantitative data in program evaluation, over qualitative. The opinions and reactions of the groups that the program serviced are often overlooked because the quantitative data collected is easier to present and often is seen as having more value than qualitative. Therefore, feedback networks from program staff and the population of those serviced are not considered and data is often only analyzed in numerical form (Hanes, 1977, p. 26). Numbers don't always tell the whole story. Every group of stakeholders presents different needs when it comes to the program itself, and some of these needs cannot be collected and presented in a spreadsheet or in chart form. Therefore, assessing if participants' diverse needs have been met requires just as diverse methods of evaluation. Further, each set of stakeholders may need different data, as well as present the need to have that data analyzed in a myriad of ways. The problem, though, is these needs are not always addressed by the formal evaluation.

The result of these shortcomings often translates into programs attempting to address similar problems but failing to analyze how and why the previous programs failed and what interventions or program alterations could make the difference in the future. An example of a repeating problem within education is that of the low performance of students within low-income

and high minority areas. Long identified as one of the top issues plaguing our education system, the achievement gap is something both parties seek to close. As of yet, though, no program has found the magic key to do just that, but multiple attempts have come down the Hill from both parties. Unfortunately, despite their efforts, even as these programs change, the issue of low-income, low-performing students is growing in severity. According to a research bulletin from the Southern Education Foundation, as of 2013, 51% of students in public schools were classified as low-income (“A New Majority: Low Income Students Now a Majority in the Nation’s Public Schools,” 2015, p. 2). This means that for the first time ever in the history of American public schools, the number of low-income students outnumbered all other classifications with the disparity continuing to grow each year since. Still, the gap identified is not a problem that was created overnight. The first policy initiative to deal with inner city schools was implemented in 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) introduced by Lyndon B. Johnson. ESEA created the Title I designation for schools that experienced extreme economic disparity within its student body. Johnson and his administration identified poverty as one of the greatest barriers to education and spoke of wishing to ameliorate the gap between minority and majority student and low and high income areas (1965). Once implemented, ESEA was evaluated a multitude of times over the next thirty-six years but remained in place unchanged as the achievement gap continued to grow. It would take President George W. Bush’s administration to offer another solution, his policy, No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

NCLB was passed into law in 2001 as the major educational reform policy from the Bush Administration. The program decided to tackle the achievement gap Johnson first spoke of by directly addressing teacher qualification. The belief was that if teachers were more qualified,

there would be a significant improvement in quality of classroom instruction and, by proxy, school performance. To meet these ends, NCLB introduced the term “highly qualified” to signify an educator that exceeded minimum standard. These highly qualified individuals were intended to be the most skilled and successful classroom teachers, and, as such, the more highly qualified educators you had within a school, the better that school should be. Additionally, NCLB introduced a new era of standardized testing. School accountability was directly tied to performance on tests given in conjunction with the federal standardized test schedule. Those schools that did not perform were penalized with a shortage of federal money. Thus, schools began to work to help students perform on these tests, and, as a result, nationwide a push for test prep within the classroom began.

NCLB received its first official program evaluation published in 2010 assesses whether or not its focus on teacher credentials made a dent in the gap between low-income and middle and high income school districts. Performed by the Rand Corporation’s education wing and written by Brian M. Stecher, Georges Vernez and Paul S. Steinberg (2010), the evaluation entitled “State and Local Implementation of the NCLB,” aimed to assess the progress states and districts had made in implementing NCLB standards since 2002. The Rand Corporation’s evaluation reported that there were two large disparities in the number of highly qualified educators across campuses nationwide. First, many of the teachers not rated highly qualified were special education (SPED) and limited English proficiency (LEP) educators. In fact, only 39% of elementary level, 61% of middle school level and 53% of high school teachers that taught these types of classes were categorized as highly qualified under NCLB (Stecher, Vernez and Steinberg, 2010). Further, the evaluation reported that there was a large disparity in the low number of highly qualified individuals teaching in high poverty and high minority schools versus

their more affluent counterparts. The Rand Corporation's report (2010) specifically states, "teachers who were not highly qualified were three times more likely to be teaching in high-minority schools than low minority schools." Further, highly qualified teachers within these low-income and high-minority areas were more likely to have three or fewer years in the classroom than those high-income highly qualified teachers. Finally, to make matters worse, 4% of total classroom teachers were unable to even determine if they were highly qualified or not when polled during the evaluation period of 2004-2005 (Stecher, Vernez and Steinberg, 2010).

The results of the evaluation were accepted by NCLB critics to show that the program was not meeting the goals it set out to meet. The achievement gap had not been closed, but, rather, the discrepancy quantified in a new way, teacher qualification. Schools were not performing at higher standards. Still, despite the negative report, NCLB was not amended, and, rather, remained until it could be replaced by an ideological shift with the Obama administration. In December 2015, at the close of NCLB's most recent reauthorization, then President Barack Obama proposed his own program to replace NCLB and bridge the gap between low-income and more affluent districts. Specifically targeting the same low-income, underperforming schools identified since the Johnson administration, Obama announced the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) which would replace NCLB moving forward. Under ESSA, schools and districts would no longer be penalized for not meeting federally set achievement standards, but, rather, states would take over as the deciding body for teacher and school accountability evaluations. In a direct response to what the Obama administration labeled over testing, ESSA encourages states and school districts to work to assist students in growing in the classroom, not studying for a test. While this program has not been formally evaluated yet, due to its newness, the issues inherent to program evaluation can already be identified. For example, ESSA is meant to solve the issues it

identifies with NCLB by finding new ways to intervene and support students from low-income areas, but the trickledown effect of some aspects of ESSA will result in the same issues experienced under the policy it intended to replace. For instance, ESSA still requires adherence to a federal standardized testing window, and states can choose to use this data as they see fit. This does not prevent the reliance on standardized test scores because some states are still analyzing accountability at the school level by using test results. For instance, in the state of Texas, the new accountability system relies heavily on the Texas state test, the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR). Schools are still bound to both achievement and growth on the STAAR, and a push for test prep culture within Texas schools has not decreased. Further, the ability for states to decide how to reach their students may complicate things in a new way. The Southern Education Foundation report referenced above also showed that the highest percentage of low-income students stem from Southern and Western states. For example, 71% of students enrolled in public school in Mississippi, 65% in Louisiana and 68% in New Mexico are all low-income (“A New Majority: Low Income Students Now a Majority in the Nation’s Public Schools,” 2015, p. 3). Thus, the question becomes can these states under ESSA close their own gap without any oversight and without any assistance from a larger educational body.

Overall, the problem here is that while both parties recognize the same policy question (how to close the achievement gap), the approaches are steeped in political influence. In truth, the policy makers create programs and policies to fit their particular political narrative. Such partisanship creates roadblocks for open discussion about educational concerns. Talking points are developed about the other party’s beliefs, their programs, and buzz words such as “school choice” begin to circulate as sound bites. The result is politically charged conversations about

educational policy that are divided into conservative and liberal corners. Sometimes this alone is enough to create an informal evaluation of a program before a formal one can even be completed. Nothing is a better example of this than Common Core. The Common Core standards were introduced in 2010 by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices. Since their introduction, the Core has engendered much negativity. With walk-outs, testing opt-outs and more in those schools that have chosen to implement them, there is much negative attention and feeling about the program and what it means for students taught under its auspices. Often, the Common Core is labeled as irrelevant, too rigorous and abstract. The way math is taught through the Common Core along with a totally new style of writing instruction lead many to believe it may be too revolutionary to be successful in American schools. Still, as with NCLB and ESSA, the issues Common Core is trying to address are very real. At the time of its composition, nationwide, only 25% of those students that took the ACT were considered to be college ready based on the standards the test evaluates (Hess & McShane, 2013, pgs. 61-66). Thus, there must be some deficit that needs to be addressed in American schools in order to ensure more of our graduating seniors are ready for college. Is Common Core the best way to solve these issues, though, became the real question.

Immediately, both major American parties took sides in the Common Core debate. Republican politicians, lawmakers and political commentators began to speak out against the very nature of the program. Conservative author and activist Phyllis Schlafly famously wrote about the dangers of the Core's standards to children in all public schools citing the cost and federal oversight that was inherent to the acceptance of the Core- two principals that are wholly rejected by the Republican Party. Schlafly was not alone in this rejection. Commentators came out of the wood work against the standards, and slowly politicians began using Common Core

buzzwords in speeches to excite their crowds and earn voters' support. President Trump and his Vice President Mike Pence are among those that used the Core debate to their benefit. In a campaign ad released in March 2016, Trump focused in on the Common Core debate talking about the failures of the education system and summing up his feelings on the issue by saying, "Common Core is dead" (2016). Trump follows this comment by using typical conservative, anti-federal oversight rhetoric and stating that instead of the Core standards, education would return to the local level under his leadership. Trump is joined by fellow conservatives including outspoken Common Core opponents, Senator Marco Rubio, Senator Rand Paul and the Koch Brothers. Additionally, Republican groups such as the Cato Institute and Americans for Prosperity have produced briefs, entire Web pages and released video compilations all meant to urge Americans to vote against the Common Core and the big government oversight they feel it brings with it.

On the other side of the political aisle, the largest supporter of the Common Core is former President Barack Obama. The Core standards developed under his administration are meant to help solve the issues of disparity amongst low-income, high-minority student populations which by and large are the least prepared for post-secondary learning. It, like ESSA, is meant to help eliminate the gap between affluent and less affluent school districts, and supporters of the Core typically buy into the idea that it is up to the federal government to assist students at the state level achieve and ensure the opportunities they are provided are fair and balanced. The question, though, becomes is the adoption of the Common Core being forced upon school districts. Depending on who you ask, the answer will change. By and large, Republican lawmakers believe resoundingly that the Obama administration forced the standards upon the 45 states that adopted them and the District of Columbia. The Obama administration and its

supporters disagree. The problem, though, is that within all these conversations, the debate about Common Core focuses solely on the program's failings in the classroom, rather than on creating an alternative that would begin to solve the issue of post-secondary readiness the Common Core was created to fix. In fact, when discussing Common Core, the reason for its creation is rarely discussed in depth. Thus, when the Trump administration talks about overturning Common Core and disbanding the standards related to it, it is not surprising that an alternative has yet to be proposed. Instead, there only exists a cursory public debate about the failure of schools to prepare students for college, specifically those from low-income, high-minority neighborhoods. Obviously just discussing it, though, won't be enough. In an editorial published in *The Washington Post* in 2013, educational activist and reformer, Diane Ravitch addresses just that. Ravitch (2013) writes, "Maybe the standards will be great. Maybe they will be a disaster... Maybe they will widen the achievement gaps between haves and have-nots. Maybe they will cause the children who now struggle to give up altogether." The problem, of course, is that we don't know. We don't know because enough discussion outside of the political arena is not happening. At this point, there isn't enough data to support a success or failure of the Core. There is only debate, only rhetoric and a lack of information like Ravitch highlights because of the lack of evaluation.

The Common Core along with ESSA and NCLB are just a few of a myriad of cases that display an inherent deficit of program evaluation at the policy level- its inability to identify what is needed and what interventions a program should implement in order to be effective. Due to time constraints of the legislative sessions, partisan politics and more, the pre-planning for program development is not often in-depth enough, and the analysis of the program's past success or predicted worth once authorized are often not completed. Despite these shortcomings,

though, what is for sure is that with a new administration entering the White House as of January 2017, the overhaul of policy and the reevaluation of the Obama years is going to start in full force. Whether a fan of NCLB, ESSA, Common Core or none of the above, the problems each of these programs were created to address are still very real and in need of solutions. President Trump's fledgling administration has the chance to do just that. The time for program evaluation is here, and an opportunity exists for the Trump administration to remove the evaluation process from the political landscape- to make educational policymaking apolitical. American schools and the children they serve would benefit from honest discussion, ethical, in depth research and policy making that began to not only allow the policymakers to ask the questions, but the evaluators themselves to contribute. It is a chance for educational research to begin to not only identify problems but evaluate the most effective interventions for these problems, to make the policymakers second to the evaluators. But it is something that will be very hard to take on because of just how radical apolitical educational policymaking would truly be.

It has never existed and may never exist in the future. In the famous 1916 essay by Bertrand Russell, Russell speaks about the same challenges presented within this paper. He talks about the problem of education not considering the student, but, rather, those in power that are resistant to change. Russell (1916) wrote, "What is considered in education is hardly ever the boy or girl, the young man or young woman, but almost always, in some form, the maintenance of the existing order" (1916, June). Russell's words could be applied to so many educational challenges found today that these many programs discussed are trying to fix. The problem, though, is that like Russell reports, often the child is not considered. The political world is rife with discussion about the achievement gap, but how often are these low-income students interviewed, the qualitative stories from their classrooms collected and brought before

policymakers pre-program authorization? Maybe, if those stories start to be collected and heard that can be the first step in a long journey to fixing the evaluation process and, in turn, the beginning of a positive change in our public schools and the education available to American students. It is in this hope and perseverance that one can be reminded of one of the purest aspects of education- the search for truth and the path to a new and better tomorrow, for what better way to provide hope than through knowledge. Again, in the words of Bertrand:

“Education should not aim at a dead awareness of static facts, but at an activity directed toward the world that our efforts are to create. It should be inspired, not by a regretful hankering after the extinct beauties of Greece and the Renaissance, but by a shining vision of the society that is to be, of the triumph that thought will achieve in the time to come, and of the ever-widening horizon of man’s survey over the universe. Those who are taught in this spirit will be filled with life and hope and joy, able to bear their part in bringing to mankind a future less somber than the past, with faith in the glory that human effort can create” (Russell, 1916, June).

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