

COMMENTARY

The Politics of District Instructional Policy Formation

Compromising Equity and Rigor

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School districts are complicated. Their leaders must implement state mandates, fashion new policies, and mediate between schools and the broader public. But their staff are rarely unified in their thinking about how to do all of this. Different philosophies of education can undercut district policy-making efforts if individuals approach the problems of teaching and learning from different angles. Indeed, views on instruction and the purposes of education are deeply rooted in technical, normative, and political notions of what constitutes ideal learning experiences. Thus, district policymakers need fluency not just in the *technology* of instruction, but in the *norms* and *beliefs* that condition educators' receptivity to change.

Added to these challenges are considerations to make policies explicitly equity-oriented. This can make the job of district leaders exponentially more difficult because there is often intense political resistance to policies that aim to benefit students of color, poor students, and others who occupy less powerful positions in schools and society.

In this way, equity-minded district leaders contend with myriad opinions over both practical strategies for change *and* deeply entrenched values and beliefs about what constitutes quality instruction for different groups of students. Yet, scholarship on the district instructional policy process concentrates primarily on the former and overlooks the latter. Researchers have investigated technical issues such as organizational conditions, interpretive processes, formal political arrangements, and rational accounts of policies' effects on student outcomes. Missing are in-depth interpretations of how central office and school site staff's values and ideologies also shape district instructional policies.

I studied these dynamics in a year-long case study of instructional policymaking in an urban California district. [In this study](#), I draw on concepts from the literature on the politics of education to explore the values and ideologies that underpin district leaders' willingness to design, protect, or retract policies whose goals include equity-oriented, rigorous instructional change. I describe how ideological differences among district leaders, teachers, and principals eclipsed district leaders' attempts to craft equity-oriented, ambitious policies. The result was a set of compromised policies that resembled those highlighted in many high-scoring districts—regulations for standards-aligned curricula, tests, and basic teacher training; standardized instructional practices; and heavy monitoring—but that dispensed with changes that would challenge the district's status quo.

This study is significant because it explains how and why district instructional policies may be compromised from the outset—before questions of implementation or effectiveness ever arise. It illustrates the powerful role that ideology plays in policy formation, and it reveals what happens when administrators and teachers embrace particular political trends. In the wake of federal [No Child Left Behind](#) and [Race to the Top](#) policies, discussion of accountability, results, competition, and standardization has

become commonplace. Federal and state sanctions and rewards hold districts and schools to account for standardized test performance with consequences that infuse rational, corporate-style responses to “failure.” These policies represent a retraction from equity-based reforms because they promote exceedingly narrow purposes of education for districts that serve high numbers of children of color and poor children—the populations who traditionally score low on standardized tests.

When administrators and teachers embrace these political trends, like the educators in this study, they limit the purposes of schooling to primarily economic ones—the cultivation of basic, standardized skills that are measured by simple tests and presumed to prepare students for the workplace. Through their emphasis on efficiency and measurable effects, their policies detract from social, civic, and other academic goals, like fostering community engagement, relationship-building, or critical thinking. Thus, the dilemmas in this California district illuminate how broader societal and institutional trends can intensify existing inequities by furthering policies that promote narrow, economic purposes of schooling for historically under-served communities.

*The [full study](#) is forthcoming: Trujillo, Tina (2012), *The Politics of District Instructional Policy Formation: Compromising Equity and Rigor*, Educational Policy.*

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