



Entry

# Understanding the Education Policymaking Process in the United States

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**Definition:** Considering the broad implications of education policy, it is important to understand the various facets of the education policymaking process. There are different stages of the process (i.e., issue definition, policy adoption, implementation, and evaluation) which, at times, can be difficult to comprehend when considering the competing goals of education and multiple stakeholders. Understanding the process can also be difficult due to the historical and contemporary influences of power and racism at play within and outside of society's educational landscape—especially within the United States context. The process is highlighted as an iterative one which provides room for adjustments and changes across different contexts. By navigating the complex landscape of education policymaking, one can be better equipped to understand the intricacies of policymaking and its transformative capacity.

**Keywords:** education; policy; policymaking; decision making



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## 1. Introduction

Public education in the United States has been and continues to be a site of struggle. This struggle stems from the various roles that individuals believe public K-12 and higher education should serve, which are informed by cultural, religious, political, and economic considerations [1]. Given that these considerations shape decisions regarding who is educated and what is taught [1], it is important to understand the policymaking process that continuously defines and redefines education in the United States.

To comprehend the policymaking process, it is first necessary to understand what a policy is. While policy occupies a perpetual state of ambiguity [2], it can be understood as “a value-laden process through which a political system handles a public problem” (pp. 3–4, [3]). Overall, policies can be understood as tools made by political institutions or organizations for the improvement of systems and structures in society. In the United States, educational institutions, local school districts, states, and the country implement various policies in education. These policies influence how schools are governed, operate, are funded, allocate resources, decide on curriculum, employ teachers, and more. These decisions impact everyone, from families and surrounding communities to teachers and administrators.

Although education policies can lead to positive impacts, they also have the potential to be harmful and disproportionately impact the most vulnerable populations [4,5], particularly those from historically disadvantaged and marginalized communities [6,7]. One of the most notable examples of this policy tension came in 2001 when the United States federal government passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), a reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) [8,9]. NCLB was a bipartisan effort, which “sought to advance American competitiveness and close the achievement gap” between low-income, racially minoritized students and their more affluent and advantaged peers (para.4) [8]. Through the act, states were required to develop and implement accountability

standards for school achievement that districts needed to meet in order to receive federal Title I funding [10–12]. While NCLB made positive strides towards improved school accountability and student achievement measures for certain student groups [8,9,13–15] and increased federal funding for students overall [16,17], it also inadvertently disadvantaged already under-resourced schools through its implementation [9,14,15,18–21]. Additionally, the policy is critiqued for its contribution to a culture of high-stakes, standardized testing that narrowed curriculum and instruction [9,15,19,20]. Overall, the negative impacts of NCLB reinforced many of the social and racial disparities that the policy was trying to reduce. Although NCLB was succeeded by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, the policy's outcomes and lasting impact highlight how the cultural, political, and economic considerations embedded in education policy not only dictate what education is but also who it is for [1].

In recent years, education policies in the United States have become increasingly contentious because of the intersection with culture, religion, politics, and economics. Due to this trend, many researchers and education stakeholders have tried to address and push back against education reform efforts that have disproportionately negative impacts on students who are low-income, racially minoritized, have disabilities, and who are LGBTQ+. Within this context, this chapter discusses the policymaking process in the U.S. and its role in shaping education. The next sections provide an examination of policy goals and who shapes policies.

## 2. Policy Goals

Policy goals extend beyond outcomes such as expanded access to early childhood education or adoption of new standards and rather reflect the “enduring values of community life that give rise to controversy over particular policies” (p. 14, [22]). Enduring values like democracy, happiness, or liberty might inspire different opinions on realizing such values in a society. Specifically, beliefs concerning liberty have historically driven the goals supported and adopted by policymakers. Competing ideas lead to the development and advancement of substantively different education policy goals based on differing philosophical approaches and belief systems.

### 2.1. Perspectives on Policy Beliefs and Values

Policymakers and their decisions may be influenced by 18th-century debates on liberty, which prioritized reason and evidence. Different ideas about the nature of liberty shape beliefs about the purpose of government. Negative liberty, as derived from John Stuart Mills, entails “freedom from coercion by others” (p. 115 [22]) and prioritizes policies that restrain harmful behavior. In contrast, positive liberty, as advanced by Isaiah Berlin, envisions “the ability to conceive of goals and realize them, and requires help from others” (p. 115, [22]). The positive liberty perspective assumes that a base level of resources is a prerequisite to liberty and prioritizes policies that help individuals reach their goals. These different philosophical approaches, the idea of liberty as “freedom from” (negative) or “freedom to” (positive), lead to different values and beliefs about the purpose of education.

Following distinctions between negative and positive liberty, policymakers distinguish between policies' distributive and independent values. Distributive values motivate policies that target certain populations, have specific criteria for dispensation, and contribute to a vibrant and healthy society. In education, distributive values lead to policies focused on educational adequacy, equality, and “benefiting the less advantaged” (p.3, 23). However, policymakers must also contend with independent values that contribute to social flourishing and affect education but are not considered educational goods, like parents' interests or freedom of residence and occupation [23]. Balancing these different values leads to a large spectrum of policy goals.

## 2.2. Education Policy Goals

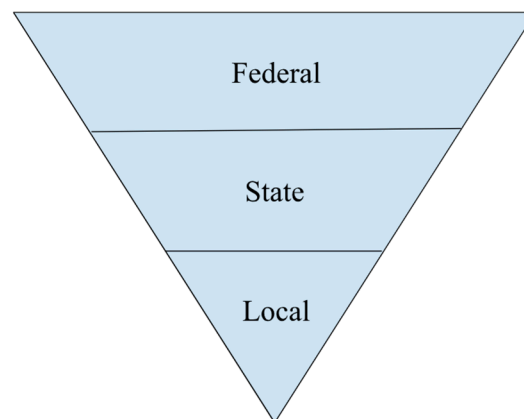
Education scholars point to different beliefs about the purpose of education, including the idea that education functions variously to engineer social efficiency, democratic equality, or social mobility [24]. The social efficiency argument, or the notion that the primary function of education is to train workers, emphasizes taxpayers and positions education as a public good that meets the market's needs [24]. Education for democratic equality also characterizes education as a public good and focuses on developing the competencies of an engaged citizenry [24]. The social mobility perspective argues that education is a "commodity" designed to provide students with a competitive social advantage and positions education as a private good emphasizing consumers [24]. Within the debates about the nature of education as a public or private good, policymakers also consider one of the purposes of education as improving prospects for the disadvantaged [23] or righting an "education debt" [18] owed to minoritized students who have been historically marginalized by or excluded through state-based education policies such as race-based segregation.

## 3. Key Policy Actors in Education

Across the United States, various beliefs and goals for education are held by individuals both within and outside of the government. Those individuals who utilize their positions or resources to influence policy goals based on their beliefs are known as policy actors. The following sections provide insight into who the policy actors are both within and outside the government and how their roles differ.

### 3.1. Within the Government

In the United States, a number of formal government actors contribute to shaping the goals of education policy. These actors exist at the federal, state, and local levels of government, and each holds distinct roles in shaping policy. However, as highlighted in Figure 1, the lower levels of government must abide by broader policies set forth by higher governing bodies.



**Figure 1.** Governance structure of the United States.

At the highest level of policymaking in the United States exists the federal government, which operates to bring attention to and set specific goals for the nation as a whole. Although the President of the United States does not have the authority to enact particular policies, they do have the power to elevate public attention to certain priorities [25]. Through the power to appoint specific individuals to roles in their administration, they are also able to impact the policymaking process. For example, the president appoints officials to the federal Department of Education, and together, they shape national priorities for education during the president's administration [25]. In addition to these federal actors, the United States legislative branch of the federal government, known as Congress, has a

central role in shaping educational policy. The 535 members of Congress not only advocate for given policy priorities but also have the legal authority to write and pass legislation which localities are then responsible for implementing. For example, Congress has passed legislation to ban discrimination on the basis of gender and disability in education, which districts and schools are mandated to be responsive to. However, given the large number of members in Congress, many different goals are represented [25], which incites what was previously discussed as the struggle over shaping policy. Further, priorities are also influenced by non-elected government workers, known as career bureaucrats, who leverage established relationships, expertise, and opportunities to promote particular policies.

While some education policies are established at the federal level in the United States, this responsibility and that of funding schools is predominantly held by the states. At the state level, there are chief state school officers (CSSOs) and the state boards of education (SBEs). However, the extent to which these individuals influence the policy agenda varies based on each state's constitution and the powers entitled to these roles within each state [26]. In addition to CSSOs and SBEs, governors and state legislatures also have informal roles in shaping education policy through advocacy for goals in alignment with their beliefs and values. However, again, the roles of these actors vary by state and depend on the other state-specific agencies responsible for education, such as departments of education, superintendents of public instruction, and credentialing commissions. Many states have several state agencies with authority over education decisions; in California, for example, there are governing bodies such as the California Department of Education, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and the California Teacher Credentialing Commission, all in addition to the state CSSO and SBE. In a state like California, with various governing entities, there can be competing forces working to influence education policy, which can make it more difficult for specific policies to garner focused attention, and policy tends to fluctuate more frequently [27].

In addition to the policies set forth by states, localities also hold significant responsibility in funding schools and deciding educational policies. In response to the goals set by state and federal agencies, local policymakers then make decisions on how the goals should be implemented. These decisions at the local level are primarily driven by individuals elected to be on the school board. School board members are publicly elected by individuals who live within a given district, regardless of if they have school-aged children. Once elected, school board members are responsible for the creation of policies that dictate the administration of schools within the given district.

Although school boards play a prominent role in education across the United States, both the federal and state governments have recently experienced increased power to set the educational policy agenda. Federal control over education specifically increased throughout the latter half of the twentieth century in part due to policies like the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, as well as Federal rulings such as *Brown v. Board*, which expanded federal oversight of state decision making [26]. At the same time, states gained an increasingly centralized role over local entities. Specifically, accountability policies increased states' control over local districts, and increased centralization at the state level has also given state policymakers additional power in setting the education policy agenda.

### 3.2. Outside the Government

Aside from those inside the government, collectives of people known as special interest groups also act to shape educational policy goals. Some special interest groups focus on advocacy for particular populations, geographic regions, or belief systems [26]. Within the education space, examples of interest groups include parent groups, teacher unions, local taxpayer organizations, racial and linguistic minority groups, and student organizations. While each of these groups holds differential influence over policy decisions, they all have the ability to advocate for policies on their available platforms. In general, the special interest groups that hold the most influence are those that have high levels of cohesion and

funding [26]. In addition to acting separately from the government, special interest groups with voting-eligible members can mobilize to elect officials whose platforms include their policy priorities [28]. Given that this level of influence does require substantial resources, some scholars argue this may be to the detriment of disadvantaged populations who lack access to the resources needed to organize around their policy priorities [26].

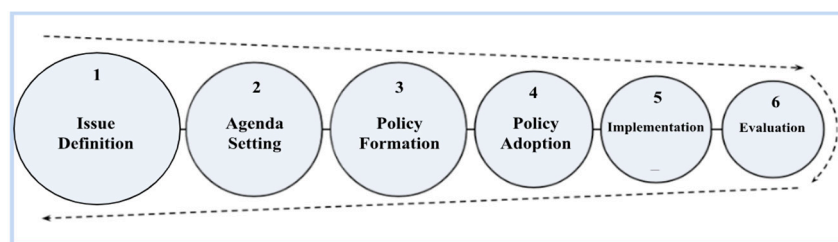
While group mobilization is advantageous, individuals can also act alone to advocate for policy goals or specific outcomes they desire to implement. Such influential individuals are known as policy entrepreneurs [25]. These policy entrepreneurs may invest their time, energy, and/or financial resources to advance a particular idea. Additionally, they may work with elected officials or special interest groups to advocate specific policies. Alongside policy entrepreneurs, individuals such as wealthy philanthropists or leaders of corporations also frequently exert influence on policy goals. These actors exert influence through the endowment of foundations that financially support research on particular topics, lobbyists, and organizations that work to advance their policy goals [29]. One example of this in education is the funding of education management organizations (EMOs) that work to promote school choice [29,30]. These organizations are often funded by venture philanthropy foundations such as the Broad Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation [25]. These venture philanthropists leverage their wealth to privately invest in policy efforts that advance the public good [29,30].

Although policy entrepreneurs and philanthropists are examples of policy actors that gain power due to financial resources, other groups do gain influence based on their cohesion [24]. Within education, one of the most cohesive types of organizations that shape policy goals is teacher unions. These organizations work to protect teachers locally through collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) but also have a critical role in setting state and national policy goals [31]. Specifically, national unions will often comment on policy proposals or endorse particular candidates, seeking to advance policies and policymakers that align with their priorities [32]. At a district level, CBAs can also be a mechanism for shaping policy through collective advocacy [33]. Stronger unions, in particular, can impact the officials who are elected to office [32] and the flexibility they are afforded in their leadership [33]. Overall, the influence of teacher unions highlights that policy actors exist in all arenas, from the government to schools and communities.

#### 4. The Stages of Policymaking

As highlighted above, policy actors can influence educational policy in various ways, including before and during policy creation. Therefore, the remaining sections will describe the policymaking process and its associated stages to provide insights into how this plays out in the creation of education policies. While many models attempt to explain the policymaking process based on the perspectives of actors or systems, others have focused more on the policymaking process itself. The six-step (stages) model of policymaking, as posited by Fowler [3], is utilized to take the latter approach to understanding policymaking. The original stages model, also known as the process or sequential model for the policymaking process was initially introduced by Laswell [34], included seven stages, and has been adapted by many scholars [35]. Fowler's adaptation, a six-stage model of the policymaking process, includes issue definition, agenda-setting, policy formulation, policy adoption, implementation, and evaluation (See Figure 2).

Different versions of the stages model have been referenced extensively in the public policy arena, and Fowler's conceptualization of the process has become one of the more well-known iterations of it. Still, Fowler's model has also received varying treatment by scholars for its assumptions of linearity and rational decision making within the policymaking process. It is important to note that none of the models for explaining policymaking are without critique [36,37]. Still, the application of the stages model in the following sections is not to dismiss those criticisms or to overly simplify what is a very complex process. Instead, it is used as a way to help provide a more digestible structure for discussing the main parts of the policymaking process.



**Figure 2.** Six-stage model of policymaking. Adapted from [3].

### 5. Issue Definition and Setting the Policy Agenda

In the first and second stages of policymaking, the various actors influencing education policy work to define the issues they seek to address and set their policy agenda. The iterative nature of the policymaking process requires issues on the policy agenda to be clearly defined so that decisions or actions can be taken in favor of those ideas. Therefore, it necessitates a policy agenda comprising a set of clearly defined issues to which policymakers give serious attention [25].

In the first stage of Fowler’s model, policy actors work to define the issues they care about. In addition to the contributions of key actors previously discussed, academics, researchers, and consultants also define issues and impact the long-term climate of ideas through research [26]. The media, through their reportage, also help bring attention to particular issues and shape issue narratives. Further, by impacting public opinion, the media are able to impact the views of the presidential administration and Congress depending on the extent to which their constituents prioritize the policy problem they shed light on [26]. Despite the short attention span of viewers in a 24-h news cycle, media can be critical for accelerating and growing movements due to the influence of public attention on the issues attended to by elected politicians. Positive public opinion of a particular policy solution can make the issue a priority for elected officials who want to curry favor with their constituents.

Overall, once issues are explicitly stated, policymakers enter the second stage of policymaking to set the agenda for the given policy.

Using Easton’s System Analysis framework, the setting of the policy agenda can be understood through its’ inputs [38]. Inputs consist of both supports and demands. The public gives support through individuals’ willingness to provide legitimacy to a system and its decisions [2]. In the case of education, this is often parents’ support of the public school system. Demands, in turn, are the pressures on the system to address a particular problem. Given limited resources, demands are often in tension with one another. Supports and demands ebb and flow and are inputs from the public that are converted by actors into policy decisions and ultimately in outputs that are part of a continuous feedback loop.

To understand more concretely how inputs are converted into an agenda, one can apply Kingdon’s Policy Window framework [25]. Under this framework, a policy window is defined as an opportune moment for a particular policy issue to be pursued or for a policy solution to be pushed. This window “opens” when three forces, or streams, come together simultaneously. These include the problem stream, the political stream, and the policy stream. The problem stream refers to an issue or matter recognized as a problem by the public, as discussed in the first stage of policymaking. The political stream is a combination of the public mood, elections, and administration changes. And finally, the policy stream consists of the proposals identified by think tanks, academia, or other research organizations. When these streams come together, there is a limited opportunity, known as the policy window, for an issue to go onto the agenda and be addressed [25].

In addition to the previously discussed component of public recognition, the problem stream also incorporates consideration for how issues are framed or problematized [25]. Specifically, numeric indicators such as statistics, rankings, or dollar amounts can help define a problem and may lead to quantifiable goals. When numbers are used to highlight a problem, they are also likely to be used to measure the progress of a given policy. However,

other symbols can be used to represent a problem qualitatively, such as the use of narrative stories. One common narrative in education is a story of decline, stating that educational quality is weakening, particularly in comparison to other nations [3]. Causal stories are also familiar in framing problems and can often be strategic. For example, arguing that a particular institution or stakeholder is to blame for student outcomes can frame that institution as the problem by placing the burden on them. Depending on the framing, different issues may be placed on the policy agenda.

## 6. Policy Definition, Formulation, and Adoption

Once a problem lands on an agenda via the policy window, policymakers enter the third stage of policymaking and spend long periods of time debating the nuances of how the policy should be structured [25]. Policy structure is determined by the instrument selected, which dictates how governmental resources are leveraged to change individuals' behaviors to accomplish political objectives [39]. The groups whose behavior the policy is specifically intended to change are known as the target population [40]. Other common names for policy instruments include alternatives, solutions, or tools. Long periods of contemplation are dedicated to the selection of a policy instrument because it dictates a policy's costs and benefits, as well as the distribution of these impacts across different groups of interest [23]. While the debate about the instruments' details predominantly occurs after a problem has been included in the policy agenda, Kingdon notes that the initial placement of a problem on the agenda is also largely dependent on the solutions that are available and offered [25].

Policy actors favor policies with instruments that align with their political beliefs about the role of the government and which resources they think should be utilized to serve a given goal or population [40]. The resources that policy instruments utilize vary widely and include money, rules, and authority [39]. Based on how these resources have been used for policy objectives, McDonnell and Elmore [39] define four primary types of policy instruments: mandates, inducements, capacity-building, and system-changing instruments. In 1990, Schneider and Ingram expanded on this classification system to provide more details about how the instruments operate and introduce two new types of instruments: hortatory tools and learning tools [40]. Each of these instruments operates with various resources of the government that suit them best for varied circumstances and produce different results, such as uniform or diverse behavior (See Table 1).

**Table 1.** Policy instruments. Based on [39].

	Definition	Resources Needed	Best Context	Expected Outcomes	Examples
Mandates/Authority Tools	Impose rules on the actions of individuals or groups under a governance system	Authority	Heirarchical system and uniform behavior desired	Compliance	Compulsory education
Inducements/Incentive Tools	Manipulation of tangible payoffs in return for a policy-desired action being carried out	Tangible payoffs (i.e., money, resources, liberty)	Diverse behavior desired and individuals are utility maximizers	Immediate action by target groups	Funding for Hispanic Serving Institutions
Capacity-Building Tools	Provide resources to facilitate policy-desired action	Resources to invest (i.e., money, training, knowledge)	Target group is motivated to act but do not have the resources to do so	Enhancement of individual capacity and long-term changes in the actions of target groups	Professional development
System-Changing Tools	Transfer authority to individuals or groups to provide specified goods or services	Authority	Target groups are unwilling to respond to other incentives	Change in public delivery of goods	School vouchers

Table 1. Cont.

	Definition	Resources Needed	Best Context	Expected Outcomes	Examples
Symbolic/Horatory Tools	Messaging campaign to appeal to target group values	Means of communication	Target groups are motivated to act based on alignment with their values or beliefs	Altered perceptions of policy-preffered actions	“Just Say No” campaign in schools to deter drug use
Learning Tools	Promote broad goals for lower-level agents to carry out through a diversity of tools	Authority	Lower-level agents are willing to learn and are motivated to find solutions	Use of diverse array of tools to achieve policy goals	No Child Left Behind goals for proficiency

6.1. Theory of Action

Given that the instrument selected partially determines a policy’s outcomes, it is central to the policy’s theory of action. A theory of action, also known as a theory of change, delineates how certain actions will lead to outcomes, both short- and long-term [41]. A policy’s theory of action can be illustrated as a flow chart that begins with policy inputs, progresses through a resultant action, and culminates with short-term outputs and long-term outcomes (See Figure 3). In Figure 3, the selected policy instrument dictates each stage’s relationship. While not all policies have an official theory of action in the form of an illustration, it can be deduced through analysis of the selected policy instrument and accompanying documents.



Figure 3. Theory of action.

6.2. Selection of Policy Instrument

Although there is a wide array of policy tools available that differently suit various situations, policymakers often lack complete information about the full range of instruments and make subjective decisions dependent on context [39]. Usually, the considered alternatives are not radical new ideas designed for the specific situation but represent a recombination of familiar elements into a new proposed solution [25]. This trend can be understood through two different perspectives. The first perspective is based on the parallel processing system of the United States federal government, whereby multiple policy issues are dealt with simultaneously by different subgroups. Large policy changes are stymied under such a system of diffused jurisdiction because public attention is limited to a few policy items at once. Therefore, changes to the status quo require intentional mobilization across interest groups, which can take time to achieve [42].

Alternatively, the incremental approach to policy change can also be understood as a deliberate attempt to maintain the status quo, which upholds systems of power and privilege [43]. Note that policymakers are most likely to choose policy instruments that fit the existing dynamic between the government and target populations, whether it be a relationship of authority or collaboration. For instance, if the relationship is collaborative, mandates are not likely to be utilized because it would impose a top-down command system that disrupts the existing relationship. Additionally, if the existing relationship has been to distribute the same resources to everyone, targeted interventions for sub-populations would be less likely to be adopted. Evidence of this was found in an analysis of California’s Student Equity Policy, which was intended to support underrepresented groups in higher education but, through negotiation between policymakers, became a broad initiative to support all students [44]. This example highlights that while incremental changes to policy can be effective for obtaining the consensus needed to have a policy passed, they can also thwart equity initiatives.



The distribution of resources, as dictated by the policy construction and instrument, is also dictated by how a target group is characterized in the mind of policymakers. Target groups can be characterized positively or negatively through symbolic language and stories engaged during agenda-setting or policy construction [45]. During agenda setting, policymakers are specifically pressured to consider policies that benefit groups that are powerful and positively characterized [45]. After a problem has made it onto the agenda, a policy also adopts language that can either encourage or discourage political participation for target populations [41]. In both stages, target group construction is racialized, where white individuals are more likely to be positively viewed, although racially minoritized individuals are characterized as weak and undeserving of receiving benefits from public policies [46]. This act of racialization leads to a lower use of policy tools that distribute benefits (compared to those that create restrictions) when the target population is racially minoritized rather than white. Based on the influence of racialized perspectives on instrument selection, policies can diminish the efficacy of equity initiatives and increase racialized disparities.

The instrument that is ultimately selected for a policy largely depends on the advocacy of policy entrepreneurs and a negotiation process among many actors. Policy entrepreneurs often advocate for a given instrument for one of three primary reasons: to promote personal interests such as public reputation, to advance their value system in public policy, or for the enjoyment of being part of the movement [25]. Frequently, the instruments that policy entrepreneurs advocate for do not prompt radical change because they have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo due to their position of power in the government. To advocate for a given instrument, many entrepreneurs begin by “softening up” their colleagues by introducing ideas in conversations or speeches, gauging responses, reshaping ideas, and repeating the process until the instrument seems to be welcomed by the policy community [25]. The policy community then engages in a process of negotiation where various instruments are evaluated based on evidence and argued about until one dominates [25]. For an instrument to be selected, it must meet three criteria for feasibility: technical feasibility (i.e., the ability to be implemented), value acceptability, and anticipation of future constraints (i.e., budget constraints and public opinion) [25]. Based on this implicit set of criteria and preceding negotiations, policy actors in governing bodies—at the federal, state, and local levels—all engage in voting that decides whether a given policy instrument is adopted. This process of voting characterizes the fourth stage of policymaking—policy adoption—and the way it is carried out is highly dependent on the governing body. However, only once the governing body makes a collective decision can a policy be implemented.

## 7. Policy Implementation

Policy implementation is the fifth stage of the policymaking process, and during this stage, the focus shifts from planning and decision making to putting policies into action. At this point, the design of a policy could aid or hinder implementation. In particular, a policy with a strong theory of action can help efficiently direct implementation and desired outcomes. However, even with a strong theory of action, it is only in implementation that the policy becomes evident since “policy-directed change ultimately is a problem of the smallest unit” (p.171 [47]). Up until this point, most policy elements are loosely defined [48]. It is in implementation where these elements are defined by both those who carry out the policy and the context in which it is undertaken [49]. This intersection of policy, people, and places reinforces that implementation is a context-specific undertaking [49] that determines the success or failure of a policy as per its stated objectives.

### 7.1. Street-Level Bureaucrats

Regarding the people important for implementation, Weatherley and Lipsy introduce the term street-level bureaucrats to designate practitioners whose jobs bring them into direct contact with target populations of a policy and who, by the nature of their roles,

exercise significant discretion in how they carry out their work and in implementation [50]. Depending on the implementation site, street-level bureaucrats could be teachers, schools, or workers at state or district education offices. These individuals must navigate the demands of their jobs, the reality of non-finite resources, and their own views about policies and target populations, among other factors, when implementing a policy. Through their roles, street-level bureaucrats become the smallest unit of policy implementation and have notable influence over how the policy plays out.

The effectiveness of street-level bureaucrats involved in the implementation process depends on whether they are willing to learn about the new policy and apply new learning, which is cardinal to the success of implementation. While the will of street-level bureaucrats can change positively and negatively over time, it can be difficult to influence depending on an individual's disposition. However, policy implementation is also influenced by factors aside from individuals' beliefs, such as the capacity of street-level bureaucrats, which is more easily built through the provision of training or funding [47,51–53]. Although some factors are more easily influenced than others, implementation is best supported at the intersection of investments in the human, social, and financial capital of street-level bureaucrats [52].

Although capacity can be built, McLaughlin does note that the response of street-level bureaucrats to policy objectives can “often seem quite idiosyncratic, frustratingly unpredictable, if not downright resistant” (p. 172, [47]). It is not always a simple case of a lack of will or capacity. Rather, McLaughlin attributes the unpredictability of street-level bureaucrats' behavior to coping mechanisms that they have to employ in the face of pressure to do their jobs and limited resources. Challenges in implementation have also been attributed to embedded biases, preferences, and knowledge, as well as resource constraints, which make it hard for practitioners to embrace change [52]. Similarly, some policies require implementation at the organizational level, and organizational culture and structures may provide support or pose challenges to implementation just as individual biases and beliefs do. These barriers at the individual and organizational levels ultimately lead to interpretations, reconfigurations, or policy alterations based on the implementers [47]. As a result, street-level bureaucrats become policymakers [54,55].

### *7.2. Implementation Context*

Given that policy implementation does not happen in a vacuum, the geographical, historical, and cross-system contexts of policies also influence how they are implemented. Situated in these contexts, the contextual factors allocate value [26], which influences perceptions regarding the legitimacy of policymaking bodies. This is important during implementation because if a policymaking body is viewed by street-level bureaucrats to be legitimate, it is more likely to be successfully implemented.

In education, federal policies are especially contentious and complicated because education is predominantly the responsibility of states and their local governments. However, the growing impact of the federal government on education [56] has resulted in an increasingly active role in education policy, which has been traced, among others factors, to the publication of *A Nation at Risk* [57]. Therefore, when education policies are federal, a lot has to be done to ensure states implement them. This sometimes creates a hostile environment for policy implementation, which has also been observed within states based on local resistance to state-level policies. Such tensions highlight that the origins of policies can either be a site of struggle or support for implementation [58–60]. Ultimately, such context factors intersect with those contributed by the policy design and street-level bureaucrats to produce the implemented policy outcome.

### *7.3. Lenses for Understanding Implementation*

Given the complexity of factors that influence implementation, it is important to examine it through various lenses. Examples of the lenses applied in thinking about implementation include cognitive, economic, organizational, and critical lenses. Through

cognitive lenses, the prior knowledge of street-level bureaucrats is considered as central in policy implementation [61–64]. Principal-agent theory alternatively stipulates that an alignment between the preferences, goals, will, and capacity of street-level bureaucrats and policy-makers is necessary for successful implementation. Implementation, then, may be affected by any divergence between the goals of these stakeholders [65,66]. Additionally, organizational culture and structures may also support or challenge implementation just as individual schemas do [65] and become another important lens to understand what happens during implementation. Finally, the acknowledgment of the centrality of race and racism [67] in education [1,68–70] provides a broader contextual look that can unveil how systemic power structures inform implementation.

Overall, implementation is highly influenced by the different goals that individuals believe education is intended to pursue. Throughout implementation, the decisions of street-level bureaucrats are fraught with tradeoffs and tensions [22,50]. Therefore, it is a realistic assumption that some policies may be successful while others may not do what policymakers intended. With all the moving parts of policymaking, policymakers' aims become tangible only through feedback after implementation [26]. Evaluation, therefore, becomes a necessary approach for examining the effectiveness of policies.

## 8. Policy Evaluation

Once implemented, the sixth stage of policymaking, known as evaluation, allows for an examination of the policy efficacy. The underlying assumption of the stage model of policymaking is that this logical approach, a series of well-thought-out actions, will produce expected outcomes and have the desired impact. With the shift from studying government structures to government policy outcomes [48], policy evaluation has become necessary for determining the effectiveness of interventions. Ideally, all policies would be implemented successfully and have the desired impact. However, this is not always the case. In education, policymaking has many components, as described above. Also, for any policy text, different street-level bureaucrats will inevitably generate different interpretations [71]. Therefore, depending on the role of people involved in the policymaking and implementation process, policies may be understood and implemented differently.

To evaluate if a policy achieved its' intended goals, the theories and assumptions undergirding the policy should be examined in detail against specified criteria. Whether provided or derived, the theory of action offers a valuable tool to examine if the policy achieved its intended outcomes. Further, the previously discussed lenses for thinking about implementation are also adopted by policy scholars to analyze implementation. Each of the lenses lends analyses to different foci. For example, a scholar who analyzes policy implementation through an economic lens would be concerned with the alignment between the actions of street-level bureaucrats and the policymakers' intentions. Alternatively, a critical policy scholar would be concerned with how existing racial inequalities in social, political, and economic systems contributed to policy implementation and how the policy outcomes either contribute to or address such inequities [72].

Such analyses not only serve to examine policy efficacy but also to inform future policies. This process of informing future policy decisions is known as the feedback loop. This process not only considers formal analyses but also the views of target populations/institutions about how policy was implemented. However, given that not all target populations have equal power [45], such evaluations are inherently political and can disproportionately blame marginalized communities for policy failure. Overall, these evaluations, along with those driven by the implementation lenses, catalyze future policymaking [26]. With far-reaching policies such as those made at the federal level, far-reaching consequences of the feedback loop can be noted. Due to the feedback loop, the ripple effects of influential policies can linger long after they have been discontinued.

While often driven by research and evidence, policy evaluation is inherently political. Even at this stage of the policymaking process, resistances emanate from who is doing the evaluation [73]. The fear of potential negativity bias [72] also makes politicians more

likely to avoid blame for policies that do not go according to plan, making it difficult to learn from and make improvements based on lessons learned. Especially when it concerns populations who do not have power [45], it becomes difficult to see real change.

## 9. Conclusions and Prospects

Given that the effects of policies can last long past their adoption, understanding the education policymaking process is important for anyone trying to improve education. Although policymaking is not linear, actors have the opportunity to work at all stages to address and remedy educational inequities. This knowledge is of the utmost importance when considering the harmful educational agendas that currently exist in the United States to further segregate and oppress marginalized communities. To help overcome current structural inequalities and racial disparities within our education system, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners must understand and engage the multifaceted process through which policies are made. The insights provided here can be used to advance educational equity and create more accessible and efficient schools for all students but particularly for historically disadvantaged and racially minoritized students, who have traditionally been the most disproportionately impacted by educational policy reform efforts.

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