

Building on the foundation: How Policy has affected a cohort of educational leaders

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In the summer of 2023, I was honored to be a part of a cohort of educational leaders selected by the Charles Butt Foundation to attend the Raising School Leaders program which was held on the campus of Harvard University. There were 300 school leaders from across the globe with 30 coming from Texas. Our cohort remains close to this day. At the intersection of public policy advocacy and education, I frame this study that will inform educational leadership practices. These fellow administrators range from instructional coaches to superintendent and policy advocates. Their reach is far and broad. Additionally, how they perceive the changes will craft the vision for their respective campus and district. Garnering their thoughts on the changes and processes to enhance learning will be a measurement of a stakeholder group that teaches the teacher, in many respects. The educational level is varied but this is a group of internal stakeholders. Studying their perspectives is not meant to be an all-inclusive look at the stakeholders affected by such change. However, leadership perspectives drive the narrative on change implementation (Wei & Burndrett, 2010).

Topic To Be Examined

In the fall of 2024, the State Board of Education (SBOE) in conjunction with the Texas Education Agency (TEA) will change the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for the third time in the last twelve years. I am interested to see the perspectives on this revisionist history strategy and how it impacts teaching and learning in the classroom. As a public service organization, it is critical that we ensure the best for our constituents daily. As the state legislature takes another look at privatizing public education (using vouchers), I believe it is ever more critical to ensure that our stakeholders are thrilled with the various concepts we are teaching students across the system.

At the outset, I will admit that I am pursuing this knowledge not only for my in-class assignment but also for an application to become a Texas Lyceum fellow. Mainly, though, I want to know how 5.5 million students are impacted each time the governing body makes a change to the content.

State Board of Education Process Update

Since the inception of this idea, some very political agendas have been sought. The State Board of Education (SBOE) is comprised of a 15-member panel. Participants run in statewide elections and are dually chosen from the regions they represent. After a representative who was affiliated with the democratic party left office to serve in another elected position, there was one finalist on the ballot, a democrat named Tiffany Clark who was running unopposed. Rather than install Mrs. Clark for a position that was rightfully hers and that she received 416,000 votes for, Governor Gregg Abbott employed Leslie Racine, a republican who was the deciding factor in approving the changes, 8-7 (Edison, 2024). Mrs. Racine, Abbott's political appointee, represents a jurisdiction that encompasses a major portion of the DFW metroplex for roughly five weeks until Mrs. Clark is sworn in. Whether you are a staunch republican or a left leaning progressive, Mr. Abbotts politics are yet another example of the measures he'll take to utilize education for his own personal gain.

As a researcher, I am mostly ambivalent towards the changes in the curriculum. In truth, I may have slight biases in supporting them. However, the process does not pass the smell test and is a shame for the 5.5 million students in Texas that need their leaders to step up.

Interested In Topic

As a professional educator with almost 17 years' experience, this topic is one that resonates with me. As a teacher, I was certified in Social Studies and taught 8th grade history as well as government and economics. As I gained a master's degree in educational leadership and later, a doctorate, I oversaw the curriculum for the social studies department. Now, as a superintendent, I sit on legislative committees that help drive and advocate for policy. As a researcher, I am not for nor against the change. However, I am interested in the perspective of my fellow administrative leaders. Whether the change costs them in terms of curriculum, professional development, or has deeper roots in DEI, it is important to understand their perspective as the leadership. It will permeate the culture and will inform the opinions of those around them.

Academic and Practical Meanings

There is wide academic meaning when the curriculum changes, particularly as fast as this curriculum has changed. Further, as a policy class, it completes the communication loop when you see the impact that the high-level policy alterations have to those that implement the change. Seeing the impacts of the change and how leaders make sense of the change, and the new identity it will create serve as a frame for interpretation of the values and sense of cultural identity (Eli & Thomas, 2001).

Theories Utilized

On a public policy level, there are certain "big questions" that need to be answered. Behn poses that one of those big questions is that our governmental entities have a trust issue (Behn, 1995, p.

315) Later he states “no single piece of public management research will offer *this* kind of breakthrough. Scientific management may have lost much of its intellectual stature, but its legacy lives on (p. 322). Utilizing a scientific approach to acquiring stakeholder data will reveal insights and themes.

Another framework that is important in considering the values placed on perspectives in the stakeholder groups likes with German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. Kant introduced the notion of external freedom. According to an article written by Hodgson, the Kantian argument states that a government can only take actions that do not interfere with the rights of other stakeholders. To do so is an impingement on the freedom of all stakeholders (Ellis, et al. p. 101).

Analysis of Data

Data was collected through a Likert scale survey indicating trust/mistrust, active leadership/tacit compliance, and implementation strategies. This was conducted on Google Forms, which allows for easy data manipulation and analysis. Additionally, there were open ended questions evaluated for stakeholder concerns or outside considerations that may not have been taken into account. The survey was sent to the compilation of Charles Butt Foundation fellows in the 2023 cohort. Although 30 participants were solicited, only two gave feedback. Because of the limited nature of the data, I reformed the participant pool and opened the survey up to teachers, instruction coaches, administrators, and the like.

Further, I reached out to the Texas Council for Social Studies (TXCSS). Their Executive Secretary, Chad Taylor, was attending the National Council for Social Studies in Boston and assured me that the survey would be added to the agenda for consideration and dissemination.

Finally, I sent the link to a colleague at our Education Service Center (ESC 16) for disbursement among the 59 other superintendents in the region. To date, the responses remain two.

Considerations

To say I am disappointed with the results of the survey would be a vast understatement. However, at times, no data can also be data. Factors that may have played into the lack of participation should be noted. There are many external factors that may play a role in the limited response.

Timing. First, the timing of the survey could have been askew. To ask for precious moments right before the Thanksgiving break may have been more than my colleagues had to spare. As I took the survey, it took me about 8-10 minutes total. I had the insight of knowing the context I was asking the question from. Perhaps the recipients needed more input so they could provide timely and efficient output on the survey.

Voice. I believe that the stakeholders I solicited have an important story to uncover and report within the constraints of the financial, training, and human capital that is involved in deploying a new curriculum. However, perhaps they read the survey questions and felt they did not have a voice to be heard or did not see the value in the survey.

Apathy. Lastly, they could have thought they had a powerful voice but there was little consequence to the policy affects. So many times, our school leaders have been relegated and marginalized when it comes to legislative decision making. Too often, we're left to pick up the pieces after the advocating is done and employ strategies to deal with yet another unfunded

mandate. In fact, advocacy groups have shared with school leaders that there is an acronym for school leaders around Austin: WASP – whiny ass school people. Apologies for the crassness of the term but it was reported in multiple venues to first time and aspiring superintendents’ academies (Region 16 superintendent meeting; TASA First Time Superintendent Academy, 2024). With this pejorative speech, it would be no wonder that my colleagues felt marginalized. However, I do not believe this to be a solid rationale as our school leaders have a heart for our students and will always search for policy and pedagogical best practices.

Other considerations. In a political climate that is polarized as ours is, I wonder if some read the survey, saw the political divide and wanted nothing to do with it. Frankly, writing pieces that are critical of powerful elected officials challenges the mettle of those that choose to stand against it. Perhaps my colleagues saw that and said it isn’t worth it.

Next Steps

Every school district has someone associated with social studies. Every campus will generally have multiple people associated and I believe their story is worthwhile to tell. I feel the scope of the last three weeks have not been enough time to engage the stakeholders. I feel the incentives to complete the survey should be evaluated and considered. I do not believe this is something worth giving up on. I am grateful to the two people that completed the survey. Perhaps looking at the length of the survey or reading levels would yield more participants. Granted, this survey is going to college educated colleagues that generally hold a masters degree or higher (a prerequisite for being an administrator). My goal is to retool the survey, seek other organizations that are affiliated with social studies, and garner further research on the topic.

Application for Public Administration

The application for public administration will be derived from the statistical analysis of stakeholder responses, the implementation strategies for districts, administrators, and teachers, and the revelations that may come from the thematic application of open-ended questions. Utilizing this data at a high level will reveal stakeholder support or lack of and help policymakers understand the impact of rewriting history each chance they get.

Conclusion and Final Thoughts

As I build my plan for continuing the data, it is clear that social studies, and the educational landscape as a whole, are changing. It is ever more important to affiliate with stakeholders and garner their opinions as we move forward together, not in isolation. As a previous selectee for the revised TEKS committee, I am aware that the process is a weeklong collaborative between various educators, businessmen and women, and parents in the state of Texas. Writing history always favors the party in control (Friere, 1972). However, the back story of elected officials using persuasive power to change the narrative from one that was counter to their desires to one that fit their narrative is reprehensible. The fact that my original proposal on November 3 saw this as a brief policy change for teaching social studies to the events of last week are a testament to why a Masters in Public Policy is critical and why ethical leadership is needed in the first place. I look forward to producing my paper for the Texas Lyceum Fellowship and for the data that it will give stakeholders. I believe this story should be told.

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