

Evolving Federal Education Policy: A Comparative Analysis of No Child Left Behind Act, Race to the Top, and Every Student Succeed Act.

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Abstract

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Federal education policy in the United States has evolved over the past two decades, reflecting shifting priorities in accountability, equity, and federal-state relations. This paper provides a comparative analysis of three significant federal education policies: the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), Race to the Top (RTTT), and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Using McDonnell and Elmore's (1987) policy instrument framework, this study examines each policy's mechanisms—ranging from mandates and inducements to capacity-building and system change—to drive educational reform. It further explores substantive areas of reform, including standardized testing, teacher accountability, curriculum standards, and funding strategies. The analysis highlights how NCLB's rigid accountability measures gave way to RTTT's competitive grant-based incentives and ESSA's more decentralized, flexible approach to state-led reforms. While these policies share the goal of improving K-12 education and addressing educational disparities, they differ in balancing federal oversight with state autonomy. This study underscores the complexities of federal education policymaking, illustrating the ongoing challenges in achieving sustainable and equitable education reforms. The findings contribute to policy discourse by identifying

lessons from past reforms that can inform future education policy development.

Keywords: federal education policy, no child left behind, race to the top, every student succeeds act, policy instruments, education reform, accountability, equity.

Introduction

Public policy is a strategic framework guiding governmental action to address public issues and societal challenges. According to Wheelan (2011), public policy is "the process by which a society makes and enforces decisions on what behavior is acceptable and what is not" (p. 7), encompassing laws, regulations, executive orders, and funding priorities. The rationale behind policy formulation is to create systematic responses to complex societal needs. Policymakers craft policies by balancing diverse stakeholder interests, political ideologies, and empirical evidence (Fowler, 2013). This balancing act is particularly critical in education, where policies must address equity, quality, and access issues across diverse populations and regions.

Policy analysis plays a vital role in understanding the effectiveness and implications of policies (Anderson, 2010, pp. 290–299; Bardach & Patashnick, 2023). As Weible and Sabatier (2018) suggest, policy analysis involves systematically evaluating policy design, implementation, and outcomes to inform decision-making and improve policy performance. Analyzing education policies enables stakeholders to assess whether policy goals are achieved, identify unintended consequences, and explore alternative strategies for improvement (Meltzer & Schwartz, 2019, p. 16).

The primary objective of this analysis is to critically examine and compare three significant federal policies aimed at K-12 educational reform in the United States of America: The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), Race to the Top (RTTT), and Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA). This analysis will explore how each policy aimed to drive educational change through various mechanisms and assess their effectiveness in promoting educational equity and accountability.

Significance of Federal Involvement in Education Policy

Historically, the federal government played a limited role in education, particularly in K-12 education, as education was primarily a state's responsibility under the Tenth Amendment (Gray, Hanson, & Kousser, 2017). Early federal involvement focused on land grants and specific educational needs. Manna (2006) presents a detailed timeline, which is further confirmed by Dahill-Brown (2019) of the federal government's increasing involvement in education. The Northwest Ordinance 1787 set a precedent by promoting public education in new territories. In the 19th century, the Morrill Land-Grant Acts (1862, 1890) supported higher education but indirectly affected K-12 education by fostering teacher training institutions. The federal role expanded slightly with the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, which funded vocational education, and the Lanham Act (1941) and Impact Aid (1950), which provided resources to schools affected by World War II and military installations. However, it was not until the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision mandated school desegregation that the federal government began addressing educational inequality, paving the way for more direct involvement through ESEA.

The federal government's role in K-12 expanded with the enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, a key part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. This legislation significantly changed federal education policy by committing to reducing educational inequities through targeted funding for disadvantaged students (Kantor & Lowe, 1995; Yell, 2013). The ESEA directly linked federal funding to school improvement, particularly in low-income and marginalized communities. Title I provided substantial funds to local educational agencies (LEAs) focusing on the region of low-income students to enhance educational services (McLaughlin, 1974). Title II supported the purchase of library resources and instructional materials (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965), while Title III encouraged innovative educational programs (Davies, 2007). Title IV funded teacher training and educational research (Vinovskis, 2015) and strengthened state education agencies (Cross, 2014). Title VI aided students with disabilities (Davies, 2007), evolving into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. These provisions created a lasting framework for future federal policies aimed at equity and accountability in education. This historical foundation in education directly influenced the development of subsequent policies like NCLB, RTTT, ESSA, and others, which were aimed at improving educational outcomes and addressing systemic disparities.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), enacted in 2001 by the Bush administration as a reauthorization of the ESEA, marked a significant shift in federal education policy by emphasizing accountability and standardized testing for better educational outcomes. NCLB aimed to reduce achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged student groups by making schools accountable for student performance (Dee & Jacob, 2011). Its core features included mandatory annual standardized testing in mathematics and reading for every student in grades 3 to 8 and one time in high school, with states required to demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) toward 100% proficiency by 2014 (Hursh, 2007). Schools failing to meet AYP faced escalating sanctions, including offering school choice, restructuring, providing supplemental services, or state intervention (Ladd, 2017). Additionally, NCLB mandated that all teachers in core academic subjects be “highly qualified,” requiring a bachelor’s degree, state certification, and competency in subject matter (Shaul & Ganson, 2005). While NCLB increased national focus on accountability and achievement gaps, critics argued that its high-stakes testing environment shrinks the curriculum and disproportionately penalizes under-resourced schools (Hursh, 2007).

The Race to the Top (RTTT)

In 2009, the Obama administration started the Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative which was under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), shifting from NCLB’s compliance-based model to competitive grants that incentivized state-led educational reforms with the primary goal of improving student achievement and narrowing achievement gaps (Howell, 2015). RTTT encouraged states to adopt college- and career-ready standards, improve teacher and principal effectiveness through performance-based evaluations, and develop data systems to track student progress (McGuinn, 2012). It also promoted aggressive interventions in low-performing schools and drove widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (Dee & Wyckoff, 2015). However, RTTT is criticized for favoring well-resourced states, increasing disparities (Superfine, 2013).

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a law signed by the Obama administration in 2015, replaced NCLB and marked a significant shift by granting states greater

authority while maintaining federal oversight to ensure educational equity (Klein, 2016). ESSA addressed criticisms of NCLB's rigid mandates by allowing states to design their own accountability systems while protecting historically underserved students (Manna, 2010). Moving away from NCLB's Adequate Yearly Progress model, ESSA required states to include several measures of school performance, such as school climate, student engagement, and advanced coursework. Although ESSA maintained annual testing, it reduced federal control over how assessment data were used, giving states flexibility to support underperforming schools (Dunn & Ambroso, 2019). ESSA also promoted a well-rounded education, including arts, physical education, and technology (Manna, 2010), offering a more balanced federal approach to educational reform.

NCLB, RTTT, and ESSA represent evolving federal strategies in K-12 educational reform. NCLB's accountability-focused mandates, RTTT's incentive-based reforms, and ESSA's balance between state flexibility and federal oversight reflect the shifting dynamics of federal involvement in education. These policies highlight the federal government's ongoing efforts to improve educational equity, accountability, and resource distribution across states and school districts.

Policy Instruments Employed: A Comprehensive Analysis Using McDonnell and Elmore's Framework

McDonnell and Elmore (1987) classify policy instruments into five types: mandates, capacity-building, inducements, system change, and hortatory policy. Each instrument serves distinct purposes based on its components, best context for use, costs, and significant drawbacks. Analyzing NCLB, RTTT, and ESSA through this framework reveals how these policies varied in their educational reform approaches.

The NCLB primarily relied on mandates as its core policy instrument, enforcing compliance through standardized testing and strict accountability measures. Mandates are most effective when uniform behavior is desirable and strong support for the policy (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). This act required annual standardized testing, using Adequate Yearly Progress benchmarks to hold schools accountable (Dee & Jacob, 2011). Schools failing to meet this faced escalating sanctions, illustrating the penalty component of mandates. However, mandates increased enforcement and compliance costs, fostering adversarial relationships between policymakers and educators. NCLB's rigid accountability

system often promoted compliance over meaningful improvement, narrowing curricula and encouraging "teaching to the test" (Hursh, 2007). This act also used hortatory policy as an instrument by emphasizing the moral imperative of "leaving no child behind" to get public support. However, hortatory strategies risk manipulation when symbolic appeals fail to produce substantive action (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987).

The RTTT primarily used inducements as a policy instrument by offering competitive grants to incentivize state-level educational reforms. Inducements involving short-term resource transfers and guidelines are most effective when diverse responses and innovation are desirable (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). This act awarded funds to states that voluntarily implemented reforms such as college- and career-ready standards, teacher evaluations linked to student performance, and robust data systems (Howell, 2015). Though inducements reduced the need for strict enforcement, they generated oversight costs and sometimes led to inconsistent implementation. States with more substantial grant-writing capabilities disproportionately benefited, widening resource gaps (Superfine, 2013). This act also promoted system change by shifting authority to nontraditional actors like charter schools and encouraging the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (McGuinn, 2012). However, system changes involved high administrative costs and resistance to authority shifts. This act also used capacity-building as an instrument by funding teacher training programs and data infrastructure. While effective when institutions lack responsiveness, this approach requires significant investment and often produces unpredictable outcomes (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987).

The ESSA used capacity-building as a primary policy instrument. This policy granted states greater flexibility in designing accountability systems, eliminating NCLB's rigid AYP requirements. This policy aimed to strengthen state and local capacities by supporting evidence-based interventions for struggling schools, a core element of capacity-building. This strategy is effective when institutions are reluctant to act but demand substantial investment and may yield intangible short-term results (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). This policy also used system change as an instrument by decentralizing authority and shifting accountability from the federal government to the states. This enabled states to implement localized reforms while federal oversight ensured educational equity (Klein, 2016). However, this shift involved high administrative costs and stakeholders' resistance to new responsibilities. ESSA also uses hortatory policies

to promote values such as a well-rounded education and equity. States were encouraged to include non-academic indicators, such as school climate and student engagement, in accountability measures (Manna, 2006). While effective when stakeholders are receptive, hortatory policies risk manipulation if symbolic appeals lack meaningful action.

The progression from NCLB to RTTT and ESSA reflects a shift in federal education policy signaling a move toward more balanced and sustainable educational reforms (Klein, 2016; Manna, 2006).

Substantive Reform Areas addressed by NCLB to RTTT and ESSA

Theodoulou and Cahn (2013, pp. 78–83) discuss the concept of “who benefits, who governs, who wins.” in public policy, emphasizing that different actors can emerge depending on the nature of policy, specific stage of the policy process, or targeted audience. This section analyzes how each policy while sharing the common goal of improving K-12 educational outcomes and promoting educational equity, targeted distinct reform areas and employed different approaches to systemic educational reform in the United States.

The NCLB Act focused heavily on boosting student performance through strict accountability measures and standardized testing (Dee & Jacob, 2011). This system aimed to close long-standing achievement gaps among student subgroups defined by Race, ethnicity, income, and disability status. Another critical reform area was teacher quality. This act introduced the “highly qualified teacher” requirement, mandating that teachers in core academic subjects hold at least a bachelor's degree, full state certification, and demonstrate subject-matter competency (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). This initiative aimed to improve instructional effectiveness, particularly in underperforming schools. While these measures intended to support disadvantaged students, critics argue that NCLB's rigid focus on testing narrowed the curriculum and neglected broader aspects of student learning, such as critical thinking and creativity (Hursh, 2007).

The RTTT expanded educational reform by incentivizing innovation in key areas such as curriculum standards, teacher effectiveness, and data systems. This policy also prioritized improving teacher effectiveness by promoting evaluation systems incorporating student achievement data and encouraging performance-

based compensation and professional development to attract and retain effective educators (Dee & Wyckoff, 2015). Additionally, this act emphasized building comprehensive statewide data systems to support data-driven decision-making and enhance accountability. The program also expanded charter schools and alternative models to increase educational choices and stimulate competition (Howell, 2015). However, RTTT faced criticism for favoring states with stronger administrative capacity to secure grants, potentially deepening disparities between well-resourced and under-resourced states (Superfine, 2013).

The ESSA Act marked a shift toward more holistic and flexible educational reforms as it expanded accountability beyond standardized testing by requiring states to include multiple indicators of school performance, such as school climate, student engagement, and access to advanced coursework, offering a more comprehensive measure of school effectiveness (Klein, 2016). This act emphasized whole-child education, encouraging a well-rounded curriculum incorporating arts, physical education, technology, and civic education to balance academic achievement with students' social-emotional development (Manna, 2017). Educational equity was central to this act, mandating that states identify and help struggling schools, particularly those serving low-income students, English language learners, students of color, and students with disabilities (Klein, 2016). While ESSA required evidence-based interventions, it allowed states flexibility to design locally relevant solutions. However, concerns emerged about inconsistent state commitment to equity, potentially leading to uneven reform implementation (McGuinn, 2016).

Evolving Federal Fiscal Strategies in Educational Policy: A Comparative Analysis of NCLB, RTTT, and ESSA

Securing funding for policy implementation is often more challenging than passing the legislation. Fowler (2012) stated that “the battle for any new policy must be fought on two fronts: words and money” (p. 182). Fiscal policy plays a critical role in translating educational policy into actionable outcomes by determining the funding and the mechanisms for distributing resources to states and local educational agencies. Each act employed distinct fiscal strategies to influence state and local education systems by analyzing how they allocated funds, identified funding sources, and utilized distribution mechanisms to shape policy implementation.

The NCLB act relied heavily on formula-based funding, primarily from Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, to help disadvantaged schools. Title I funding allocations were determined by a formula based on the number and percentage of children from low-income families in each state and district (DeBray, 2006). However, this act tied this funding to strict compliance with federal mandates, particularly in meeting AYP benchmarks. States and districts that failed to meet these benchmarks faced funding reductions or reallocation for corrective actions, such as offering supplemental educational services and implementing school restructuring (Ladd, 2017). While the formula-based approach aimed to distribute funds equitably, critics argued that it often failed to account for the varying capacities of states and districts to implement federally mandated reforms effectively (Cross, 2014).

The RTTT Act, part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, adopted a distinctly different fiscal strategy by utilizing competitive grants to encourage state-led reforms. This act allocated federal funding to incentivize states to adopt innovative policies aligned with federal education priorities, such as implementing college and career-ready standards, improving data systems, and developing teacher evaluation systems (Howell, 2015). Funding distribution under this act depended on states' ability to design comprehensive reform plans meeting federal criteria. States were scored on a 500-point scale across categories such as data systems, teacher effectiveness, standards and assessments, and turning around low-performing schools (McGuinn, 2012). Unlike formula-based funding, RTTT's competitive model created disparities between states, as those with more excellent administrative and technical capacity were more successful in securing funds. This approach also raised concerns about long-term sustainability, as the funding was designed as a one-time stimulus rather than ongoing financial support (Superfine, 2013).

The ESSA act reinstated a primarily formula-based funding model while granting states increased flexibility. In fiscal year 2019, this act allocated approximately \$15.4 billion through Title I to support disadvantaged students, and by FY2023, Title I funding increased to \$18.39 billion, reflecting a \$1 billion rise from FY2022 levels (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Unlike NCLB, this act allowed states more autonomy in using federal funds to meet accountability and school improvement goals. This act introduced new funding streams to support whole-child education and school improvement (Yell, 2013). The Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant provided \$1.17 billion in FY 2019 to help districts

offer a well-rounded curriculum, improve school conditions, and integrate technology (Manna, 2017).

Additionally, ESSA required states to reserve 7% of Title I funds for targeted support to those struggling schools, avoiding rigid federal mandates. ESSA emphasized educational equity, requiring funding formulas that addressed disparities for low-income students, students with disabilities, and English language learners. It also prioritized long-term sustainability to support ongoing state-led educational reforms (Manna, 2017).

The funding strategies of NCLB, RTTT, and ESSA reflect shifting federal approaches. These contrasting fiscal policies highlight the federal government's shifting strategies in balancing accountability, innovation, and equity in educational funding.

Conclusion

The analysis of these three acts reveals notable similarities and critical differences in their approaches to educational reform. All three shared the overarching goal of improving educational outcomes and closing achievement gaps, particularly for disadvantaged student populations. They each exerted significant federal influence on state and local education systems, shaping accountability standards, instructional quality, and resource distribution. However, their policy instruments, reform areas, and funding mechanisms differed substantially. The progression from NCLB to ESSA reflects a major change in federal education policy from top-down, compliance-driven mandates to more collaborative, state-centered strategies. This evolution underscores the need for policies that support local innovation while maintaining accountability for equitable student outcomes.

Future educational reforms should build upon these lessons by fostering sustainable, evidence-based strategies that balance federal support with local flexibility. Policies should prioritize capacity-building in under-resourced states and districts to ensure equitable access to reform opportunities. Additionally, accountability systems should incorporate a diverse range of performance indicators, moving beyond test scores to include measures of school climate, student engagement, and social-emotional learning. Long-term, consistent funding structures aligned with local needs are essential to sustaining reforms and closing

persistent achievement gaps. As educational challenges grow more complex, future policies must emphasize collaboration, equity, and innovation to support all learners effectively.

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