

What happens when well-intended educational policies go wrong, really wrong, exacerbating the very problems they were aiming to solve? This is a compelling issue that demands attention, yet has been understudied. While much has been written on the unintended consequences of policies, policy backfire has received little attention in the field of education. This volume fills this important niche. Michael Gottfried and Gilberto Conchas bring together an esteemed group of authors to share six detailed, critical case studies of policy backfire in education. The chapters in this volume provide vital lessons that can help avoid some of the damaging consequences of policy backfire in the future.

Several of the chapters address issues arising from the local responses to No Child Left Behind. Under pressure to respond to state and national accountability systems, well-meaning local educators make critical educational decisions using data. Sometimes these decisions are misinformed, despite the best intentions. Data-driven decision making has become widespread in the past decade, and educators are expected to use data such as test scores and dropout rates to drive decisions. At the same time, many principals and teachers feel ill-equipped to make informed decisions on the basis of data, in large part because they have not had sufficient training or because they lack time. Educators often find themselves making quick decisions with limited information because they are forced to show they are “doing something” in response to the data. This is a key moment when policy backfire can occur. Data tend to be used as part of a triage process that focuses on the most “needy” students, rather than an inquiry-oriented process of continuous improvement that benefits all students.

Chapters in this volume also address the backfire that occurs with locally developed policies, not just that arising from state or national policies. This is important, as indeed many policies originate at the local level and in theory such policies should be more attentive to the school context than those developed farther away. However, this is not always the case, as the examples in the book make clear. Local decisions regarding school closure, school choice, and a one-to-one computer program did not account for the ways in which these policies would play out for students, families, and/or teachers. The experiences and belief systems of these key stakeholders were not considered as part of the policy process, and the consequence was policy backfire.

The most troubling aspect of the policy backfire examples shared in this book is the negative effect on the education of underserved students. Already marginalized in US education systems, low-income students and students of color disproportionately experience further setbacks as a result of various policies. Instead of experiencing expanded learning opportunities, these students face more limited prospects. While recent accountability policies and the use of data have brought attention to the academic performance of student subgroups, the ways in which educators at the local level have responded to these data have not always been beneficial. For example, many schools and districts offer intervention programs for students identified as struggling. While these interventions have laudable goals, their implementation does not always match up to the ideal, and in some cases it backfires, as this book points out.

This book should be essential reading for anyone involved in establishing educational policies, including at the local level. Its lessons are important not only for government policy makers, school board members, and district and school leaders, but also for the teacher making classroom-, grade-, or department-level decisions. These microlevel decisions have long-term consequences for children's learning. Take the following case in point: A team of teachers in an elementary school has

developed their own policy regarding math instruction. They assess all students at the beginning of the year to determine which students will get placed into an advanced-level math class. They administer three assessments and determine the cutoff scores by which students will or will not qualify. While aiming to target instruction to the students' individual needs and drawing on multiple forms of data, this policy does not account for the negative effects for the students placed in the “regular” class, including lower self-efficacy in math and less rigorous math instruction. The effects for these students are long lasting, having an impact well beyond elementary school.

Apart from ensuring that this book gets into the hands of key individuals across the educational system, how might we convey its important lessons to the right people? One possibility is to pose several core questions during the policy development process. These might include:

- How does this policy help to improve the educational experience of *all* students?
- Are we keeping the goal of equity front and center?
- How are we meaningfully incorporating the input of students, teachers, and community members into the policy process?
- Have we been honest with these stakeholders and ourselves about the potential short- and long-term effects?
- Are there any perverse incentives involved with this policy?
- Are we taking sufficient time to carefully examine a wide range of data and explore all possible options and outcomes as we work toward policy development?

While thoughtfully addressing these questions may not avoid all cases of policy backfire, it will hopefully inspire dialogue around key issues. However, much of what we know about the policy development and implementation process runs counter to deep inquiry around these kinds of questions. For this reason, we also need community

involvement. Parents, students, and community organizations also need to be aware of the lessons in this book so that they can help pose some of these questions and advocate for policies that are in the best interests of all students.

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