

FEDERALISM IN Action

Education Policy

Education policy has traditionally been left to state and local governments. That all changed when President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Under NCLB, states must develop and administer tests to all students at select grade levels in order to receive federal funding. While NCLB does not create a single national test or set of standards, it does mandate that each state test its students and demonstrate steady improvement in test scores from year to year. The essential argument behind NCLB is that schools should be held accountable for meeting basic education standards. However, critics of the law argue that NCLB has resulted in education that is geared toward teaching to the test. Frustrations with the law led most states, including Texas, to apply for waivers from the federal program.

As NCLB became increasingly unpopular, President Obama advocated the Common Core State Standards (championed by Bill Gates). Common Core is an attempt

to establish consistent education standards across the country. States do not have to participate in Common Core, and so far Texas has opted out. The state legislature passed legislation in 2013 that prohibits Texas from adopting Common Core or using Common Core standards in its classrooms.

Proponents of federal education policy point to uneven education levels across states and argue that states should be held accountable for how they spend federal education dollars. Opponents argue that education and curriculum decisions should be made at a local level. From their perspective, federal management of local education results in an overly complicated policy that rarely fits the needs of the local community. When it comes to education Americans have their doubts about both the federal and their state governments. An August 2014 poll of Americans found that 56 percent thought local school boards should have the most influence over what is taught in the public schools, with 28 percent favoring state government and 15 percent preferring the federal government.ⁱ

While we most often hear about the struggle between the federal and state governments, tensions also exist between Texas government and local school districts beyond the high-stakes battles over school finance and standardized tests discussed elsewhere in this chapter. Many teachers and school district officials resist the large number of mandates from the state about what is taught and how it is taught. Greg Abbott campaigned for governor partly on a plan that offered “genuine local control by

giving school districts operational flexibility over their schools and by empowering families to make meaningful educational choices.”ⁱⁱ

- Does the state have a responsibility to ensure access to an equal quality of education across Texas? If so, what does it mean if Texas allows its local governments greater control over schools?
- To what extent should local governments be in control of education policy?
- If national standards like those of NCLB and Common Core can be sidestepped by states through waivers and other exemptions, how much influence does the federal government really have over the implementation of policy at the state level?

i. Valerie J. Calderon, “Americans Wary of Federal Influence on Public Schools: Prefer Local School Boards over Federal Government, 56% to 15%,” Gallup, August 20, 2014, www.gallup.com/poll/175181/americans-wary-federal-influence-public-schools.aspx (accessed August 21, 2014).

ii. “Greg Abbott’s Educating Texans Plan: Governance,” Texans for Greg Abbott, www.gregabbott.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Greg-Abbotts-Educating-Texans-Plan-Governance.pdf (accessed June 20, 2014).