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Fwd: Education policy is 100% about government

1 message

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Wed, Oct 17, 2018 at 8:06 AM

November board meeting

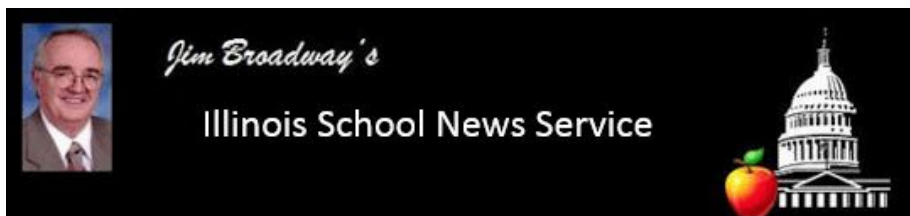
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From: **State School News Service** <j.m.broadway74@gmail.com>

Date: Wed, Oct 17, 2018 at 2:03 AM

Subject: Education policy is 100% about government

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To view the web version, [click here](#).**Education policy is 100% about government**

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

Years ago, a veteran educator told me that, as a students in teacher preparation, he and his colleagues had been discouraged from having anything to do with government and politics during their careers. Too "dirty," they were told. Just do your job and stay away from politics and other controversies.

It seemed to me a shame that, in a democracy, any professionals - especially teachers - would be advised in college to disengage from the process in which policy is enacted with impact on almost everyone's life. And there is no profession that is more purely a product of the policy process than education.

So you can guess how pleased I have been, in recent years, to be invited to talk with graduate students of education about how government and politics affects teachers and administrators, public schools and public schoolchildren, and citizens as parents and as taxpayers - like I did last week at Illinois State University.

It was great. Word got around that I was coming so three classes merged into one seminar group. We reviewed how we got to where we are today, how educators survived decades of turmoil and how education can cope with the reduction of entrants into the field. (More on that later.) We talked about government.

Trends in governance have great impact. It seriously matters whose ideas influence the policymakers as they approach complicated issues, especially if there is

an element of distributive justice to contend with. Illinois' recent shift from the old "school aid formula" to the new "evidence based funding" illustrates this.

The contending approaches are (1) what John Rawls described in his influential 1971 book entitled [A Theory of Justice](#), and (2) the 1974 book entitled [Anarchy, State and Utopia](#), written in reaction to Rawls' work by Robert Nozick. (The new school funding system Illinois has adopted is clearly Rawlsian.)

Rawls and Nozick had offices just a few doors from each other at Harvard University. Rawls had spent decades developing the concepts that drive his theory. Nozick sort of rushed his book into publication. Both men died in 2002; Rawls was 81 when he died; Nozick was only 63. (For a great explication of their theories, the similarities and differences, the popularity versus intellectual gravitas, [Yale Professor Tamar Gendler's lecture](#) is recommended.)

In ridiculous brevity, Rawls' ideal of justice would ensure that the poorest among us would benefit most, proportionately, from a fair change in the distribution of social resources. Meanwhile Nozick's book (from which he later recanted) held that it is wrong for government use general taxation to support the poor.

Whose theory was the more influential? It depends on who's being asked. Citations of both books have been off the charts, but Rawls has been cited by subsequent scholars more than 30,000 times, compared with Nozick's 10,000. But Nozick's book sold more copies and sparked the modern "[libertarian movement](#)."

There's no doubt that President Ronald Reagan, and those who advised him, were disciples of Nozick, as evidenced by the fact that the wealthy began in the 1980s to [gain far more](#) than those of more modest incomes. (The yawning income gap, we will see, has been dramatically exacerbated by the recent GOP tax cuts.)

Aside from protecting citizens from threats, internal and from abroad, plus basic services like enforcement of contracts, libertarians of the Nozick school believe government should have few responsibilities. That would be why they so strongly support efforts to privatize public education and other services.

Rawls' theory assumes that educated, free - *and self-interested* - persons would design a just society if they acted from behind "a veil of ignorance" in only one regard: *They knew not what would be their status* in that society. He concludes that, among other results, the needs of the disadvantaged would be addressed.

That is most laudable feature of Illinois new "evidence-based" school funding mechanism. Is Illinois an outlier in an otherwise mostly uncaring nation? Or was [Public Act 100-0465](#) a sign that libertarianism is starting to be rejected as a flawed approach to government - [as Nozick himself conceded](#) it should be?

Is a caring-about-others trend developing? We'll get a hint on that [November 6](#).

The "educator accountability" movement, which was launched with the publication of [A Nation At Risk](#) in April of 1983 (by the Reagan Administration), changed the profession of teaching - how the profession is entered, what the incentives for entering it are, how teaching credentials are retained - in profound ways.

In some ways, the reforms of the last three-and-a-half decades arguably had good results. Professional development requirements surely have had skill-enhancing effects. The insistence that every child's education must be attended to, that no child may be ignored, is said *by educators* to have been a needed focus.

But some of the motivations to teach, motivations I heard about in my earliest interactions with teachers as a journalist (starting in 1970), have been greatly diminished by policy changes. The desire to see children learn, to see the lightbulb go on above their heads when they "got it," that's still a powerful force. It makes teachers

want to teach in spite of the low pay - relative to private sector workers with less education, skills and responsibilities.

Job security has taken a hit. Surviving four years and getting tenure is a thing of the past. A planned and approved program of professional development must be pursued and achieved. That's had good effects, too, but not in guiding a bright young college to student decide on a teaching career. Attacks on pensions haven't helped.

There's been a lot of public education-bashing, nationwide, since 1983. In time, that will have an effect. The 53% drop in Illinois candidates enrolling in and completing teacher preparation programs from 2010 to 2016 - as included as a finding in a recent [ISBE document \(see p. 3\)](#) - is not surprising, all things considered.

The question arose, last week at ISU, what can be done to solve the current crisis in the teacher pipeline? My observation has been that major problems that result from many years of flawed public policy are rarely - make that never - resolved in a quick or painless way. The problem has deep roots. It will be hard to dislodge.

Back in the 1960s, there was a major shortage of teachers in Illinois. One of the ways it was addressed was to eliminate tuition and fees at state universities for students pursuing education degrees. That was a far cheaper strategy back then than it would be today. But some version of it may be worth considering.

The state's fiscal uncertainty - played out at high volume during the budgetless years - was surely the primary cause of huge reductions in enrollment at many Illinois state university campuses. A powerful outreach to high school students, assurances that those days are over (we'll see, November 6), may be in order.

The ISBE document linked above - [Teach Illinois](#) - includes a number of recommendations that are on the State Board's agenda for discussion by video-conference between Chicago and Springfield starting at 9 a.m. today. (A link to allow you hear the meeting's audiocast will be posted at www.isbe.net at that time.)

The [board meeting agenda](#) describes eight recommendations (see p. 57) for recruiting and retaining excellent teachers. Most are intuitive, like reaching out to high school students and "inspiring" them to become teachers. Others relate to the licensing process and its need to be "streamlined." Mentoring is stressed.

The State Board of Education seems to be starting a journey that is sure to be a long one, if Illinois is to return to the status it enjoyed just a few years ago, that of a state that was an exporter of teachers because the number of graduates was far greater than the number of vacancies that existed in the schools.

Findings of the [Illinois Education Research Council](#) will be helpful.

(Last time, I promise.) This is all about government. Whatever course is taken, the State Board, the legislature, the governor, the school districts, the teacher preparation programs - all of which are, or are run by, governments - will have to play their roles, to move carefully and cooperatively toward crisis resolution.

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