

Douglas S. Reed. *Building the Federal Schoolhouse: Localism and the American Education State.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xxv, 321 pp. (\$45 cloth).

The federal government has historically contributed only a small share of the financing for American K-12 public education. In 1959, when Douglas Reed's engaging and original story about the building of the American education state begins, less than five percent of all public school spending came from Washington; while this share would more than double by 2010, it remains dwarfed by the state governments and local school districts. Absent any mention of education in the United States Constitution, but guaranteed by all the state constitutions, education has developed as a state responsibility, with significant responsibilities further devolved to local school districts in nearly all states.

Of course, this does not mean that the federal government has not been involved in education, and Reed's story of education politics in Alexandria, Virginia shows in rich historical detail exactly how active it has become. Arguing that we need to turn to the local "to understand the politics of the federal" (12), Reed paints a vivid picture of how federal priorities run up against "operational localism," the prevailing local power structure, governing regime, and imperative to maintain its tax base. In eight chapters, *Building the Federal Schoolhouse* details both how local politics is an obstacle to the federal government achieving its goals, while federal demands reshape and dismantle local political arrangements "without assuming the responsibilities of actually operating schools" (4). Reed's well-written book therefore offers an important contribution to our understanding of federalism, education politics, and state building.

Guided by an American Political Development (APD) approach, Reed breaks his analysis into three chronologically arranged sections. Each focuses on a distinct federal policy domain, and on how authority flows through institutions, levels of the federal system, and an education state shaped in part by earlier battles and policies. The first domain, "Race and Reform," looks at how Alexandria, then a segregated southern school district, responded to court and federal government ordered integration. Covering the conflicts and deliberations around building and locating new schools and student school assignment policies, Reed demonstrates vividly in microcosm why desegregation took so long to occur after *Brown v Board of Education* (1954), why strong federal government actions were required, and how the federal government's pursuit of civil rights disrupted local politics.

The second section continues the story of how conflict between local regime interests and those of the federal government impact the regime's survival and organization. With desegregation and white flight come the politics of exit, as the school board must confront the potential loss of much of their tax base. Two informative quantitative analysis supplement this section. Through a geographical analysis of voucher use Reed shows how the "commitment to Alexandria's public schools among families living in more affluent neighborhoods was—to some extent—conditional upon their children not undergoing desegregation." (112). And in a neat bit of detective work, Reed reanalyzes the data from a 1974 survey of exiting Alexandria families to show how the data was massaged to "project an image of public satisfaction with Alexandria schools" (114) rather than the concerns with quality and desegregation that were the actual causes of exit.

This section also covers federal promotion of equality for students requiring special education and those for whom English is not their first language. These issues, too, are racially charged as minority students tend to be "overidentified" with special needs. All these battles have the effect of restructuring the local political regime. The story here is multi-faceted and well-told. White exits lead to demographic

changes, the ideological distribution of the district moves left, new coalitions form between parents of special education students and those concerned with high academic standards, and the Southern conservative one-party Democratic rule. By the mid-1980s, “progressive democratic hold on Alexandria was largely complete” (127).

The third section brings us up through contemporary education politics with its emphasis on accountability, standards, and tests. Here the story is a little less tight, as Reed shoehorns into this section on “accountability” both the standards movement, which is a central issue for all American states and school districts, and the local efforts in Alexandria to shift from an appointed to an elected school board. While certainly important to local Alexandria politics, this aspect of accountability is less relevant to education politics more generally and seems to raise different issues than that of standards and holding individual teachers, principals, and schools accountable for the learning progress of their students.

Reed’s use of APD throughout the analysis is informative but neglected for large segments of the book. After arguing convincingly that education, like the “welfare state,” needs to be understood as “more than sum of its parts” (xii) that takes its form “as patterned reconciliation between federal and state” (5). Reed does not make extensive efforts to tie each section back to APD or state building, even as he does an excellent job narrating this patterned reconciliation. Most important is that this story of state-building does not include the states. This omission is reasonable for space, but at times the absence is noticeable, especially as the story moves into accountability and standards which represent an important consolidation of state authority (in VA as Reed notes, and elsewhere).

Building the American State is an excellent choice for those interested in how the federal government’s commitment to equality runs up against the localism that defines American education. One can extend much of the analysis to other policy areas, where community interests and local governing institutions constrain the ability of state and the federal governments to implement policies as they would like. But as Reed notes, analysis does not tell us much about how to make education better; indeed, all this education state building produced “profound changes in education governance” (3) but little improvement in educational outcomes. But focusing on the education state does offer a rich new way to view education policymaking.

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