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ARTICLE

The No Child Left Behind Act in the Global Architecture of Educational Accountability

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Abstract

Although chiefly framed in the context of domestic education policy, debates about the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) echoed international education policy debates and the workings of global education governance. As this article demonstrates, both domestic and international efforts were shaped by three key features: tension between centralized goals and historically localized practices and authorities; links between education policy goals and a set of rhetorical arguments centered on human capital; and competitive comparisons among education systems that mixed market rhetoric with prestige dynamics. These common features can be attributed to the development of a “soft governance” layer, in which multilateral surveillance plays a major part. In the US, such development began before NCLB, accelerated during the NCLB era, and remained after NCLB was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015.

Key words: accountability; No Child Left Behind; Global Education; American education

Elements of accountability have been a recurring feature of education for several centuries. Students have been held to account by teachers, authorities, and parents, and teachers have been held to account by school authorities and parents. As state formation has grown more advanced, national authorities have come to play an increasingly important role in holding lower echelons accountable, and the rise of democracy has meant that citizens can hold decision-makers and governments to account.¹ In addition, since World War II (WWII) the field of education has witnessed a rise in international organizations (IOs) devoted to global educational development, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the World Bank.²

¹Sherman Dorn and Christian Ydesen, “Towards a Comparative and International History of School Testing and Accountability,” *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 22, no. 115 (2014), 1–11.

²Stephen P. Heyneman, “The History and Problems in the Making of Education Policy at the World Bank 1960–2000,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 23, no. 3 (May 2003), 315–37; Christian Ydesen and Karen Egedal Andreasen, “Historical Roots of the Global Testing Culture in Education,” *Nordic Studies in Education* 40, no. 2 (2020), 149–66; Maren Elfert and Christian Ydesen,

These IOs have come to facilitate exchanges, collaborations, and joint programs in education among nation-states. Although they have not had the authority to issue mandates, IOs create a layer of “soft governance” through recommendations, the use of non-binding rules, and setting standards for best practice. This form of soft governance creates a dynamic wherein national decision-makers in education have navigated between local, national, and international agendas and priorities. This interplay among scales of governance is complex and increasingly global. An example from the early post-WWII era comes from UNESCO’s program on peace education in the 1950s, when a close network existed among the UNESCO education section, the American Council on Education, the US National Commission to UNESCO, and the National Education Association—all of whom were engaged in textbook revision with the aim of promoting peace.³ In terms of understanding the soft-governance layer of global education, Niemann and Martens argue that “IO soft governance implies that although international organizations are set up by states and consist of state delegates, they are able to develop their own positions, ideas, or dynamics because of intra-organizational networks and interactions that cannot be fully controlled by any principals.”⁴

This intellectual independence of the people involved in post-WWII IOs is what created the capacity for pressure without mandates: networking among key stakeholder representatives and multilateral surveillance, surveillance understood as the normative pressure of expectations to adapt and learn from other systems.⁵ For instance, consider the OECD Reviews of National Policies for Education, conducted since the 1960s. These have promoted a shift in the focus of international rhetoric from inputs and procedures to learning outcomes, and beyond that shift in language, an evaluation culture promising accountability, transparency, and the appraisal of different education systems against well-defined performance standards.⁶ This dynamic within IOs, and then between them and national polities, amounts to

“The Influence of the United States on the Rise of Global Governance in Education: The OEEC and UNESCO in the Post-World War II Period,” in *Organizing the 20th-Century World: International Organization and the Emergence of International Public Administration, 1920–1960s*, ed. Karen Gram-Skjoldager, Haakon Andreas Ikononou, and Torsten Kahlert (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 73–89.

³Christian Ydesen, “Debating International Understanding in the Western World: UNESCO and the United States, 1946–1954,” in *UNESCO without Borders: Educational Campaigns for International Understanding*, ed. Aigul Kulnazarova and Christian Ydesen (London: Routledge, 2016), 239–55. This push for peace education is separate from the history of the Peace Corps and other American teachers in other countries; there is little connection to the history Jonathan Zimmerman tells in *Innocents Abroad: American Teachers in the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁴Dennis Niemann and Kerstin Martens, “Soft Governance by Hard Fact? The OECD as a Knowledge Broker in Education Policy,” *Global Social Policy* 18, no. 3 (Aug. 2018), 267–83, doi:10.1177/1468018118794076.

⁵Kerstin Martens and Anja Jakobi, “Introduction: The OECD as an Actor in International Politics,” in *Mechanisms of OECD Governance: International Incentives for National Policy Making?*, ed. Kerstin Martens and Anja Jakobi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1–30.

⁶Antoni Verger, Clara Fontdevila, and Lluís Parcerisa, “Constructing School Autonomy with Accountability as a Global Policy Model: A Focus on OECD’s Governance Mechanisms,” *The OECD’s Historical Rise in Education: The Formation of a Global Governing Complex*, ed. Christian Ydesen (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2019), 219–43; William C. Smith, ed., *The Global Testing Culture: Shaping Education Policy, Perceptions, and Practice* (Oxford: Symposium Books, 2016). We see the modern

what some scholars have called *policy diffusion*, or *policy borrowing*.⁷ In the postwar era, key vehicles for the workings of soft governance in global education have included the production and coordination of objectives, data, numbers, and categories used for comparative purposes and the development of evidence-based policy research, at least in its aspirations.⁸ The discussion around such vehicles and newly defined data have encouraged their use as putative facts about education systems that serve as points of orientation for a host of actors, including politicians, IOs (e.g., the OECD and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement), businesses (e.g., publishers such as Pearson or consultants such as McKinsey), philanthropic institutions (e.g., the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation), practitioners, students, parents, and the general public.

From a domestic perspective, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) grew out of the modern debates over accountability in public education, development of high-stakes testing systems in some states, and the 2000 election of George W. Bush as a president who campaigned on being a “compassionate conservative.” From an international perspective, the NCLB era belongs in a global framework of systems development. Tension over federalized education policy in a decentralized US system is an example of more general center-periphery tensions. Economists in the US might have coined the term *human capital* in the early decades after World War II, but it became part of a global style of reasoning around education systems, well beyond its origins in the US. And with the NCLB system of requiring state action to follow the failure of an individual school to meet any of a number of benchmarks on student test scores, the US was implementing a version of education system surveillance that grew in quantity and influence in the past seventy-five years. These three international patterns developed over decades.

This article contributes to existing scholarship by analyzing the NCLB era as an example of a global phenomenon. Bringing an international perspective to NCLB reveals that US debates over federal education policy and power in the early twenty-first century echoed international education policy debates and the workings of global education governance. NCLB serves as our entry point into exploring the role and significance of the global dimension and its interactions with national and local policies and developments in American educational accountability. We argue that the history of NCLB belongs not just within American education politics, but also within

shifts in policy language or style of reasoning as important to the history; a deeper discourse analysis of the rhetoric is beyond the scope of this article.

⁷Frank Dobbin, Beth Simmons, and Geoffrey Garrett, “The Global Diffusion of Public Policies: Social Construction, Coercion, Competition, or Learning?,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 33 (2007): 449–72; Euan Auld and Paul Morris, “Comparative Education, the ‘New Paradigm’ and Policy Borrowing: Constructing Knowledge for Educational Reform,” *Comparative Education* 50, no. 2 (2014), 129–55, doi:10.1080/03050068.2013.826497.

⁸Sotiria Grek, “Governing by Numbers: The PISA ‘Effect’ in Europe,” *Journal of Education Policy* 24, no. 1 (2009), 23–37; Thomas S. Popkewitz, “International Assessments of Student Performance: The Paradoxes of Benchmarks and Empirical Evidence for National Policy,” *Handbook of Education Policy Studies: School/University, Curriculum, and Assessment*, vol. 2, ed. Guorui Fan and Thomas S. Popkewitz (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020), 295–310; Antoni Verger, Lluís Parcerisa, and Clara Fontdevila, “The Growth and Spread of Large-Scale Assessments and Test-Based Accountabilities: A Political Sociology of Global Education Reforms,” *Educational Review* 71, no. 6 (2018), 1–26.

a global education policy context. More specifically, we interpret NCLB as part of a global architecture of educational accountability—a perspective that deepens our knowledge about the role and significance of the law, and reveals the connection between the development of education policy in the US and the workings of global education policy formation.

This global perspective is aligned with recent historiography in the United States, work that emphasizes the long-term role of accountability and testing in the political governance of schools. In this regard, the publication of Bill Reese's history of the debates over testing in Boston in the 1830s and 1840s is critical.⁹ Reese's scholarship shifts our understanding of test-based accountability back to a foundation in the common school era. His book interprets that early connection as a shift away from older, often ritual-based ways in which the public kept local schools accountable. Reese's scholarship implies a generally applicable question about the long history of accountability: How can we trace and explain the important shifts in that testing-accountability link? Because the start of institutionalized testing dates to before the Progressive Era, we should emphasize the change during that period in the use of testing, from holding schools responsible, as Joseph Mayer Rice's 1893 articles on the failure of urban elementary instruction attempted to do, to bolstering the autonomy of administrators as scientific managers, using tests to manage, guide, and limit students within the system.¹⁰ We must similarly frame the recent history of accountability as another set of shifts in the testing-accountability linkage. To wit, in the past half-century, testing and the modern sense of accountability rejoined, slowly and inconsistently, and this awkward rejoining is the latest version of the testing-accountability linkage.¹¹ But what was especially new in the No Child Left Behind era? This is relevant both to the domestic story of the law and also how we understand global dynamics in modern education policies.

To illuminate the global connections with NCLB, we use the OECD as the IO for our analytical focus. Over the past several decades, the OECD has risen to become one of the most important international actors in defining and developing the trajectories of global education. The organization has taken a leading role in creating and coordinating an arena that gathers a host of actors who come together around various agendas, programs, and policy instruments, the most well known being the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which published its first results in 2000.¹² As Engle and Rutkowski argue, "The OECD acts as the global leader in

⁹William J. Reese, *Testing Wars in the Public Schools: A Forgotten History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

¹⁰David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974); David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); Christopher Mazzeo, "Frameworks of State: Assessment Policy in Historical Perspective," *Teachers College Record* 103, no. 3 (2001), 367–97.

¹¹Sherman Dorn, *Accountability Frankenstein: Understanding and Taming the Monster* (Chapel Hill, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2007).

¹²See, for example, Niemann and Martens, "Soft Governance by Hard Fact?"; Sam Sellar and Bob Lingard, "The OECD and Global Governance in Education," *Journal of Education Policy* 28, no. 5 (April 2013), 710–25; Tore Sorensen, Christian Ydesen, and Susan Lee Robertson, "Re-Reading the OECD and Education: The Emergence of a Global Governing Complex – An Introduction," *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 19, no. 2 (March 2021), 99–107.

educational assessment and evaluation, a space where the OECD, and the OECD alone, has the technical expertise, infrastructure, and participant buy-in to assess the merit and worth of educational systems.”¹³ This means that the OECD has recently been able to wield authority as a key arbiter and reference point for the framing of global education, and the organization’s programs, evaluations, and data about national education systems are often referenced by national policymakers to legitimize and advance policy reforms.¹⁴

What is new about the OECD in the context of post-WWII development is the evolution of IOs as persistent institutional actors. There were previous rounds of educational visits from one country to others (such as Horace Mann’s visit to Europe to study its schools in the 1840s), world fairs, and other transitory structures for multilateral “scopic” systems, as Sobe and Boven have described.¹⁵ However, the differences between older forms of international influence and modern structures such as the OECD are important. The OECD constitutes an independent actor in education, building its own comprehensive data bank that it has used to craft a development narrative about its policy analyses and recommendations. The role and significance of the development narrative within the OECD may be understood as an expression of what Beckert has termed *promissory legitimacy*, established through claims about future paths, or what Berten and Kranke have called anticipatory global governance, wherein “international organisations (IOs) are especially active in authoritatively delineating certain visions—that is, specifying certain versions of the future but not others.”¹⁶

To support our argument that the NCLB era was part of a global phenomenon, the following discussion provides a historical analysis of the key developments in the OECD-US educational space with a focus on the era of NCLB. We first present a section on the nature of accountability as part of education policy-making, focusing on the inherent tension between federal and state authority in the NCLB era history, and parallel policy features in the global education space. To explore the embedding of accountability within the US in the history of IOs such as the OECD, we then move to resemblances between the domestic accountability history within the US and what we see in the global education space. Finally, in our concluding discussion, we tease out the explanatory power of our findings and discuss the implications in terms of NCLB’s lifespan as well as our contributions to the historiography of the NCLB era.

The analysis draws on research literature, primary sources in the form of publicly available policy documents, and archival documents from the OECD Archives in

¹³Laura C. Engel and David Rutkowski, “Pay to Play: What Does PISA Participation Cost in the US?,” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 41, no. 3 (July 2018), 484–96.

¹⁴Sorensen, Ydesen, and Robertson, “Re-Reading the OECD and Education.”

¹⁵Noah W. Sobe and David T. Boven, “Nineteenth-Century World’s Fairs as Accountability Systems: Scopic Systems, Audit Practices and Educational Data,” *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 22, no. 118 (Dec. 8, 2014).

¹⁶Jens Beckert, “The Exhausted Futures of Neoliberalism: From Promissory Legitimacy to Social Anomy,” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 13, no. 3 (Feb. 2019), 318–30, doi:10.1080/17530350.2019.1574867; John Berten and Matthias Kranke, *Anticipatory Global Governance: International Organisations and Political Futures*, paper presented at 6th European Workshop in International Studies, Krakow, June 26–29, 2019, p. 1.

Paris and the US National Archives at College Park, Maryland. Using finding aids and collected documents, we narrowed the materials examined in each archive to relevant references; in the US National Archives materials, we searched for all mentions of the OECD and PISA; in the OECD materials, we searched for all mentions of NCLB and US with the term *accountability*. These materials are used below to extend our understanding of international resemblances among education policy structures.

Center-Periphery Tension in Accountability

It is challenging to understand NCLB as both a specific policy and an environment that has extended well beyond the formal structures of policy: the surrounding political dynamics, the rhetoric about failing schools, the rhetorical dimensions of both advocacy for the bill in 2001 and the responses in ensuing years, as well as popular understandings and misunderstandings. These penumbral features of NCLB echo the larger history of accountability as policy, politics, and culture.¹⁷ In this section, we focus on inherent tensions of scale in the policy and political structures, because doing so helps us understand the international interconnections and similarities between NCLB and global developments. The key feature we highlight is the tension between common central goals, on the one hand, and distributed governance and practice, on the other.

Governance Tensions in the Lifespan of NCLB

In 2006, the brother of President George W. Bush publicly lambasted the fundamental structure of the No Child Left Behind Act. In his last year in office, Florida governor Jeb Bush complained that it was unfair for the federal government to imply that a school was failing even when it earned an *A* or *B* grade from Florida's own system—a system that Jeb Bush had pushed through the state legislature in 1999, three years before NCLB.¹⁸ The president's brother thought that an accountability system should include a growth component, a piece of the state accountability structure that had no counterpart in NCLB. This fraternal criticism lay bare the inherent tensions between the federal government and states in the NCLB era. Both brothers believed firmly in test-based accountability systems in education, but the federal imposition of a particular judgment scheme divided them.¹⁹ This federal-state tension was submerged during the legislative negotiations over NCLB, and its reemergence was fatal to the long-term survival of extensive federal mandates. Jeb Bush's criticism of the federal formula reflected a technocratic conflict between the federal mechanism that measured distance from an absolute measure and a state mechanism that gave credit for academic growth. But that managerial detail also captured a political conflict between the highlighting of failure at the federal level, on the one hand, and a state labeling system that could provide a patina of success

¹⁷Dorn and Ydesen, "Towards a Comparative and International History of School Testing and Accountability."

¹⁸Sam Dillon, "As 2 Bushes Try to Fix Schools, Tools Differ," *New York Times*, Sept. 28, 2006.

¹⁹Dorothea Anagnostopoulos, Stacey Rutledge, and Valentina Bali, "State Education Agencies, Information Systems, and the Expansion of State Power in the Era of Test-Based Accountability," *Educational Policy* 27, no. 2 (Feb. 2013), 217–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904813475713>.

to a growing number of schools, on the other. This conflict evolved even though many governors of the state labeling systems had approved the creation of NCLB, as Paul Manna has argued.²⁰

NCLB represents the apotheosis of accountability and standards-based education efforts in the US, and at the same time it represents the height of federal intervention in state education systems, albeit in an awkward, somewhat indirect way—and that indirect nature is a key to its global context.

From an international perspective, the US is characterized by a highly decentralized education system owing to its federal organization, and in the NCLB era, the country attempted to deliver globally competitive (and comparative) outcomes while preserving the authority of state governments. This attempt has played into an ongoing tension over governance structures in education between local, state, federal, and global levels from at least the mid-1950s.²¹ In many ways, NCLB institutionalized a more interventionist federal regime and, thereby, an attempted consolidation of new federal-state relations, one that lasted until successor legislation scaled it back significantly in 2015.²² The lifespan and ultimate fate of NCLB must be understood in light of this dilemma and the continuous struggles over policies and governance structures in education. In the post-WWII era, each federal intervention in elementary and secondary education has required greater political effort than in many other areas of policy-making such as spending on the military or policy mandates of states tied to highway funds, and the NCLB era of federal policy represents a particular type of coalition politics in federal education policy-making. Congress and the executive branch partnered with state governors, in what Paul Manna described as a coalition of *borrowed authority*, where activist governors thought that NCLB would provide them the authority to take bold action that they thought was necessary.²³

This coalition on behalf of federal policy was the end of a decades-long trajectory that began with a much softer assertion of federal authority over states in education. In the first decade of national politics focused on accountability, after the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report, states led the way formally. In part, that was a natural consequence of greater state-level education funding beginning in the 1970s; once a significant part of their budget was devoted to elementary and secondary schooling, all governors became education governors.²⁴ While the federal Department of Education had created a national commission that issued *A Nation at Risk*, both the Reagan administration's concern with federalism and the inherent politics of education at the time created a rhetoric that was *national* in scope, but that did not create

²⁰Paul Manna, *School's In: Federalism and the National Education Agenda* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006).

²¹Patrick McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965–2005* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006).

²²John Benedicto Krejsler, "The 'Fear of Falling Behind Regime' Embraces School Policy: State vs Federal Policy Struggles in California and Texas," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 31, no. 5 (Feb. 2018), 393–408.

²³Manna, *School's In*.

²⁴Daniel P. Resnick, "Chapter 1: Minimum Competency Testing Historically Considered," *Review of Research in Education* 8, no. 1 (Jan. 1980), 3–29; United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform – A Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education, United States Department of Education* (Washington, DC: The Commission, 1983).

significant pressure for *federal* policy. Thus, in 1989, when the first Bush administration organized a national summit on education held in Charlottesville, Virginia, the result of negotiation with governors was to frame the summit around *national concerns* rather than *federal action*.²⁵ Governors were part of an explicit coalition with the federal executive, but without significant federal policy or mandates for states to follow as a direct outgrowth of the 1989 summit.

In contrast with earlier waves of national debate about education, the NCLB era was one of federal action that partnered elite state and federal actors, where governors and other state policymakers thought it would benefit their interests at the state level for the federal government to gain authority and impose additional mandates. The result was a law where the federal government defined acceptable assessments, measures, and consequences that state officials would be obligated to impose. This was a jerry-built apparatus that was separate from the trajectory of state-initiated policies. The 1990s had been a decade in which activist governors and legislatures had built accountability mechanisms that varied in the stakes and tempo of testing—the creation of accountability bureaucracies in California, Florida, North Carolina, and Texas, for example—and the halting creation of state-level curriculum standards that promised a rational policy alignment from curricular expectations to consequences. However, the federal creation was built separate from considerations of how it would interact with state judgments of schools. In large part because President George W. Bush was familiar with Texas's system, and his policy staff borrowed heavily from his Texas circle, much of the NCLB apparatus paralleled that single state's system.

What evolved with NCLB was thus different from what supportive state officials expected: the layering of federal obligations on top of and sometimes contradicting state policies. As critics of NCLB often observed, a school could fail to meet its adequate yearly progress expectations if it failed to satisfy one of more than two dozen criteria. This was not the way states had built their own accountability systems before NCLB, which had often blended different sources of data and enabled a substantial portion of schools to claim to be outstanding in a state's official labeling system.²⁶ As noted above, among the critics of the new mechanism was President Bush's brother. Bipartisan dissatisfaction grew for a number of years, demonstrated in 2011, for example, by Rep. John Kline (R-MN), chair of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce: "We cannot continue to rely on this one-size-fits-all Federal accountability system to gauge the performance of our schools and students."²⁷

The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 represented the denouement of the NCLB era and was itself a result of political federalism, a coalition

²⁵Maris Vinovskis, *From a Nation at Risk to No Child Left Behind: National Education Goals and the Creation of Federal Education Policy* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008).

²⁶Dorn, *Accountability Frankenstein*.

²⁷We are focusing on the federal-state tensions inherent in NCLB; an extensive discussion of the Obama administration's approach is beyond the scope of this article. At a first impression, the bipartisan vote restricting federal authority through ESSA reflected a bipartisan dissatisfaction with Obama as well as Bush policy. *Education Reforms: Examining the Federal Role in Public School Accountability*, U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Education and the Workforce, Sept. 14, 2011, hearing, House Report 112-38, p. 2.

that reversed the main thrust of NCLB. Rep. Kline's statement in 2011, quoted in the paragraph above, presaged a congressional assault on federal mandates. ESSA was a congressional initiative that the Obama administration reluctantly acceded to after apparent state and national exhaustion with a dozen years of NCLB's style of federal mandates. The key actors in moving ESSA forward in Congress were Lamar Alexander of Tennessee and Patty Murray of Washington, the chair and the ranking minority-party member, respectively, of the Senate Health, Education, and Labor Policy Committee. Before Alexander was a US secretary of education under George H.W. Bush, he had been a governor and had become increasingly distrustful of the federal government's education authority—now matched by the states' widespread distrust of the US Department of Education. In the Senate committee report on the bill, the committee bluntly stated what Jeb Bush and other governors had complained about for years: "While well-intentioned, the rigid structure of NCLB's provisions, in particular its one-size-fits-all federally mandated system of accountability and requirements for school improvement, have become unworkable in the Nation's schools."²⁸

This spirit of resuscitated state authority significantly guided the legislative intent in the final language, as described in the conference report on the bill that became ESSA. For example, when the conference committee agreed to language limiting the authority of the secretary of education, the conference report was clear regarding limits: "Conferees intend to prohibit . . . regulation that would create new requirements inconsistent with or outside the scope of the law, including regulations that would take from a State the authority to establish a Statewide Accountability System. . . . The Secretary may not, for example, require a State to meaningfully differentiate schools using an A-F grading system or other specific scoring rubric."²⁹ This was language intended to restrict the authority of the federal Department of Education, a rebalancing of the relationship between states and the federal government that signaled the congressional consensus that the prior two presidential administrations had abused their authority under previous law. ESSA still required annual testing, but its use in federal law shifted from a trigger of mandated consequences to a more complex role, a role that still included surveillance of elementary and secondary education.

At the general policy level, ESSA amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to remove the lockstep consequences of NCLB, loosen the rigid definition of adequate yearly progress that had been written into federal law thirteen years before, and tightly restrict the ability of the federal department to reject state policies for nonconformance.³⁰ The new definition was still a jerry-built formula, but states had more authority to adapt the formula for themselves and far more authority in how to respond to schools who did not meet the new formula. The effective result was a new regime in which states reacquired authority to tinker with how their accountability systems fit into the federal structure and where the balance of power

²⁸*Every Child Achieves Act of 2015: Report of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions*, US Senate Report 114-231 (March 17, 2016), 2.

²⁹*Every Student Succeeds Act Conference Report*, House of Representatives Report 114-354 (Nov. 30, 2015), 447–48.

³⁰Maria Ferguson, "Washington View: ESSA Is More Than the Latest Acronym on Education's Block," *Phi Delta Kappan* 97, no. 6 (2016), 72–73, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721716636879>.

was readjusted, with the federal Department of Education having far less effective authority.³¹

Governance Dynamics in the Global Education Space

The passage of ESSA and the diminution of federal authority in US education policy was foreseeable but not inevitable, and the complicated dynamics in international education policy suggest the contingent nature of these evolving relations. While international policy formation does not have the feel or mechanisms of a mandate, unlike in national education policy, they still have the capacity to shape perceptions and priorities in education policy and sometimes even practices. This dynamic is a soft-governance layer, built on organizational networks and subtle pressures. An important observation about the modus operandi of global education today is that education policy perceptions built into international programs and data production hinge on projections, future goals, and the achievement of internationally defined benchmarks and standards.³² The last two decades have shown us a host of programs and initiatives in education, such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative, the European Union's education and training framework (the Bologna Process), the OECD's Learning Framework 2030, and the World Bank's data set on education quality. In effect, contemporary education operates in a space influenced by a multitude of programs, technologies, data, and agents, each claiming to make education a stepping-stone and a catapult for a better, more effective, more competitive, richer, and more sustainable society.

Pasi Sahlberg has argued that global education policy has recently worked under the reign of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM).³³ GERM is an education reform approach that broadly follows the tenets of neoliberalism and especially the New Public Management theory developed in the 1980s. It is structured around a common set of policy ideas, including standards-based management, performance evaluation, and accountability.³⁴ Through that lens, NCLB can be seen as a cog in that machinery, the American domesticated form of GERM.

But perhaps Sahlberg's diagnosis is too broad and unable to pick up the finer mechanisms at play in the interactions between global and national levels of

³¹The Department of Education published implementing regulations in the last months of the Obama administration, and in early 2017 the Republican majority in Congress and President Donald Trump used the Congressional Review Act to revoke the regulations, which have not been reissued in any form. For a discussion of how the Trump administration treated state ESSA plans, see Megan Duff and Priscilla Wohlstetter, "Negotiating Intergovernmental Relations Under ESSA," *Educational Researcher* 48, no. 5 (June 2019), 296–308.

³²Steven Lewis, *PISA, Policy and the OECD: Respatialising Global Education Governance through PISA for Schools* (Singapore: Springer, 2020); Karen Mundy et al., "Introduction: The Globalization of Education Policy – Key Approaches and Debates," *The Handbook of Global Education Policy*, ed. Karen Mundy et al. (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 1–20; Ydesen, *The OECD's Historical Rise in Education* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

³³Pasi Sahlberg, "How GERM Is Infecting Schools around the World," *Washington Post*, June 29, 2012. Retrieved from <https://pasisahlberg.com/text-test/>.

³⁴Kay Fuller and Howard Stevenson, "Global Education Reform: Understanding the Movement," *Educational Review* 71, n. 1 (Dec. 2018), 1–4.

education policy. Is there a global parallel to the tension in the US between federal education debates and goals, on the one hand, and long-term paeans to local control, on the other? What we identify is a common and general mechanism of seeing education systems “like a state”—or, more to the point, like a collection of multiple states. We use the term *multilateral surveillance*, a concept developed by Marcussen, to capture both the sense of systemic “seeing” and the idea of an education system as a looser structure rather than a strict hierarchy.³⁵ How does this appear in practice? In their analysis of the OECD’s work in education, Verger, Fontdevila, and Parcerisa have argued that what they call “school autonomy with accountability (SAWA)” reforms crystallized as a global phenomenon during the early 2000s.³⁶ According to their findings, the OECD “promotes SAWA solutions in very different settings and attaches these solutions to a broad range of problems, including lack of transparency in public administration, low overall performance of the educational system, equity issues and learning gaps, lack of teachers’ engagement, and so on.”³⁷

In the US, we have seen how NCLB sought to hold schools accountable while simultaneously claiming it was continuing to devolve power to schools, but ultimately being unable to manage both of those goals. The parallels are important. But they do not explain how the parallels come about. Focusing on the workings of soft-governance mechanisms goes a long way in providing an answer. The OECD does not have a mandate to dictate education reforms in its member states, and the US federal authorities cannot intrude too directly in states’ education authority. These limitations put soft governance at the forefront of education reform in both the US and a global context. The common denominator is a normative pressure of expectations to adapt and learn from other systems to improve. In the guise of the OECD, this mechanism is called *multilateral surveillance*. As Marcussen defines the term, the implication is that “a multitude of state authorities, working together, have agreed to formulate a set of ‘rules of the game,’ best practices and norms for appropriate behavior.” It also implies that they have established mechanisms which they can use to ensure that these rules of the game, best practices, and norms are actually regulating, constraining, or enabling the behavior of state authorities.³⁸ In the US the introduction of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 1969 was an important step in creating an American version of “multilateral surveillance” between the states. It created a national set of data about performance, and one that set the stage for later developments, including state-level summaries of NAEP results. Another step was the “Wall Chart,” created by Secretary of Education Terrel Bell, which compared states’ educational performance. It could provide US states with knowledge about their comparable performance and aggregate information about national performance. According to Bryk and Hermanson, “The Wall Chart

³⁵Martin Marcussen, “Multilateral Surveillance and the OECD: Playing the Idea Game,” in *The OECD and European Welfare States*, ed. Klaus Armingeon and Michelle Beyeler (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2004), 13–31.

³⁶Verger, Fontdevila, and Parcerisa, “Constructing School Autonomy with Accountability as a Global Policy Model.”

³⁷Verger, Fontdevila, and Parcerisa, “Constructing School Autonomy with Accountability as a Global Policy Model,” 234.

³⁸Marcussen, “Multilateral Surveillance and the OECD,” 13.

prompted the CCSSO [Council of Chief State School Officers] to create the State Educational Assessment Center and begin work on a fairer and more comparable set of indicators. In the following year, the National Research Council recommended that data collection and reporting be reorganized under a stronger federal agency.”³⁹

It is precisely the development of such mechanisms that create the parallels between global and national education policies. There is a strong resemblance between the OECD multilateral surveillance mechanisms and the “federal turn” in the US—supported by mechanisms like NAEP and the Wall Chart—that constructs a normativity around education policies, an implied set of appropriate practices that makes it hard for states to opt out or choose different paths unless they want to make themselves irrelevant in the federal mainstream debate about education. This multilateral surveillance is an essential structural resemblance of the policy spaces at the global level and in the US, a set of soft-governance structures to guide practices within a polity concerned with and suspicious of centralized power.

In addition, and as argued by Krejsler in his analysis of OECD policy recommendations, the workings of multilateral surveillance mechanisms gain rhetorical legitimacy from a fear of falling behind. It is a strategic development narrative⁴⁰ about world order dictating that education systems will lose the national or global competition if they fail to optimize their human capital—that is, produce “employable” or “career-ready” adults who participate in the economy.⁴¹ As we will show in the next section, this narrative resonates strongly in the US context.

All in all, the lens of Sahlberg’s GERM concept leads to seeing the contemporary terrain in a way that is too broad and tilted toward a portrait of hegemonic authority. Instead, we find that the governance mechanisms are more subtle and cannot be explained as a one-way expansion of a global governance regime emerging from IOs. Today, there is a large literature exploring the role, significance, and impact of IOs in education in general and the OECD in particular. However, although such a focus does hold considerable explanatory power in terms of understanding how global education is framed, it does not identify the mechanisms through which globalized programs, agendas, and initiatives have formed and developed. Some researchers have referred to this literature as taking for granted the overwhelming power of global mechanisms.⁴² As a counterreaction, recent research has emphasized the de facto flexibility of individual states behind the apparently global and hegemonic styles

³⁹Anthony S. Bryk and Kim L. Hermanson, “Educational Indicator Systems: Observations on Their Structure, Interpretation, and Use,” *Review of Research in Education* 19, no. 1 (Jan. 1993), 451.

⁴⁰See, e.g., Euan Auld and Paul Morris, “A NeverEnding Story: Tracing the OECD’s Evolving Narratives within a Global Development Complex,” *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 19, no. 2 (Feb. 2021), 183–97.

⁴¹John Benedicto Krejsler, “How a European ‘Fear of Falling Behind’ Discourse Co-produces Global Standards: Exploring the Inbound and Outbound Performativity of the Transnational Turn in European Education Policy,” in *The OECD’s Historical Rise in Education*, 245–67; John Benedicto Krejsler, “Imagining School as Standards-Driven and Students as Career-Ready! A Comparative Genealogy of US Federal and European Transnational Turns in Education Policy,” in *Handbook of Education Policy Studies*, vol. 2, ed. Guorui Fan and Thomas S. Popkewitz (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International, 2020), 351–83.

⁴²John Clarke, foreword to *The Politics of Scale in Policy: Scalecraft and Education Governance*, ed. Natalie Papanastasiou (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2019), v–xii.

of reasoning.⁴³ The point is that what appears to be global is, in fact, often a set of nationalistic ideologies that appear global at a distance and testify to the presence of geopolitical concerns in the shaping of global education. The implication is that interactions between the global and the national educational arenas take place both front-stage but also back-stage. Where the front-stage interactions amount to what we have described as multilateral surveillance, the back-stage interactions reflect the very ideas, agendas, designs, and technologies going into the development and implementation of IO-driven programs and instruments.

An example of this complex dance lies in the OECD's creation of the International Educational Indicators (INES) project in the 1980s. INES was a precursor of PISA, largely in response to pressure from the US and France, whose representatives stressed the need to develop statistical capability to compare students' educational performance.⁴⁴ As argued by Bryk and Hermanson, "International efforts on educational indicators received a boost in 1987 with U.S. government support for a cross-national indicator project within the OECD in Paris."⁴⁵ The 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report was an important backdrop and serves a reminder of the geopolitical component of education program development, even at the global level.

But this indirect form of multilateral pressure was not a new idea; in many ways this style of reasoning about governance descends from the Eisenhower administration, as evidenced in an internal memo within the US administration dated March 8, 1960, arguing on behalf of interagency development of an international education policy stance. The assistant commissioner for international education, O. J. Caldwell, in writing to Commissioner of Education L. G. Derthick argued that "education is the foundation of national power."⁴⁶ In this sense, the US sought to promote its national interests via IOs such as the OECD, as well as through American policies encouraging international cultural exchanges.⁴⁷ But the organizational behavior became independent of the precise intentions of Eisenhower administration officials, creating a layer of soft governance. A recent example of extrapolated nationalism lies in the OECD's use of NCLB in its reviews of education systems as an example of how to achieve

⁴³See Daniel Tröhler, Nelli Piattoeva, and William F. Pinar, "Education, Nationalism, and the Ordering Construction of the World," in *World Yearbook of Education 2022*, ed. Tröhler, Piattoeva, and Pinar (New York: Routledge, 2022), 1–6.

⁴⁴Sotiria Grek and Christian Ydesen, "Where Science Met Policy: Governing by Indicators and the OECD's INES Programme," *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 19, no. 2 (Feb. 2021), 122–37; Kerstin Martens, "How to Become an Influential Actor – The 'Comparative Turn' in OECD Education Policy," in *New Arenas of Education Governance: The Impact of International Organizations and Markets on Education Policy Making*, ed. Kerstin Martens, Alessandra Rusconi, and Kathrin Leuze (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 40–56.

⁴⁵Bryk and Hermanson, "Educational Indicator Systems."

⁴⁶Oliver Caldwell to Lawrence G. Derthick, March 8, 1960, Memo regarding the Establishment of an Interdepartmental Committee on International Education Policy, Office Files of Commissioner of Education, box 529, no. 12, US National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

⁴⁷For the broader foreign policy history, see Liping Bu, *Making the World Like Us: Education, Cultural Expansion, and the American Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), and Randolph Wieck, *Ignorance Abroad: American Educational and Cultural Foreign Policy and the Office of Assistant Secretary of State* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992).

educational improvement using testing and transparency as drivers.⁴⁸ These examples across a half-century testify to the defining and standard-setting role of the US in the development of the postwar architecture of IOs and in the concrete formulation and use of global education programs and policy recommendations. Education policy developments at the global, national, and local levels do not take place in a causal relation—although they are certainly permeated by power relations—but rather they tend to follow certain recurring patterns that get instituted through programs and inspirations following some of the same logics, styles of reasoning, and mechanisms. It is the purpose of the next section to explore these logics and styles of reasoning more in depth.

Accountability Systems as Styles of Reasoning: Human Capital and Surveillance as Public Management

As a means of exploring the resemblances between the public narrative around accountability in the US and what we see in the global education space, we now turn to analyze the linkages in terms of styles of reasoning in the OECD and the US concerning accountability and NCLB.

Human Capital and Public Management in the US

The post-WWII style of reasoning regarding education accountability in the US is shaped by three dynamics: the nationalization of education politics, the explosion of human capital as a way of talking about education, and the development of managerial impulses in public agencies, an impulse one can see threaded from the postwar Department of Defense in the US to performance contracting and New Public Management by the 1980s. These dynamics converged to support a stronger role of central government, not only justified by a new rhetoric about how education should serve the national economy, but also by how the federal government could and should actively manage a key state function. The nationalization of education debates encompassed both the successes of the civil rights movement in forcing the hand of the federal government to address fundamental inequalities of society, and the cooptation of education in a rhetoric about national initiatives, to the extent even of employing the metaphor of war: education was recruited to help fight the War on Poverty and the Cold War. Both sides of the postwar national rhetoric fed into the arguments for NCLB: to George W. Bush, reading was “the new civil right,” and to most secretaries of education in the federal government since Terrel Bell, education has been essential to global economic competitiveness.

That style of reasoning incorporated the new postwar language of human capital, or investment in people, which became a way of talking about education. In turn, this reinforced the longer-term tendency of Americans to see education as the primary lever for solving social problems. To liberals in the heyday of postwar policies such as the early Elementary and Secondary Education Act, education was an investment in poor children, and the best way to prevent poverty. To conservatives, education was a way for individuals to invest in themselves. Importantly, this framing was contested. The phrase “no child left behind” was adapted (or maybe stolen) from the registered

⁴⁸Paulo Santiago et al., *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Australia 2011* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2011).

trademark of the Children's Defense Fund advocacy organization, "Leave no child behind." The Children's Defense Fund phrase reflects its commitment to children's well-being, a commitment in a much broader set of policy areas than education alone.⁴⁹ It was not inevitable that human capital arguments would join up with the nationalization of education debates or postwar arguments about public agencies and services, creating the modern style of reasoning about accountability.

The final ingredient of the style of reasoning regarding accountability that gelled with NCLB was the development of performance management in public agencies, a trend that made its way in the US from the postwar Department of Defense to the Department of Education and education management more generally. In education, there certainly were previous rounds of "managerialism" in reform movements, most prominently in administrative progressivism. From the 1960s forward, this management impulse became a part of federal education policy structures, as a commitment by a regular sequence of presidential appointees in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and then the Department of Education, from Francis Keppel to Arne Duncan.⁵⁰ This management impulse led to experiments in performance contracting that followed over several decades, the creation of the "wall chart" by Terrel Bell, who had been involved in earlier performance contracting, and then the acme of federal mandates over education under George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

In one sense, this trajectory is a thoroughly American story about a society's over-reliance on education to solve social problems, taken to an extreme. However, as indicated above, NCLB can also be viewed as part of a global architecture of educational accountability. Michael Apple argued that NCLB was a reflection of a global rhetoric emphasizing equality and fairness in education—what Apple has called "a larger process of exporting the blame from the decisions of dominant groups onto the state and onto poor people."⁵¹ While this global contextualization of NCLB has been the object only of sparse scholarly attention, the next section intends to remedy that, by exploring the traces, connections, and overlaps of discourses on educational accountability in the spaces between the OECD and the US education authorities at different levels.

Human Capital and Public Management in the OECD

Once again, the history of NCLB belongs both in the domestic historiography of accountability and as part of the international intellectual history of education.

⁴⁹The 1993 filing for the trademark indicates that the Children's Defense Fund used the phrase first, in 1991. See trademark registration 1853919, June 21, 1994, United States Patent and Trademark Office, tsdr.uspto.gov. Marian Wright Edelman consistently argued that the Bush administration stole the expression as a way to sell a conservative, narrow vision of policy. See Paulette Brown-Hinds, "Marian Wright Edelman: Bush Leaving Kids Behind," *Black Voice News*, Nov. 29, 2004, <https://blackvoiceneews.com/2004/11/29/marian-wright-edelman-bush-leaving-kids-behind/>.

⁵⁰Andrew T. Knudsen, "American Teachers, American Workers: AFT, NEA, and the Politics of Performance, 1945–2015" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2020). Of particular note in this intellectual history is Alex Abella's *Soldiers of Reason: The RAND Corporation and the Rise of American Empire* (New York: Mariner Books, 2009).

⁵¹David Hursh, "Neo-Liberalism, Markets and Accountability: Transforming Education and Undermining Democracy in the United States and England," *Policy Futures in Education* 3, no. 1 (March 2005), 3–15; Michael Apple, *Educating the Right Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality* (London: Routledge, 2006), 32.

As a powerful financial contributor, the US is in many ways in a league of its own in defining the development of the OECD's approach to education in general and its programs in particular.⁵² However, the OECD also has considerable agency as an organization, which enables it to feed back to American education and even develop frameworks that influence the workings of education in the US.⁵³

An important type of rhetoric has revolved around the human capital agenda. The human capital approach to education developed as a theory about links between education and the economy.⁵⁴ Students invest in their education, which then improves their productivity and value on the labor market, and this, in turn, benefits the wealth of the nation, that is, establishing the “learning-earning” connection. Following in the wake of human capital theory are the measurement of educational outcomes and skills—often via indicators and standards—and concerns about schools delivering excellence, which creates an intimate connection with accountability. While earlier generations of education reformers could incorporate the economic benefits of education into their arguments, in the post-WWII international world of education policy rhetoric, human capital became a concept that could leverage policy in a more powerful manner.⁵⁵

Federal officials in the US saw the development and management of human capital as part of the country's foreign policy agenda. In a 1994 paper for the OECD titled “An Agenda For Reform in the U.S.A.,” Marshall Smith, a professor at Stanford and the US undersecretary of state for education in the Clinton administration, explicitly describes the president's agenda for the US as essentially a “human capital agenda,” emphasizing the central importance of human development in the future of the nation.⁵⁶ It was a clear signal—or perhaps more an affirmation—to the OECD about the US stance on education. The human capital agenda has been a recurring feature of the OECD approach to education.⁵⁷ A key player in promoting this approach was the US, which had been a driver in promoting a global system of output governance in education hinging on ideas about the cultivation of human capital.⁵⁸ The human capital approach was significantly boosted by the launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957, and the eagerness of the US to promote its national

⁵²Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2003).

⁵³For instance, in 1979 the OECD reviewed education policy in the United States with a particular focus on federal policies and programs for the educationally disadvantaged, in OECD Education Committee, *Review of Educational Policy in the United States of America: Examiners' Report and Questions* (Paris: OECD Archives, 1979).

⁵⁴Joel H. Spring, *Economization of Education: Human Capital, Global Corporations, Skills-Based Schooling* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁵⁵Maris A. Vinovskis, “Horace Mann on the Economic Productivity of Education,” *New England Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (Dec. 1970), 550–71.

⁵⁶OECD, *The Curriculum Redefined: Schooling for the 21st Century* (Paris: OECD/CERI, 1994).

⁵⁷See, for example, OECD, *Policy Conference on Economic Growth and Investment in Education: Washington, 16th–20th October* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 1961), and Gary S. Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education* (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1964).

⁵⁸Regula Bürgi, “Systemic Management of Schools: The OECD's Professionalisation and Dissemination of Output Governance in the 1960s,” *Paedagogica Historica* 52, no. 4 (May 2016), 408–22.

agenda via IOs such as the OECD cannot be understood without taking the competitive and antagonistic geopolitical climate of the Cold War into account.

And yet, despite the central role of the US in promoting IOs and a human capital agenda as part of its broader foreign policy, the US and its education system was also the subject of OECD reviews. In the OECD's 1979 review of US education policy, the examiners—as was commonplace in that kind of review—made particular observations about measuring outcomes, accountability, and school excellence in their report:

Not least the rising costs and the unsettling financial squeeze have given rise to demands for “accountability”—a new word on the American education scene around 1970. Already by the mid-1960s, with support from the Office of Education, preparations were initiated to launch a national assessment programme. This would enable the nation at regular intervals to take its “educational temperature” in terms of student competence in key subject areas. Misgivings about how the schools was performing led to demands for, and actual experiments with, performance contracts where financing was tied to performance level and to voucher systems which, at least in theory, would provide the parents with a reasonable range of options in selecting schools for their children.⁵⁹

The examiners also noted a federal pressure for targeting specific achievement goals that they determined was the result of federal aid to states and local education authorities. They found what they describe as “complex systems of accountability that have become part and parcel of Federal programmes.”⁶⁰ These observations are very much in line with our description above about the changing federal relationships in US education. However, in observing these accountability practices, the OECD examiners took a critical stance, pointing out that “the strict accountability regulations have often led to questionable pedagogical practices, such as unnecessary pullout practices in remedial programmes and barring Title I teachers from helping children who are in need of remedial help but who are not formally eligible for Title I assistance. . . . We were given several examples of absurd consequences of regulations that were in effect at the time of our site visits.”⁶¹

The inclusion of the US in this multilateral surveillance was made possible by the independent authority of the OECD as an IO. It is important to note that these reviews were conducted by a group of international experts who were associated with or recruited by the OECD. In the case of the review of education policy in the US conducted in the fall of 1978, the team consisted of professors Peter Karmel, chairman of the Tertiary Education Commission in Australia; Hartmug Von Hentig, from the University of Bielefeld in West Germany; Torsten Husén, from the University of Stockholm in Sweden; and Lord Michael Young, director of the Institute of Community Studies in London. The main critique in the review was that rigid accountability mechanisms installed in connection with a federal

⁵⁹OECD Education Committee, *Review of Educational Policy in the US*, 63.

⁶⁰OECD Education Committee, *Review of Educational Policy in the US*, 76.

⁶¹OECD Education Committee, *Review of Educational Policy in the US*, 41.

push for more authority could undermine the core task of education, to educate every student. While this critique could be interpreted as being in accordance with the human-capital style of reasoning, it could also be aligned with other logics about social justice and education for all. In terms of understanding the linkages between the US and the OECD, these observations were a reminder that the OECD could not be treated as a monolithic agent in itself. Rather, the OECD arena had developed into a complex space with multiple agents, agendas, and styles of reasoning. Such reviews by OECD-hired experts from different national contexts did not necessarily reflect the official stances and recommendations of the OECD itself. Therefore, critical reviews may not indicate a setback of US-OECD alignment overall. With their broader appeal in terms of being able to connect with multiple logics, the reviews may have played into party political agendas in different ways.

The Comparative Competition Style of Reasoning

In the opening address at the second General Assembly of the OECD Project on International Education Indicators, held in Lugano-Cadro, Switzerland, on September 26 and 27, 1991, T. J. Alexander, director of the OECD Directorate for Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, made a general claim about the value of international comparisons within individual national politics:

The general wave of educational reforms that has been apparent in most of the OECD Member countries since the 1980s and which is characterized by an overriding concern with the effectiveness of schools seems to have brought with it a new interest in comparability issues. International comparisons of educational conditions and performance are now perceived as a means of adding depth and perspective to the analysis of national situations. References to other nations' policies and results are beginning to be routinely used in discussions of education, and comparability now belongs with accountability to that changing set of driving words which shape the current management paradigm of education.⁶²

The same style of reasoning resonated in the US. For instance, at a 1996 House of Representatives hearing on "what works" in public education, William Randall, Colorado state commissioner of education, contended, "We have also benchmarked our assessment data through the national assessment to the international arena because it is so important to that we recognize that we're not in isolation and that we are in competition as has been mentioned on a world-wide basis."⁶³

In the same hearing, Frank T. Brogan, state commissioner of education in Florida, argued along the same lines with direct reference to the OECD's work: "In 1994 a survey conducted by the Paris-based Organization for Co-operation and Development

⁶²Thomas J. Alexander, "Introductory Address," *Making Education Count: Developing and Using International Indicators*, ed. Albert Tuijnman and Norberto Bottani (Paris: OECD, 1994), 17.

⁶³Hearing on *What Works in Public Education*, Serial No. 104-57, US House Of Representatives, Committee on Economic and Educational Opportunities, 104th Congress, 2nd Session, Jan. 31, 1996, p. 96.

(OECD) concluded that the American primary and secondary education system ‘while highly variable, can broadly be characterized as mediocre at best.’⁶⁴

Even though the act did not explicitly reference the OECD, the preparatory work for NCLB revealed the same comparative competition style of reasoning. Senator Edward Kennedy, a coauthor of the act, pointed out that “results from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study show that performance in math and science by US students declines relative to that of students in other nations as students move up the grades of our school system.”⁶⁵

We find other testimony reinforcing the discourse of international competition, the focus on living up to international standards, and the importation of best practices to quench a fear of falling behind, such as in the 2008 statement of Jason Altmire to the Committee on Education and Labor:

Today’s 21st century economy requires increased levels of understanding of engineering and technology fields. The foundation for this learning is math and science, but the U.S. is falling behind. In 2006, the average score of American students on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) was below that of 31 other countries. For our country to remain competitive in the global economy, we need to provide every student with, at the very minimum, a basic understanding of math and science.⁶⁶

The OECD has offered concrete lessons for the development of the US education system based on PISA data and insights from a number of so-called high-performing education contexts (e.g., Ontario, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Finland, Japan, Brazil, Singapore, Germany, England, and Poland).⁶⁷ The main message of the OECD to the US has been one that ties together notions of American inefficiency, inequality, and mediocrity:

To move from the middle ranks in performance to the top ranks, either [the US] will have to radically improve . . . efficiency . . . [or] greatly increase the amount spent. But every level of government in the United States faces severe financial

⁶⁴Hearing on *What Works in Public Education*, 92.

⁶⁵*President Bush’s Educational Proposals: Hearing of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, United States Senate, 107th Congress, On Examining the Administration’s Education Proposals to Improve Accountability and Close the Achievement Gap in the Education System, February 15, 2001* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2001), 2. These findings align with the “fear of falling behind” paradigm mentioned above. Investigating the performativity of this style of reasoning, Krejsler argues that it has “considerable performative effects in producing a state of crisis awareness both at state and at federal and national levels that has succeeded in motivating and driving a standards-based education regime promising equity and its associated panoply of political technologies in the form of high-stakes testing, accountability measures, and rankings.” John Benedicto Krejsler, “The ‘Fear of Falling Behind Regime’ Embraces School Policy,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 31, no. 5 (April 2018), 403.

⁶⁶Prepared Statement of Hon. Jason Altmire, a Representative in Congress from the State of Pennsylvania,” in *Innovation in Education through Business and Educational STEM Partnerships: Hearing before the Committee on Education and Labor, US House of Representatives, One Hundred Tenth Congress, Second Session . . . July 22, 2008* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office), 6.

⁶⁷Santiago et al., *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education* .

constraints, and that situation is likely to remain unchanged for many years to come. . . . It is hard to see how the United States can succeed in matching the performance of the world's highest-performing countries unless it levels the playing field for its students in the way that almost all of its competitors have already done.⁶⁸

The OECD then offered concrete policy advice to remedy these challenges, calling for clearer governance structured in the US by emphasizing that

it is important to note that no unit of government at any level of the American education system seems to have the authority of a ministry of education in most of the countries portrayed here—not at the national level, not at the state level and not at the local level. . . . Finding ways to make all the parts work together is essential for producing the best results.⁶⁹

In making this argument, the OECD emphasized that NCLB was a positive factor:

The importance of recent developments in American federal education policy to set the clear expectation that all students should be taught to the same standards and held to the same expectations cannot be overestimated. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 required all schools to make progress towards a state-determined standard of “proficiency” for all students, and the Obama administration has supported the states in their efforts to put in place an increased focus on the instructional systems and teacher support necessary to ensure that all students are held and taught to these same expectations.⁷⁰

We see in these recommendations a clear pattern of inducing the US to follow the same policies in terms of organizational structure and authority distribution as other OECD member states have done in their education system. This was multilateral surveillance in practice. However, because of the dual position the OECD took to NCLB in its recommendations, offering both praise and criticism, NCLB became a flexible representative of modern education reform, sometimes applauded for its emphasis on standards and sometimes derided for its rigidity and counterproductive policy enactments. In input to the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions in 2010, Andreas Schleicher, director for the OECD Directorate for Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, critically compared the US with other systems:

Other countries tend to give greater weight to guide intervention, reveal best practices, and identify shared problems. . . . They also seek to intervene in the most troubled schools first rather than identifying too many schools as needing an improvement. . . . Another drawback. . . [is] the “single bar” problem that

⁶⁸OECD, *Lessons from PISA for the United States, Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2014), 246.

⁶⁹OECD, *Lessons from PISA for the United States*, 251, 253.

⁷⁰OECD, *Lessons from PISA for the United States*, 233.

leads to a lot of focus on students nearing proficiency while not valuing achievement growth through the system, and many countries address that through accountability systems that involve progressive learning targets that extends through the entire system, which lay out the steps that learners follow as they advance.⁷¹

Even though NCLB was used very differently in the argumentations, both these examples of OECD policy advice to the US were expressions of the argument by world culture theorists such as John W. Meyer and Francisco O. Ramirez, who posited an emerging global convergence in education.⁷² In this sense, the OECD has held up a kind of multilateral-surveillance mirror to the US, offering a reflection of comparison and competition based on a human capital approach. In this sense, the two rhetorical motifs overlapped and supported each other.

Conclusion

Multilateral surveillance of education systems is now an endemic feature of our world—a modern development accelerated if not begun by American interstate comparison technologies and practices, first via the National Assessment of Educational Progress and later via comparisons such as Bell's Wall Chart and eventually NCLB. The recent policy experience of the US through the NCLB era comprises one specimen of the global growth of multilateral surveillance, a general repertoire of how education governance has evolved. The passage of ESSA resolves some of the federal-state tensions inherent in NCLB-era policy, but it leaves the residue of enhanced surveillance if not all of the specific mandates from the 2002 law. We have analyzed NCLB as both policy and as part of a global style of reasoning around the goals of education. Tying policy and styles of reasoning together allows us to understand modern global accountability history as one of emerging patterns and resemblances between national and global contexts. Analyzing the linkages in terms of styles of reasoning in the OECD and the US concerning accountability and NCLB, we identify the presence of common threads including a human capital paradigm and the common tensions between a multilevel political coalition based on borrowed authority to push through a policy act such as NCLB, on the one hand, and the persistence of tensions between central authority and states (for the US) or national interests (for global patterns), on the other.

What happens to our understanding of accountability history when one takes into account global linkages, resemblances, and trajectories before, during, and after the reign of NCLB in American education? In terms of policy, we can see NCLB more clearly as part of both the domestic American interplay of changing federal relationships in education and broader tensions in postwar global education debates—

⁷¹ESEA Reauthorization: *The Importance of a World-Class K–12 Education for Our Economic Success – Hearing of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, United States Senate, 111th Congress, Second Session, On Examining Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Reauthorization, Focusing on K-12 Education for Economic Success*, March 9, 2010, Washington, DC, 6.

⁷²Stephen Carney, Jeremy Rappleye, and Iveta Silova, "Between Faith and Science: World Culture Theory and Comparative Education," *Comparative Education Review* 56, no. 3 (Aug. 2012), 366–93.

between central assertions of education goals on the one hand, and decentralized power on the other. The NCLB era could be viewed as attempting to establish a central cog in an American manifestation of neoliberal policies, where a core feature is that the state runs a system in which it can “govern schools from afar through policies promoting testing, accountability, and choice.”⁷³ From a global perspective, the NCLB era was a clumsy and eventually failed attempt to impose a federal directorate structure, wherein the federal government defined acceptable assessments, measures, and consequences that state officials would be obligated to impose. NCLB was an expression of a global attempt to reconcile the centripetal and centrifugal pressures in education policy: the SAWA movement. For a little under fifteen years, the decentralized American system attempted one version of that vision.

In addition to the tension between localized governance and the common centralized assertions of education reform goals, we find two styles of reasoning: the human capital discourse and the comparative competition discourse. These global reform movements seem to be fueled by a paradigm of the fear of falling behind, as well as a paradigm about development, and the role of education in achieving this development—a zeitgeist among politicians and decision-makers in the age of globalization. This amounts to what some scholars have called the educationalization of social problems.⁷⁴ Understanding the international context of NCLB also provides additional understanding of the discourse focused on test results and the growth of sports-like league tables for schools: it combines a market rationale for reform (global economic competition) with a mechanism derived from institutional prestige systems (ratings).

We end with two general observations from this international context about the importance of looking beyond limited scales and the contingency of modern accountability history. First, an important observation springing from our analysis is that historians can gain an understanding of regional and national events by refusing in the long term to treat subnational, national, and global levels as entities that are separate in any meaningful sense. For example, what appears to be a global trend can often be the indirect expression of nationalism in education policy, the exploitation of geopolitical concerns in the shaping of global education. The relation between the US and the OECD is a good example, because the US has historically been so prominent in shaping OECD approaches and programs. In this sense, our analysis offers a conflation of two dichotomies: what has been described as methodological nationalism and methodological globalism.⁷⁵

Our second observation is that expressions of global discourse and policy trends have been highly contingent on national circumstances, and we misunderstand the NCLB era if we see it as the inevitable endpoint of American education reform focused on accountability. While we have sketched a narrative arc for the NCLB era in the US, the potential for such a narrative might mislead readers to erase the

⁷³David Hursh, “Neo-Liberalism, Markets and Accountability,” 6.

⁷⁴See, for instance, Marc Depaepe and Paul Smeyers, “Educationalization as an Ongoing Modernization Process,” *Educational Theory* 58, no. 4 (Nov. 2008), 379–89; Felicitas Acosta, “OECD, PISA and the Educationalization of the World: The Case of the Southern Cone Countries,” in *The OECD’s Historical Rise in Education*, 175–96.

⁷⁵Clarke, foreword to *The Politics of Scale in Policy*.

contingency involved in the period, and that would be a mistake. The interplay and resemblances between policy development and discourse allows us to understand that contingency can still lead to important discussions and policies, even while the eventual course of events was highly uncertain. The broader global story consists of uncomfortable and contingent attempts to resolve these long-term tensions. Ultimately, the governance mechanisms at global, national, and local levels are subtle and cannot be explained as a one-way expansion of a global governance regime emerging from IOs. Education policy developments at the global, national, and local levels do not take place in a causal relation but rather tend to follow certain isomorphisms that get instituted through programs and policy-borrowing, following some of the same logics, styles of reasoning, and mechanisms.

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