Education Policy and the Language Arts

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Many variables affect English language arts teaching. Teachers have special talents and limitations, and make choices, even within highly regimented systems. Principals, coaches, specialists, and other educators can make a difference as well through their ability to decide on teacher placements, professional development, and supervision. At a district level, there are school boards, superintendents, and curriculum directors who are responsible for many of the decisions that affect classroom life, and state bureaucrats and educational publishers have played a role too. Until recently, that was the universe of influence in a language arts classroom.

More recently, the educational policies of the federal government have begun to reshape language arts teaching. The transformation from having no educational policy role to being a major influence has been nothing short of remarkable. This entry provides an analysis of the transformation of the federal role in education policy, particularly during the past half century—from the Great Society programs of the 1960s through No Child Left Behind and the Race to the Top efforts of the current decade.

This chapter only considers federal policy, and only policy making with direct implications for the English language arts. An issue like school funding, which has little specific bearing on the language arts is ignored, while anti-poverty legislation, though not about literacy and language teaching, is reviewed because of its implications for such teaching. Federal legislation has occasionally addressed writing, but such efforts have been circumscribed, and there have been no similar efforts with other parts of the language arts. Consequently, this chapter focuses mainly on federal reading instruction policies.

Federal education policy has become increasingly demanding and specific about literacy teaching during the past half century. This chapter describes major features of this transformation, including the nature of federal education funding, accountability, research role, and politics, and it will review the federal programs aimed at improving literacy, pre-school through Grade 12.

The Nature of Federal Involvement in Education

Most countries have a ministry responsible for that nation’s educational policies. That has not been true in the United States. The Constitution makes no mention of education, and the Bill of Rights says that powers not expressly delegated to the federal government are reserved to the states. Consequently, state and local governments have had the major responsibility for education in the United States.

From the beginning, nevertheless, the federal government adopted policies to encourage education; for example, land grants were based on the recipient’s willingness to build schools on a portion of the land, a policy eventually extended to universities. The federal role in education expanded following the Civil War. In 1867, a National Bureau of Education was formed in the Department of the Interior to formulate educational policy and coordinate educational activities at a national level, though this agency did little more than compile educational statistics (Jennings, 1999).

More relevant to educational policy was the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (the “Freedmen’s Bureau”), established in 1865 to address the needs of the newly-freed slaves (Bentley, 1970). This bureau was to provide emergency food, medical support, and housing to the freed slaves, but it took steps to provide educational support, too. By 1870, it had established more than 1,000 schools for former slaves, including appropriating land and buildings, formulating curricula, and publishing reading textbooks (Smith, 1965). These efforts ended in 1872, but federal involvement in education during emergencies surfaced again during the Great Depression; Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal programs provided bailout money to prevent school closures and construction money for schools.
Thus, the federal government has played a recurring role in education, but that role was *categorical* rather than *general* (Graham, 1984). The federal government did not provide general education funding to the states, towards the states’ own policies. Instead, it provided support for categorical activities or specific purposes (setting aside land for schools) or for particular groups of students, while authority for general education was maintained by the states.

After World War II, the federal government played an expanding role in almost every realm of American life, except education. The idea of providing general support for schools was debated during the Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy administrations, but to no avail (Graham, 1984). The idea of local control of schools ran too deep, and opposition from various groups who feared the implications of a federal takeover of schools blocked federal involvement.

This policy logjam was broken in the wake of the Kennedy assassination. Given the outpouring of support, in 1965 President Johnson pushed through Congress the most extensive federal education legislation in history (Graham, 1984). This legislation was categorical in nature, aimed at supporting disadvantaged children. Programs such as Head Start and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary School Act (ESEA) were meant more as anti-poverty or civil rights programs than educational ones (Graham, 1984; Jeffrey, 1978). Over the next three decades, these programs grew, with ESEA repeatedly receiving additional funding.

In 1983, the report, *A Nation at Risk*, set off a wave of school reform effort that continues to this day (Davies, 2007; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). That report, issued by the White House, revealed that U.S. students were lagging their international counterparts despite a costly education system. The most enduring result of these reform efforts has been the “education standards movement.” The idea was that schools needed to have more demanding learning goals, and that progress towards those standards could be monitored through testing. These efforts, led by the National Governors Association, with federal support, emphasized the need to improve reading levels, and instigated state efforts to improve test scores (Jennings, 1998). On a federal level, there were efforts to create national literacy standards, and experiments in the support of educational programming aimed at improving reading (such as the Reading Excellence Act—which attempted to get states to intensify their reading improvement efforts and to bring those efforts more in line with research findings).

In 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law No Child Left Behind, a reauthorization of ESEA (No Child Left Behind, 2001). This law increased federal education support, created major new literacy programs, and mandated compliance to accountability standards. What started in 1965 as assistance to local districts to meet the needs of poverty students has grown into a larger program with the power to require accountability reforms for all students. Critics have claimed the federal government provides too little funding to dictate local policies, but two decades of case law supports the idea that federal categorical support requires adherence to more general federal mandates. Thus, federal education policy is important with regard to literacy and language because of its ability to leverage local policies.

NCLB required that states meet educational standards, but allowed each state to define these standards locally. This preserved local control, but discouraged the establishment of high, competitive standards, since states could lose support if they failed to meet their standards. However, in 2009, 48 states agreed to adopt common standards, and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan pledged $350 million to develop new tests. He also pledged $4.5 billion for Race to the Top, an effort to increase accountability (by linking teacher salaries to test scores) and strengthen the federal role in education reform; at this time the criteria for Race to the Top have not been released, but states have been changing to state laws to ensure that they could compete, including expanding charter schools and making sure that teacher could be linked to student tests.

Federal policies have been a significant influence on literacy education. Because of the expansive definitions of eligibility devised to ensure wide political support, Title I programs have operated in most local school districts (more than $14 billion dollars are distributed through Title I to more than 50,000 schools). The broad distribution of this program has accustomed school districts to reliance on federal aid.

That ESEA funding has been so heavily aimed at elementary schools has focused these programs on literacy. Since ESEA had required separate educational programming for poverty children, Title I supported pull-out remedial reading programs, requiring the hiring of Title I teachers and the purchase of reading materials and assessments. Changes during the Clinton administration have made combinations of federal and local funds easier to enact if more than 60% of the students are living in poverty. This means that in such schools Title I money can be combined with general education money to support reading instruction for all students, without regard to poverty status.

These federal programs have had accountability requirements that will be discussed in the next section. It is sufficient to note that civil right laws gave the federal government power to withhold funding if states did not comply with policy standards. These powers were used to force the desegregation of local schools, and during the past decade these enforcement powers allowed the federal government to influence literacy education as well.

**Accountability** In 1965, the ESEA included accountability provisions. Senator Robert Kennedy asked that the law include evaluations that would allow the measurement of the effects of Title I due to concerns that school programs might not improve the achievement of disadvantaged children (Bailey & Mosher, 1968). Accordingly, legislation required the annual academic testing of children enrolled in Title I programs.

When ESEA was first revised, another testing provision was added establishing an assessment to promote a national
benchmark of learning progress against which to measure learning in light of ESEA. As a result, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) began monitoring reading achievement in 1969.

Thus, the use of tests as the measure of educational success and the monitoring of student learning by the federal government through tests were built into this legislation early on, though the federal government’s enforcement powers were hampered. For example, since schools selected the ESEA-mandated tests and with no required criteria for success, no one could be held accountable for student progress. Similarly, the National Assessment results could not determine the success of schools or programs, and even state comparisons were proscribed.

However, the 1964 Civil Rights Act had enforcement provisions that allowed the federal government to use ESEA to require changes in local policies affecting general education programs (Civil Rights Act, 1964). The leveraging of ESEA in this way helped to desegregate schools, but also opened the way for the government to use categorical support as leverage to influence general education programs.

Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act said, “no person in the United States shall, on the basis of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.” This means that the feds could terminate funding to districts that were out of compliance with this federal law. Since many segregated school districts received ESEA funding, the threat to withhold these funds was serious, and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare that administered ESEA, took its enforcement responsibilities seriously, forcing districts to change policies (Davies, 2007).

Some states resisted, arguing that the narrow stream of support did not entitle the federal government authority to require broader policy compliance. The courts supported the constitutionality of these enforcement powers.

Claiming literacy as “the new civil right,” President George W. Bush put forth the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation which amended the ESEA law in 2002 (Henry, 2001). NCLB required districts to test all students in reading, math, and science, and the tests were to evaluate the success of various racial, linguistic, and economic groups. If local standards were not achieved, then the schools had to allow students to transfer to other schools and provide after-school tutoring. Claims that this represented an unfunded mandate were rejected by the courts based on the earlier desegregation rulings; literacy had truly become the new civil right. The link of literacy to civil rights was continued by the Obama administration. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has declared that “Education is the civil rights issue of our generation” (Duncan, n.d.), and he has called for an expansion of a federal test-based accountability.

**The Role of Research** The role of research in education policy has changed over the years: “Research played a new role in influencing policy... In the past, research has been regarded just as one among many information sources consulted in policy formation...but those expectations were dramatically elevated in the late 1990s” (Schoenfeld & Pearson, 2009, p. 567).

During the period prior to the passage of ESEA, researchers from several fields explored the idea that intelligence was not a fixed ability predetermined by genes, but was influenced environmentally. These theories suggested that educational programming aimed at preschoolers and children growing up in “cultures of deprivation” could improve learning (Silver & Silver, 1991).

It is clear from the policy advice given at the time that empirical data played little role (Jeffrey, 1978). Data were used more as persuasive examples than scientific proof, which meant that single flawed studies could be influential. For example, the influence of the Banneker project in which a school district tried to improve reading achievement by changing teachers’ attitudes towards poor children (but not curriculum or instruction) was used as evidence of the likely success of ESEA (Silver & Silver, 1991). Although the difficulty of improving the achievement of severely disadvantaged children was evident in existing research, neither policymakers nor the scholar-advisors gave attention to such data (Jeffrey, 1978).

The role of research changed quickly, however, as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 required the commissioning of a study, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Coleman, 1966), and the release of this study suggested the limited effectiveness of federal programs. “The important fact about the Coleman report...was not its detailed findings, but its contribution to a climate of opinion in which ‘scientific’ evaluation was coming to be expected” (Silver & Silver, 1991, p. 119). During the decades following the Coleman report, educational evaluation studies had mixed results concerning the effectiveness of Title I and Head Start. These studies focused on variables such as IQ, but gradually shifted their attention to reading. Despite negative findings about the effectiveness of federal education efforts in improving reading achievement, these programs continued to be funded without much effort to reform the quality of these programs.

This began to change due to literacy debates that raged in states like California (McGill-Franzen, 2000; Schoenfeld & Pearson, 2009; Taylor, 1998). During the 1980s, California bureaucrats adopted state-level curricular policies. Critics began pushing back almost immediately, but their efforts gained little headway until NAEP began publishing state comparisons. In 1992, when NAEP placed California at the bottom of tested states in reading achievement, lawmakers imposed extensive curriculum reforms. These divisive debates over beginning reading (labeled the Reading Wars) were often marked by the rhetorical, partisan, and contradictory use of research.

As a result, the federal government intervened to determine what instructional practices were supported by research. In 1997, Congress requested the appointment of the National Reading Panel (NRP). NRP established criteria...
for evaluating research, requiring practices to have rigorous studies showing their effectiveness. The panel issued its controversial synthesis of 450 studies, concluding that some practices conferred learning benefits to children, including the teaching of phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and professional development for teachers (NICHD, 2000). These findings were soon adopted as the basis of federal education policy. In 2002, President George W. Bush signed NCLB into law, which included provisions for Reading First and Early Reading First, requiring specific instructional efforts in the areas identified by NRP (No Child Left Behind, 2001). The law mentioned “scientific based reading research” more than 100 times.

Shifting Political Alliances Ultimately, electoral politics underlie government policy. In many areas of public interest, political alignments are well established and longstanding. With regards to education policy, however, there has been greater fluidity and, consequently, it is harder to predict which policy makers or parties will support particular positions.

The reason for such flexibility is that the federal role in education was minimal until recently, so there has not been much opportunity to develop a history of consistent policy support. Also, even though education groups endorse candidates and make donations to political campaigns, few voters make federal electoral choices on the basis of education. This gives candidates room to adjust positions, and education has been an ideal issue to draw attention to a quality of a candidate’s character or policy such as bipartisanship, toughness, or altruism.

In the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy, a Democrat, saw political advantage in moving federal dollars to schools, but strongly opposed general education support, and did little on the education agenda (Graham, 1984). He was succeeded by President Lyndon Johnson, a former school teacher and fellow Democrat, but who was a strong proponent of education. Johnson initiated the first major federal support for schools, but later in his term, he attempted to severely limit additional support (Graham, 1984).

Then came President Richard M. Nixon, a Republican, who wanted to reduce the federal education role, and ESEA and Head Start funding did not increase during his administration (Davies, 2007). However, though Nixon had campaigned on the idea of slowing school desegregation law enforcement, the federal role in education was strengthened greatly through his administration’s strict enforcement of those laws. Nixon championed school literacy programs, and his policies and approaches were largely continued under presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, a Republican and a Democrat (Davies, 2007). Carter wanted more education funding than his Republican predecessors, and he grudgingly supported the establishment of a cabinet level department of education, but otherwise there was little difference (Davies, 2007).

The only president to express strong opposition to federal involvement in education was Ronald Reagan, a Republican (Davies, 2007). He promised to close the new Department of Education, and tried to stop categorical support for schools, preferring block grants. As president, he did little to move his negative educational agenda, except opposing increases in funding. His position on block grants was contradictory of past conservative doctrine which had always opposed general education support. Interestingly, an important factor in expanding the federal role in education came from the A Nation at Risk report which was issued by the White House during his presidency.

The next two presidents, George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, a Republican and a Democrat, worked closely with the National Governors Association to establish national educational goals (Jennings, 1998). President Bush called for “a national crusade” to improve schools, and it was during his administration that national education goals were written into law, America 2000, including the idea that all students would demonstrate competency in English and that every adult would be literate. President Clinton continued these policies, and called for a national achievement test, an idea strongly opposed by Republicans who had supported national learning goals. Clinton also established the National Reading Panel and the Reading Excellence Act, legislation aimed at improving elementary reading achievement that required states to use “research based” approaches to teaching.

President George W. Bush, a Republican, worked closely with Senator Edward Kennedy, a Democrat, to craft NCLB (DeBray, 2006; Rudalevige, 2003). This legislation increased federal support, but also established accountability standards. This legislation provided more than $5 billion in support for the improvement of reading instruction in preschool and elementary school. Additionally, President Bush supported changes in Head Start to increase its emphasis on early literacy skills. Finally, President Barak Obama, a Democrat, supports extensive increases in federal support to schools, but with a tightening of accountability standards. President Obama is encouraging the development of common standards, with teacher salaries linked to student success on achievement tests.

What this brief chronology reveals is the striking lack of consistency in the support of education within the political parties, ideologies, or even some of the individuals themselves. There is no consistent literacy alignment, and future policies will likely show the same kind of flexibility or inconsistency.

Federal Literacy and Language Legislation Modern federal education policy making began in the mid-1960s, and those initial efforts exerted little specific impact on language arts teaching, except increasing the hiring of elementary reading teachers. This approach changed quickly, and by 1970, the federal government began addressing literacy directly.

Initially, federal support was neutral—including reading in national testing, and providing small amounts of
grant money to improve reading instruction. Over time, as the national assessment revealed stagnant achievement, a growing concern since *A Nation at Risk*, federal involvement in literacy became more substantial, prescriptive, and accountability driven (see Table 22.1). Below is a description of each of these federal literacy policies and programs, arrayed in chronological order. This compendium of federal policies illustrates the increasing specificity and scope; and the consistency of this transformation across parties and ideologies, suggesting that the federal role is unlikely to abate until student literacy achievement improves.

**National Assessment of Educational Progress.** NAEP began in 1969, and was required to test the reading of samples of students in grades 4, 8, and 11. These tests were administered twice per decade, a schedule that now requires testing every 2 years. NAEP reports are the most influential of any regarding education policy, and the pattern of reading achievement has influenced federal law. In the 1970s and early 1980s, NAEP showed that students were steadily improving in reading, particularly children from low-income families. These gains were lost during the 1980s and early 1990s, a trend blamed, fairly or not, upon the whole language reforms that had swept reading education (Schoenfeld & Pearson, 2009). Since the early 1990s, fourth-grade reading achievement has regained the levels attained in earlier decades.

**Right to Read.** The first federal foray into literacy education in modern times was made in 1970, with the creation of Right to Read. Originally announced as a voluntary national effort, and intended to distract public attention from divisive issues, such as desegregation, this effort eventually grew into an annual $10 million expenditure for professional development efforts in ESEA schools (Allen, 1970).

**Reading is Fundamental (RIF).** In 1966, RIF began as a private organization to encourage reading by distributing books to children who had never owned books. The early success of this program led to the establishment, in 1975, of federal funding to help pay for book-giving nationwide (Inexpensive Book Distribution Program). Through this funding stream provided by the Department of Education, with RIF as sole contractor, local programs receive matching funds for the purchase and distribution of books to children, from preschool through high school. More than $24 million annually is provided to motivate reading.

**National Research Centers.** During the 1970s, the U.S. Department of Education provided support for a national research center in reading focused on reading comprehension. The Center for the Study of Reading opened in 1976 at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and was funded until 1992. During that time, the center published hundreds of research papers and reports on the teaching of reading, including the influential research summaries, *Becoming a Nation of Readers and Beginning Reading.* The federal government also supported a national writing center, from 1990 to 1995, at the University of California, Berkeley, and Carnegie Mellon University. The purpose of that center was to conduct research into how to teach writing effectively.

In 1992, the reading research funding was moved to support the National Reading Research Center at the universities of Maryland and Georgia, with an emphasis on studying reading motivation, and in 1997, the funds went to create the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement at the University of Michigan (which led a consortium of five universities). These research centers have published a plethora of work that has influenced literacy teaching. At this time, there are no federal research centers with this kind of focus.

**National Writing Project.** The National Writing Project began as a local effort at the University of California, Berkeley, towards improving professional development. The Writing Project expanded as affiliate groups received funding from their states, and in 1991, the federal government adopted the National Writing Project network providing funds for its activities since that time. That core grant, supplemented with state and local support, now funds approximately 200 sites where teachers can learn how to support student writing development.

**William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Programs.** The Even Start program began in 1988 and distributes, through the states, more than $65 million annually to local family literacy programs. The purpose of Even Start is to offer assistance to families to help end the cycle of poverty by providing literacy education to parents and their children. Even Start supports coordinated adult literacy and early childhood education services.

**National Voluntary English Language Arts Standards.** In 1992, the National Governors Association proposed the adoption of rigorous and specific learning goals. Such standards would serve as the criteria for measuring accountability. To facilitate state efforts, the U.S. Department of Education provided funding for the creation of national “voluntary” standards. Accordingly, a contract was issued to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, International Reading Association (IRA), and National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) to develop national language arts standards; about $1 million was spent before the government pulled the plug in 1994. The Department of Education criticized the standards saying they were not specific enough to “define what students should know and be able to do in the domains of language, literacy, and literature” (Diegmueller, 1994). IRA and NCTE later published the standards themselves (1996).

**National Reading Panel (NRP).** At the height of controversy in the 1990s over how to teach reading, the Congress required the appointment of a panel to determine
what works in reading instruction through a formal review of research. NRP issued a report (NICHD, 2000) which was later adopted as the foundation of federal policy. NRP became the basis for the curricular requirements of Early Reading First and Reading First, and led to other federally-supported research reviews: the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth (August & Shanahan, 2006), considering research on teaching English learners, and the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP, 2008), which reviewed research on preschool and kindergarten literacy.

**Reading Excellence Act (REA).** REA became law in 1998, and provided funding for states to help upgrade literacy. This was the first education legislation to provide a definition of “scientifically based reading research” and to indicate that reading included “the understanding of how phonemes (speech sounds) are connected to print; the ability to decode unfamiliar words and read fluently; and the knowledge of sufficient background information and vocabulary to foster reading comprehension.” States competed for this support.

**Reach Out and Read (ROR).** This private reading promotion provides books to infants and young children through their pediatricians. Parents are guided in reading to their children as an approach to improve language development and early literacy. First embraced by the federal government in 1997 at a White House conference on early reading, ROR began receiving federal support in 2000, about $5 million annually.

**Early Reading First (ERF).** ERF provides multiyear grants to schools to enhance the early language and literacy development of preschoolers from low income families. Schools that receive ERF funding are required to adopt strategies and professional development approaches consistent with scientifically based reading research. ERF distributes more than $100 million annually to improve preschool literacy and language teaching through programs that emphasize the teaching of phonological awareness, language development, alphabet knowledge, and print awareness.

**Reading First.** Established by NCLB in 2002, it represents the largest federal commitment to literacy education (about $1 billion per year), to improve reading achievement K–3. Reading First programs had to explicitly teach phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, and the federal funds were for supporting such teaching through professional development, curriculum materials, reading assessments, and instructional interventions. The requirements for Reading First were more prescriptive than any prior federal policy, and it was plagued by claims that it was giving unfair advantages to particular commercial programs, charges later upheld by an investigation of the Inspector General (2006). Federal studies of the effectiveness of the program were not positive (Gamse, Bloom, Kemple, & Jacob, 2008). Nevertheless, the program has exerted an important influence on all reading instruction provided through Title I (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

**Striving Readers.** In 2005, the Department of Education began a small discretionary grant program to support efforts to improve the reading achievement of adolescents. These funds, about $30 million annually, are to be spent on the implementation of reading interventions for “striving readers” in middle and high schools. This program was expanded in 2009 and will be supported in all states.

**Head Start.** Head Start began in 1965 as a social service program for disadvantaged preschoolers to increase their health, encourage parental support, and enhance early cognitive functioning. This program, administered by the Department of Health and Human Services, was not designed to address academic skills. During the past decade, dissatisfaction with early literacy achievement has led to a revamping of Head Start (Improving Head Start Act, 2007). Head Start programs now must hire staff qualified to “promote the language skills and literacy growth of children and that provide children with a variety of skills that have been identified, through scientifically based reading research, as predictive of later reading achievement.”

**Conclusions**

Federal policy making does not stand still, and many of these programs will end or change over time. As this is written, funding for Reading First has not been renewed and President Barack Obama has proposed an end to the funding of Reading is Fundamental, National Writing Project, and Even Start, and Congress is debating expansive new literacy legislation to combine Early Reading First, Reading First, and Striving Readers into a single larger program aimed at improving the teaching of reading and writing through the use of research-based instruction, preschool through high school. The Chief State School Officers and National Governors Association are hurrying to complete common core learning standards for the teaching of English language arts, which are likely to be de facto national education standards.

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<th>TABLE 22.1</th>
<th>The Transformation of Federal Education Policy.</th>
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<td>Diversity</td>
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that will exert an important influence on teachers of the English language arts.

Of course, no one has the crystal ball that will reveal which of these new efforts will come to fruition and which will be stillborn. However, what seems certain, is that until literacy attainment reaches the levels demanded by the public, an ever-shifting alignment of players, parties, and ideologies will promote research-based federal education legislation that will continue to exert extensive influences—by leveraging the power of targeted categorical investments in local schools—on the teaching of literacy and the English language arts.

References