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Conflicting Questions: Why Historians and Policymakers Miscommunicate on Urban Education.

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CLIO

AT THE TABLE

Using History to Inform
and Improve Education Policy

Edited by
Kenneth K. Wong & Robert Rothman



PETER LANG

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Conflicting Questions

Why Historians AND Policymakers
Miscommunicate ON Urban Education

JACK DOUGHERTY

In my mind, history and policy tend to go together. Fifteen years ago, while teaching high school history in Newark, New Jersey, I guided my students as we investigated local urban policy issues. From there I enrolled as a graduate student the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where I concentrated in educational history and policy, and also studied with professors in the Department of History as well as the La Follette Institute of Public Policy. Currently, as an associate professor at Trinity College, my teaching focuses on the intersection of educational history and policy, through courses such as *Education Reform: Past & Present*. My first book concluded with a chapter titled "Rethinking History and Policy in the Post-Brown Era," which argued that in order to move forward on our present-day dilemmas over race and education, we needed to reexamine the past and our stories about how we arrived at our contemporary dilemmas.¹

Yet while history and policy come together in my work, they do not coexist harmoniously. In recent years, while my students and I have worked on the Cities, Suburbs, and Schools research project and interacted with a broad array of local, regional, and state policymakers, we have occasionally found ourselves in the midst of conflict and miscommunication. On these days, when the history side of my brain is pushed closer to the policy side, it makes me feel somewhat schizophrenic. Historians and policymakers tend to ask different types of

questions, and as a result, I sometimes feel as if I'm hearing competing voices inside my head.

This chapter outlines three types of conflicting questions posed by historians and policymakers on the topic of urban education:

1. Conflicting orientations on past, present, and future
2. Conflicting purposes of historical interpretation
3. Conflicting views on historical understanding versus policy action

Furthermore, I will illustrate each topic with examples drawn from historical research and policy discussions in metropolitan Hartford, Connecticut, and will offer reflections on the writings of other scholars who also have addressed similar themes.

CONFLICTING ORIENTATIONS ON PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

The first and most basic difference between historians and policymakers concerns our conflicting orientations with respect to the past, present, and future. Historians stand in the present and look backward to ask: *What happened? How has change or continuity occurred from the past to the present?* By contrast, policymakers also stand in the present, though they look in the opposite direction, oriented toward the future, to ask: *What will happen next?*

This fundamental difference in orientations appears simple, but I wish to offer a concrete example to illustrate how it leads to significant miscommunication between historians and policymakers. Recently, my students and I prepared a report for policy audiences on the progress of the long-running *Sheff v O'Neill* school desegregation case. In 1989, Elizabeth Horton Sheff and other parents filed a lawsuit against then-Governor William O'Neill, charging that Connecticut's system of separate city and suburban school districts led to racially segregated schools, which violated their state constitutional rights to equal educational opportunity. In 1996, after a prolonged trial, Connecticut's Supreme Court split 4-3 in favor of the plaintiffs, ruling that the racial and socioeconomic isolation of Hartford schoolchildren violated the state constitution. However, the Court did not specify a goal, remedy, or timetable to resolve this problem, turning it over to the executive and legislative branches instead. Eventually, in 2003, the Sheff plaintiffs and state defendants agreed on a legal settlement, approved by the Connecticut General Assembly, which relied upon voluntary desegregation efforts and additional funding to meet a specific goal. According to the settlement, by 2007, at least 30 percent of the public school minority students

residing in Hartford were to be educated in a reduced-isolation setting, through inter-district magnet schools, city-suburban school transfers, and part-time cooperative exchange programs.²

Since the four-year settlement period was coming to a close, we decided to issue a policy report, documenting the racial composition of public schools and the efficacy of desegregation reforms from 1989 to the present. We pulled together nearly two decades of data on local school districts, plus the results of adding 22 inter-district magnet schools and expanding city-suburb transfers, into a coherent package of maps and charts to illustrate what had (and had not) changed over time. In essence, we became unofficial scorekeepers in a numbers-driven legal battle because no one else had risen to fill that role. Our report did not feature in-depth historical analysis, because we were simply trying to put facts into public view, to provide a deeper knowledge base for broader policy discussion.

To ensure that policy audiences understood our report, my students and I gave several preview sessions, where we walked readers through the data from past to present, documenting how little progress had been achieved under the current desegregation plan. Although the settlement had called for a goal of 30 percent of Hartford minority students in reduced-isolation settings, we found that only 17 percent of students were in schools that passed the legal requirement (and only 9 percent were enrolled in schools that met the spirit of the goal, in practice). In our minds, we thought that our longitudinal report, with key data from 1989 to the current school year, had addressed their policy needs. But during the question and answer period, one policymaker turned to us and said, "This is all very interesting. But what I really want to see are the data projections. Can you tell us where we will be in the future?"

The pained expression on my face revealed much about why historians and policymakers speak in different languages. Unwittingly, the policymaker had asked me to step over a line, dividing the past and future, that respectable historians dare not cross. Back in graduate school, our instructors socialized us to adopt what might be called the historians' Hippocratic oath, particularly for those working on topics relevant to contemporary policy issues, such as education. We swore an oath against *presentism*. In the words of our advisor's advisor, the eminent Harvard historian Bernard Bailyn, it sounded like one of the Ten Commandments: Thou shalt not write histories of the past as "simply the present writ small."³ The classic example of the fallen historian was always Ellwood Cubberley, the Progressive-era Stanford professor of educational administration whose erroneous interpretation of the past was fused with his politics of the present.⁴ As a rule, historians of our current generation are very cautious against becoming trapped in the present. Of course, we recognize that our views on the past are inevitably shaped by our present-day circumstances. But our stated mission is to understand the past on

its own terms, not solely through the lens of present-day policy debates. When I became trained as an historian, it seemed that presentism itself was a sufficiently serious charge to warrant excommunication from the profession; crossing over into futurism could only be worse.

So, back in Hartford, I turned to the policymaker and mumbled something about our report focusing only on historical data, from past to present. If he wanted future projections on school racial populations and policy forecasts, I recommended that he consult a different specialist, such as a demographer, who could mix together various assumptions and deliver the type of speculation they were looking for. (From my narrow perspective as an historian, it was tempting to add that these future-oriented social scientists practiced something akin to the Dark Arts, but I held my tongue.) But our miscommunication was caused by differing temporal outlooks: policymakers looked forward, while historians like me looked back.

CONFLICTING PURPOSES OF HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

A second area of disagreement concerns how different parties envision the purpose of historical interpretation. Historians tend to explore these questions for their own sake, asking: *Which interpretation best explains how and why change and/or continuity occurred?* Yet policymakers tend to use history for more instrumental purposes, asking: *Which interpretation helps to advance our broader policy goals?* In drawing this distinction, I do not wish to perpetuate the false dichotomy that policymakers crassly seek their own interests while historians nobly pursue the dream of “objectivity.”⁵ Historians are self-interested people, too. Instead, my intention is to illuminate how the different contexts surrounding each group’s work shapes our conceptualization and use of history.

Historians are not foreigners to educational policy disputes, particularly those involving the judicial branch of government. Several prominent U.S. historians have authored important legal briefs or served as expert witnesses on school desegregation cases. For instance, in 1953, when the U.S. Supreme Court instructed the attorneys in *Brown v Board of Education* to reargue their case, they asked for historical evidence on whether members of the Reconstruction-era Congress and state legislatures intended that the Fourteenth Amendment would abolish public school segregation. Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP turned to three prominent Southern historians—Horace Mann Bond, C. Vann Woodward, and John Hope Franklin—to research their case and formulate interpretations to be used in court.⁶ More recently, historians have submitted legal briefs on whether the framers of the Fourteenth Amendment were “color-blind” or race-conscious, in

an effort to influence the Justices’ opinions in the 2007 Louisville and Seattle desegregation cases.⁷ Policymakers (at least those involved in judicial cases) call upon the services of historians when they seek evidence on the decades-old intent behind a law or the historical facts on a case.

In Connecticut, the *Sheff v O’Neill* desegregation trial illustrates how historical interpretations can change during the litigation process, particularly as historians and lawyers use them with different ends in mind. History played an important role in this case because both the plaintiffs and defendants sought to persuade the court about the root cause of educational inequality between Hartford and its suburbs. When the Sheff plaintiffs filed their lawsuit in 1989, they initially constructed a two-prong historical argument: the state was culpable for public school inequalities due to the governmental role in creating and maintaining segregated education as well as segregated housing. Specifically, the original lawsuit claimed that the State “also failed to take action to afford meaningful racial and economic integration of housing within school zones and school districts in the Hartford metropolitan region.”⁸

But later, when the plaintiffs went to trial in 1992, they amended their legal argument and therefore their historical interpretation. The plaintiffs requested the court’s permission to drop the second half of their original two-prong argument, by deleting their claim about the state’s role in segregated housing. According to their motion, the plaintiffs sought to “eliminate any ambiguity in the pleadings that may be relied on by the defendants to divert the court’s attention from the important educational issues that are at the core of this case.”⁹ But this significant change in interpreting the root historical cause of the problem was shaped largely by legal strategy. The Sheff case depended entirely upon the guarantees defined by the equal protection and free public education clauses of Connecticut’s state constitution. In other words, the law guaranteed the equal educational opportunity, but did not make as strong a statement about housing, so the historical interpretation shifted to fit better with the law.

Once the trial was underway, all sides devoted great attention to a historical question: did state actions play a role in creating educational inequality? The plaintiffs called the State Historian, University of Connecticut Professor Christopher Collier, to the witness stand and questioned him on this issue. Collier was careful with the facts. Connecticut never had a state policy of de jure segregation, he explained. Regarding state policies on racial matters, Connecticut was relatively progressive, compared to other Northern states. But the one specific piece of historical evidence that Collier did provide in support of the plaintiffs’ case was Connecticut’s policy on designating school district boundaries. In 1909, the state legislature consolidated the existing patchwork system so that each school district boundary would be identical with its municipal boundary. This meant

that Hartford students would attend Hartford city schools, and suburban students would attend their own suburban schools. In Collier's view, the 1909 district boundary law was the most important factor contributing to "present segregated conditions" in urban schools.¹⁰

The Sheff defendants sharply challenged Collier's testimony. In cross-examination, the State Historian conceded that when the school district boundary consolidation law passed in 1909, the act was viewed as an exercise in governmental efficiency. It had "nothing to do with race whatsoever," because at that time, both the city and suburbs were predominantly white.¹¹ In the defendants' legal briefs, they forcefully argued that the plaintiffs had failed to prove any state action causing segregated schooling, since the 1909 law was adopted long before its racial consequences in the 1950s and '60s could have been foreseen.¹² Furthermore, the defendants reminded the Court that "this is in no way a housing or zoning case, the plaintiffs having expressly disavowed such a claim."¹³

Which historical interpretation about state action was most persuasive? Hypothetically, if the Sheff case had been tried before a court of historians, it would have been very difficult for the plaintiffs to argue persuasively that a 1909 state action on school district boundaries alone (with no reference to housing) was the primary culprit. Historian Kenneth Jackson and others have documented the role that governmental housing policies have played in intensifying city-suburban inequalities during the post-war era. For example, exclusive suburban zoning policies (backed by state governmental approval) designated minimum building lot sizes and single-family housing construction requirements which essentially guaranteed that only higher-income families could afford to purchase new homes in heavily zoned suburbs.¹⁴ But given that the Sheff plaintiffs had to frame their historical interpretation around their constitutional legal argument, this broader analysis of the problem was not discussed in court.

The Sheff plaintiffs narrowly won their case in 1996. The Court's four-vote majority ruling underscored Collier's historical interpretation, by finding that "the state has nonetheless played a significant role. . . . Although intended to improve the quality of education and not racially or ethnically motivated, the districting statute that the legislature enacted in 1909 . . . is the *single most important factor* contributing to the present concentration of racial and ethnic minorities in the Hartford public school system."¹⁵ But in a strong dissent, the other three justices held to the defendant's historical interpretation, that no evidence of state action in segregating schools had been proven. Framing the inequality case entirely around schools, rather than schools and housing, also had other consequences. To date, the Sheff remedies have focused entirely on educational policy, not housing policy, even though most historians would agree that a combination of the two would be a more compelling explanation for city-suburban inequality over time.

Today in metropolitan Hartford, school desegregation advocates and affordable housing advocates operate largely in separate spheres, working on separate policy agendas, despite their common history and potential for common ground.

CONFLICTING VIEWS ON HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING VERSUS POLICY ACTION

At the core, there is a third fundamental difference between the roles of these two groups. On one hand, historians *seek a deeper understanding* of how and why change and continuity occurred over time, while on the other hand, policymakers *take actions to govern*. Both groups give serious thought to the problems at hand, but with very different intentions in mind. My recent experience in Connecticut shows how this division has led to some interesting examples where the two sides meet on a topic of mutual interest, yet fail to communicate fully in each other's terms.

At Trinity College, economics professor Diane Zannoni and our students and I worked with officials from a large suburb to study the relationship between home prices and school test scores over time. We framed our inquiry around these questions: Inside this suburban school district, how much more did homebuyers pay to purchase a house on the higher-scoring side of an elementary school attendance boundary, holding constant the characteristics of the home and the neighborhood? Furthermore, how did this economic relationship change over a decade (1996–2005), amid the expanding politics of school accountability and the Internet?

On the academic side, we worked together as economists and historians to understand this complex relationship between homes and schools. Our study found that in this particular suburb, for comparable homes located in geographically similar neighborhoods, a 12 percentage point increase (or one standard deviation) in the number of fourth-graders meeting the state-approved goal on the Connecticut Mastery Test was associated with a 2.8 percent (or \$5,065) increase in the price of an average \$200,000 home, in year 2000 dollars. Furthermore, we found that this test-price relationship became stronger over time, from the first half of our time period (1996–2000, a 1.2 percent gain) to the second half (2001–05, a 4.2 percent gain), in year 2000 dollars.

Our interpretation of this quantitative result emerged from our historical understanding of politics, markets, and schools in suburbia. Connecticut established a statewide achievement test in 1985, and required uniform reporting of scores in 1992, but these data typically appeared only once a year, in the local newspaper, and were not easily accessible to prospective homeowners. But after 2000, school test

scores became more widely available on websites operated by the state government, as well as those by advocacy groups and real estate interests. More important, these data became instantaneously accessible to consumers, rather than appearing only once a year, and became a larger part of public policy discourse with the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. Whether or not Connecticut's standardized test scores actually measured educational quality did not matter; the point is that homebuyers *believed* that these numbers had value, and our study proved that they paid more to buy private homes on the higher-scoring side of attendance boundary lines, to gain access to those public schools.¹⁶

We returned to the suburb to present our findings to local officials, and to discuss their implications. From my perspective as a historian, I emphasized how public schools and private real estate markets were deeply connected, and had become even more so in recent years. To their ears, my presentation sounded very much like a professor advancing another "big idea," which seemed like common sense to them. Of course their suburban public schools attracted homebuyers; that had been one of the town's implicit development strategies for decades. Our data simply confirmed what they instinctively knew. The local policymakers responded to our research by asking a question arising from their most pressing policy issue of that moment: "How will this help us to get our school budget approved by the voters?" The pressure to maintain the quality of the town's public school system, with limited state funding, had once again created a political standoff between elected officials and a local organization calling for reduced property taxes. My students and I could not provide a meaningful answer to this question, since our research was framed around a "deep question," which failed to translate into a clear policy directive.

Yet other audiences did make effective use of related test-price research produced by other scholars. In 2005, the National Association of Realtors published a resource "toolkit" on public schools for its extensive membership of real estate agents across the nation. In its introduction, the booklet summarized the latest scholarship by leading economists, emphasizing that "the link between public schools and neighborhood quality is not just intuitive to REALTORS®; there is solid academic research to back it up." After reviewing findings from key studies, it encouraged real estate agents to "forge better working relationships with local school boards." After all, "REALTORS® shouldn't be shy about getting involved . . . because what's good for neighborhood schools is also good for real estate markets."¹⁷ In sum, three different constituents each had a different relationship to the schools and housing phenomenon: historians researched how it changed over time, policymakers sought to transform it for their political advantage, business interests asked, "How can we profit from this?" All of us were working for very different goals.

CAN EDUCATIONAL HISTORIANS AND POLICYMAKERS WORK TOGETHER?

By our nature, historians would be the first to point out that this very question has its own literature. Carl Kaestle, Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, and Bill Reese all have chronicled the weak relationship between educational research, policy, and practice during the nation's past century.¹⁸ Yet many historians seem to hold onto the hope that history can be relevant for policymaking. In their introduction to *Learning from the Past*, Diane Ravitch and Maris Vinovskis, both historians with significant experience in federal policymaking, make a compelling case for significance: School reform and other contemporary policy issues "have historical antecedents," they claim. "Unfortunately, many policy makers and analysts believe that current problems are new and unprecedented. Implicit in many current writings and actions is the unexamined belief that knowledge of history is not necessary or particularly helpful. This is regrettable because so often in retrospect a broader historical appreciation of the earlier efforts to promote educational change might have provided some useful guidance for those previous school reformers."¹⁹

In a more recent volume, Vinovskis argues that during the earlier years of the nation's history, policy leaders were greatly influenced by historians. Prior to the twentieth century, policymakers "frequently turned to history for guidance and inspiration," he argues, though mostly for "moral instruction rather than specific policy guidance."²⁰ Yet in recent decades, the influence of history on policy has sharply declined, for two reasons. First, Vinovskis contends that historians have professionalized and many became cautious about preserving their "objective" stance as separate from political activity. Second, observed the policy historian Hugh Graham, when policymakers of the late twentieth century sought advice, they increasingly turned to their "experienced line staff, to lawyers and 'hard' social scientists, or to policy analysts trained in systems analysis and operations research" who were "trained in problem solving" through cost-benefit analysis. By contrast, Graham noted, "historians are quickest to see what's wrong with politically tempting analogies" by arguing how historical contexts differ from setting to setting.²¹

Despite this general decline, Vinovskis points to a rising generation of scholarly historians who have become more interested in policy, the growth of academic presses publishing books with historical analysis of policy issues, and the creation of the *Journal of Policy History* in 1989. Indeed, as Peter Stearns has observed, history and policy have become so deeply intertwined, as policymakers "inevitably use history either to help explicate policy or at least to justify it after the fact," particularly through historical analogies to present-day issues, whether accurate or misleading.²²

To be sure, conflicts between the worldviews of academics and policymakers are not limited to historians. In *Why Sociology Does Not Apply*, Robert Scott and Arnold Shore underscored the challenges of integrating research grounded in a disciplinary perspective with policymaking that is driven by other motivations.²³ In addition, Douglas Ashford has outlined the difficulties faced in comparative public policy research, where researchers expand the domain of knowledge beyond conventional U.S. case studies, forcing even deeper thought about what does (or does not) apply.²⁴ But compared to other academics, historians face a more daunting challenge because of the temporal gap: our work is expressly devoted to the past, while policymaking looks toward the future.

If historians and policymakers did wish to cooperate more effectively on educational issues (and that's a big "if"), then both parties would need to make important changes. On one hand, historians would need to rethink our institutionalized aversion to presentism. In a published exchange between historians employed in professional schools, Jonathan Zimmerman argued that there are two different types:

One type of presentism analyzes contemporary issues in historical perspective, asking how knowledge of earlier eras might make us change the way we look at our own. A second type starts with a present-day opinion or perspective, then seeks historical examples or precedents to justify it. I think the second kind of presentism has given the first kind a bad rap. Of course, we should never write or teach history solely as a means of justifying our current-day predilections or opinions. But we should teach history as a way to interrogate the present—that is, to make our current circumstances less certain, less stable, and less taken-for-granted than they already are.²⁵

If historians wish to bridge the divide with policymakers, we need to take a step closer to accepting Zimmerman's first type of presentism and recognizing its difference from the second.

On the other hand, if policymakers wish to cooperate more closely with historians, they need to reflect on how and why historical thinking might possibly alter their decision-making process. Consider what the policy historians Richard Neustadt and Ernest May pose in their book, *Thinking in Time*, as an alternative reason for studying the past: its ability to stimulate historical imagination. "Seeing the past can help one envision alternative futures," they write. While history cannot tell policymakers what to do, studying the past can teach us how to ask probing questions, especially about our presumptions about contemporary policies. "The point is to get forward, as soon as possible, the questions that ought to be asked," Neustadt and May argue, "before anyone says, 'This is what we should do' or 'Here's how to do it'."²⁶

Putting forward the questions that "ought to be asked" and debunking misleading historical analogies sounds like good advice for historians. But it places the burden on historians to act *before* the policymaking process begins, and to interrupt conventional trains of thought. Is this possible for historians to do, given all of our differences with policymakers cited above? Change is possible only if policymakers desire for it to happen.

Indeed, policymakers and historians tend to operate on very different schedules, the former usually moving much faster than the latter. But the policy formation process does not always operate at full speed. Occasionally, windows of opportunity can arise when policymakers would benefit from stepping back and welcoming historians to engage in some serious reflection on past and present.²⁷ At the same time, historians would benefit by preparing for these opportunities in our writing and public outreach, and reconsidering our stance on presentism. After all, what appears to be today's "crisis of the moment" is part of a larger crisis over time. Finding our way out of the present situation requires a deeper understanding of how we arrived here in the first place.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lessons FROM THE Past

A Challenge AND A Caution FOR
Policy-Relevant History

TRACY L. STEFFES

In their popular 1986 text, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers*, Richard Neustadt and Ernest May of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government extolled the virtues of using history in the decision-making process. Writing at a time when history was largely out of favor in policy analysis, Neustadt and May sought to stimulate conversation about the role that history could play in guiding policy. History, they argued, can provide policymakers with analogies and comparisons that can profitably guide action; help them more fully understand people, institutions, and issues in negotiating; and locate decisions in "time streams" that have predictive value. History, they suggested, could help policymakers avoid mistakes, inform their understanding of present options, and anticipate future outcomes.

In advising decision-makers on whom to turn to for historical knowledge, however, Neustadt and May relegated academic historians to a minor role. Officials, they argued, "probably do right to put them last" on the list of authorities to consult, because conversations among policymakers and historians "can resemble those between Chinese speaking different dialects." Scholars "know too much and may well have trouble saying anything without qualification." While Neustadt and May "dream[ed] of a day when officials and historians will talk to each other more easily," they viewed the prospects of this as slim.¹