

METHODS OF POLICY ANALYSIS IN EDUCATION
Education 8340:10

Graduate School of Education and Human Development
The George Washington University

Fall, 2019
Tuesday: 7:10 p.m.-9:00 p.m.
3 credits

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Note

This is the syllabus for Fall, 2019. The general format of the course and the learning goals remain consistent from year to year. However, education policy is a continually evolving field and the focus of the curriculum can be expected to change as public policies change.

Overview

The course examines the role of research in analyzing federal, state, and local education policies. The focus is on research and analysis that demonstrate a range of public policy issues and research methods. Policy issues are considered from several perspectives: federal education policy; state and local education policy; higher education policy; the social context; and the international context. Specific topics are chosen to reflect current education policy and research issues. Course topics include: school choice; testing; school finance; access to higher education; the broader social context; international perspectives on education policy; international test-score comparisons; and considerations in conducting and interpreting research. The course is intended both for students interested in conducting public policy research and for those who wish to become informed consumers of research relevant to educational policy and practice.

Learning Goals

The three key Education Policy learning goals are:

- Goal 1: Program graduates will understand the complexities of federal/state/local education policy reforms.
- Goal 2: Program graduates will be able to critically analyze education policy research.
- Goal 3: Program graduates will be able to design research studies to analyze education policies.

These goals are integral to the course and incorporated throughout the course. The course builds on components developed in earlier courses, with the focus on those that have been less emphasized in these courses. The following are examples of key analytic skills that students are expected to gain.

- Reading research and policy analyses thoughtfully and “critically,” seeking evidence, testing assumptions, questioning conclusions and interpretations, and distinguishing between facts and value judgments.
- Formulating research questions.
- Understanding how the choice of research methodology affects the research findings.
- Building on critiques to strengthen research and to develop more effective education policies.
- Formulating arguments that are persuasive and supporting conclusions with evidence.
- Understanding and presenting the arguments on both sides of an issue.
- Writing effective policy analyses that are supported with research evidence.
- Assessing policy relevance and feasibility.
- Formulating alternative education policies and understanding the tradeoffs.
- Gaining a perspective on U.S. education policy by understanding the broader social and international context.

These skills are developed and evaluated through class participation, written analyses and oral reports given as part of the class work, a paper, and a final take-home exam that is the equivalent of two papers, one focusing on policy analysis and the other on methodology. Skills emphasized in the class include, for example: (1) formulating research questions; (2) defining independent and dependent variables operationally; (3) accounting for confounding variables; (4) accounting for inconsistencies among research findings given differences in settings and methodology; (5) analyzing methodological problems in conducting comparative studies; (6) selecting research topics that are feasible and relevant to formulating education policy; and (7) drawing implications for education policy.

Required Readings

- Richard J. Light and David B. Pillemer, *Summing Up: The Science of Reviewing Research*.
- Research reports and articles relevant to each of the issues outlined in the class schedule below. A list of readings, along with discussion questions, will be distributed at least one week prior to the class that addresses each issue. The focus of the readings is on the type of work that is typically conducted in the field of policy research. In addition, students are responsible for reading relevant articles in *Education Week* and in a daily newspaper.
- Students are expected to select a few relevant articles or research reports during the semester to distribute to the class.
- At various times during the course students will be asked to conduct outside “research” on topics discussed in class.

Course Activities

Each student will be responsible for the following activities during the semester:

1. Participation in class discussions of readings. In these discussions, it is particularly important that you have read the material and thought through the issues. I am not looking for the “right” answer, but rather your ability to analyze issues based on evidence, assess tradeoffs, build on ideas, distinguish facts from value judgments, make connections between different policy and research issues, draw policy implications, offer constructive criticism, ask and answer questions, and stay on point. Quality is more important than quantity! Class discussions are an integral part of the course, and it is important to attend each of the class sessions. If you are unable to attend a particular class, please let me know in advance. Students who miss a class will be asked to prepare short analyses that address the issues discussed that week in addition to the work that was assigned in preparation for that class. In addition to preparing for class discussions, students will be asked most weeks to prepare a 2-3 page policy analysis of a key issue that will be addressed in class. Topics will be distributed, along with the readings and discussion questions, at least a week before the relevant classes: 50% of grade.
2. A 10-page paper analyzing the report of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), an international comparison of science and mathematics test scores at the end of secondary school. The paper should discuss the following topics:
 - The validity of the test-score comparisons based on the following methodological considerations: (1) sampling (participation and exclusion rates); (2) % of 25-34 year-olds completing secondary education; (3) % of students taking advanced assessments as a proportion of the age cohort; (4) average age and grade of participating students; (5) type of school and program; and (6) poverty rates. The discussion should include an analysis of both the general and the advanced tests.

Analyze the potential cumulative effects of the variables outlined above, as well as their individual effects.

- The consistency between the study methodology and findings as described in (1) the body of the report; (2) the executive summary of the report; and (3) the press accounts.
- The public policy implications of the reported findings—for example, the extent to which the rankings reflect the quality of education in each of the participating countries.
- Your conclusions about (1) whether or not the rankings serve a useful purpose; (2) what might be done differently in conducting future studies; (3) what might be done differently in the press releases.
- The type of international comparisons/studies you believe would be most useful.

The information required to address these topics will be distributed in class. Papers are due on October 4th. 20% of grade.

3. Take-home exam. Students will be asked to respond to essay questions designed to build on the approaches to policy analysis discussed in class. The response to each question should be about 10 pages. The take-home exam is due on December 12th. 30% of grade.

Your paper, policy analyses, and take-home exam should be clearly written, well-organized, and edited. Support your assertions with research evidence and citations (using APA style). All papers should be double-spaced.

Revising Papers

You will have the option of revising your TIMSS paper for a higher grade. The grade on the revised version of the paper will then be averaged with the grade on the first version to arrive at the final grade for that paper. If the first grade is an A-, the grade for the revised version of the paper will be the final grade for the paper. The revised paper is due one week after receiving the comments and grade on the first version.

Office Hours

Please get in touch with me to schedule an appointment. In addition, I plan to schedule at least one meeting with each student during the semester and I also welcome additional individual meetings with students.

Academic Integrity

All papers and other assignments and work products are expected to be completed in conformance with The George Washington University Code of Academic Integrity. Note especially the definition of plagiarism; “Intentionally representing the words, ideas, or sequence of ideas of another as one’s own in any academic exercise; failure to attribute any of the following: quotations, paraphrases, or borrowed information.”

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

In order to receive accommodations on the basis of disability, a student must give notice and provide proper documentation to the Office of Disability Support Services (DSS), Marvin Center 436, (202) 994-8250. Accommodations will be made based on the recommendations of the DSS office.

Class Schedule

August 27: Setting the Context

Public policy research and analysis; current issues

September 3: Testing

What are the key factors to consider in interpreting test-score comparisons? Are student scores on standardized tests reliable and valid indicators of teacher effectiveness? Why/Why not? What evidence are you using to reach that conclusion?

September 10: Charter Schools, Part 1

What is the impact of charter schools on student achievement? What methodological problems do you need to consider in making that judgment?

September 17: Charter Schools, Part 2

What is the impact of charter schools on segregation and other social issues? What methodological problems do you need to consider in making that judgment?

September 24: Charter Schools, Part 3

Class debate

October 1: Does Money Matter?

Does the research show a link between level of resources and student achievement? What research evidence are you using to draw your conclusion? How might the research questions and study design influence the outcomes?

PAPER DUE: OCTOBER 4

October 8: Research and Analysis

Selecting research topics; formulating research questions; defining independent and dependent variables, communicating research results; applying research results in the formulation of public policy

October 15: Higher Education, Part 1

Increasing access: How have college and university policies influenced access to higher education? What are the current trends in access?

October 22: Fall Break

No class

October 29: Higher Education, Part 2

Class debate

November 5: The Class's Class

Your choice of topic

TAKE-HOME EXAM DISTRIBUTED

November 12: The Social Context

Placing education policies in perspective: What is the impact of poverty, the widening income gap, and housing on student achievement?

November 19: The International Context, Part 1

What factors need to be considered in assessing the validity of international comparisons?
Can these comparisons provide useful policy information?

November 26: Thanksgiving Week

No class

December 3: The International Context, Part 2

Do other countries face problems similar to those in the United States? How are their policies designed to address the problems?

December 10: Makeup Class

Wrap-up and discussion

TAKE-HOME EXAM DUE: DECEMBER 12

HAPPY HOLIDAYS!

DISCUSSION TOPICS

September 3, 2019

Readings:

- Tables distributed in class: NAEP, SAT, and economic and other indicators.
- Daniel M. Koretz, "Limitations in the Use of Achievement Tests as Measures of Educators' Productivity." *The Journal of Human Resources*, Autumn 2002, pages 752-777 (no cost if read online).
- Dan Goldhaber, "A Gloomy Perspective on High-Stakes Testing." Review of "The Testing Charade: Pretending to Make Schools Better" by Daniel Koretz, *Education Next*, Spring, 2018.
- Daniel Koretz, "A Realistic Perspective on High-Stakes Testing." Response to Dan Goldhaber's review, *Education Next*, Spring, 2018.

Discussion Issues:

- What conclusions would you draw about the quality of a state's education system if the students in the state had high average SAT scores? High average NAEP scores? High average scores in high-stakes standardized tests? What variables would you want to consider in making these judgments? Please be prepared to support your comments from the tables distributed in class and any other sources you wish.

- In your view, are the main arguments made by Dan Goldhaber based on research evidence? The main arguments by Daniel Koretz? What are their main points of agreement/disagreement? To what extent are the points of disagreement based on disagreement about facts or the interpretation of those facts? Please give examples to support your points.

Policy Analysis:

Please prepare a 2-3 page analysis that presents an argument, based on research evidence, which supports either Goldhaber's or Koretz's point of view.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

September 10, 17, and 24, 2019

September 11 – Charter Schools, Part 1

Readings:

- Adam Gamoran and Cristina M. Fernandez, “Do Charter Schools Strengthen Education in High-Poverty Urban Districts?” in *Choosing Charters: Better Schools or More Segregation?* Iris C. Rotberg and Joshua L. Glazer, Editors, Teachers College Press, 2019, pages 133-152.
- Douglas N. Harris et al, “The Effects of the New Orleans Post-Katrina Market-Based School Reforms on Student Achievement, High School Graduation, and College Outcomes.” Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, July 15, 2018, pages 1-8 and 42-45.
- Mercedes Schneiders’s Blog, “How to Make New Orleans Market Ed Reform a Success: Hide RSD Failure inside an OPSB-RSD Data Blend,” July 22, 2018.
- Christina Clark Tuttle et al, “KIPP Middle Schools: Impacts on Achievement and Other Outcomes.” Final Report, February 27, 2013, Executive Summary, pages xiii-xx.

Discussion Issues:

- Based on our discussion of test-score comparisons, what methodological factors need to be considered in comparing charter schools with traditional public schools? What other methodological issues, specifically related to charter school comparisons, might you wish to consider? Does the

- Gamoran/Fernandez analysis account for these factors in its conclusions? Please explain.
- What additional methodological issues should be considered in the study of New Orleans by Harris et al? The “rebuttal” in Mercedes Schneider’s Blog? Please explain.
 - What questions would you ask Tuttle et al to assess the validity of their findings?
 - Many studies have been designed to compare the achievement of charter school students with students in traditional public schools? Do you think this is a meaningful comparison? Why/Why not? What would you recommend instead?

Policy Analysis:

Please write a 3-page analysis of Gamoran/Fernandez’s research review. What are its strengths? Weaknesses? In your view, are the positive outcomes described in the study by Harris et al (and cited by Gamoran/Fernandez on pages 137-138 of their chapter) convincing? What implications would you draw for future research and/or policy?

September 18 – Charter Schools, Part 2

Readings:

- Grover J. “Rus” Whitehead et al, “Segregation, Race, and Charter Schools: What do we know?” Center on Children and Families at Brookings, October, 2016.
- Iris C. Rotberg, “A School System Increasingly Segregated.” In *Choosing Charters: Better Schools or More Segregation?*

Iris C. Rotberg and Joshua L. Glazer, Editors, Teachers College Press, 2018, pages 41-60.

- Brenda Shum, "Civil Rights Protections for Students Enrolled in Charter Schools." *Choosing Charters: Better Schools or More Segregation?* Iris C. Rotberg and Joshua L. Glazer, Editors. Teachers College Press, 2018, pages 153-162. (Our discussion will focus on the section on New Orleans, pages 158-160.)

Discussion Issues:

- How might the methodological issues pertaining to measures and "geographical scale" (as described in Section 2 of the report by Whitehead et al) influence the results and interpretations of segregation research? Please be prepared to give examples from subsequent sections of the report.
- In your view, is the title, "A School System Increasingly Segregated," supported by the arguments and evidence in the chapter? What are the strengths of the chapter? Weaknesses? What implications would you draw for future research and/or policy?
- What implications do you draw when you combine the results of the research on student achievement outcomes in New Orleans with Shum's analysis of New Orleans in her chapter, "Civil Rights Protections for Students Enrolled in Charter Schools?"

Policy Analysis:

The last paragraph on page 53 of the report by Whitehead et al states:

“These findings and conclusions do not, of course, support an argument for more racially and economically segregated schools. They do, however, provide evidence that supports a focus on quality schools for students and suggest that economic and racial integration of schools is an indirect route to that goal, and not necessarily essential to its achievement.”

Please write a 3-page analysis of this statement that considers its assumptions, the evidence on which the assumptions are based, and the policy implications of the tradeoffs it implies.

September 25 – Charter Schools, Part 3:

Class debate. Issues to be formulated in class.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

October 1, 2019

Readings:

- Bruce D. Baker and Kevin G. Welner, "School Finance and Courts: Does Reform Matter and How Can We Tell?" The article can be retrieved from the Horace Mann League Blog, where it was posted on July 5, 2013.
- Bruce D. Baker, "Does Money Matter in Education?" Second Edition, Albert Shanker Institute, 2016. There is considerable overlap between this report and the Baker and Welner article. In the Baker report, please focus on (1) the various ways the question of "Does money matter?" are posed and (2) the section, "Do Resources Matter?"
- A brief overview of "San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez" (decided March 21, 1973). See, for example, the Oyez website.
- Dissenting Opinion by Thurgood Marshall in San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez, 1973.

Discussion Issues:

- What are the factors that make it difficult to assess the effects of school finance reform cases?
- In your view, what outcome measures should be used in making these assessments? What outcome measures does the Baker and Welner article propose?
- Are student test scores a valid method of assessing the impact of school finance reform? Why?/Why not?
- The way the question "Does money matter?" is framed can determine the findings of the research. Please be prepared to

describe the various ways the question can be framed, the one(s) you consider optimum, and your rationale.

- Do you agree with the arguments in Justice Marshall's dissent? If you had been on the court would you have joined the dissent or supported the majority? Please give your rationale.

Policy Analysis:

Please write a 2-3 page essay responding to one of the five quotes on page 1 of the Baker report. In the essay, please describe your areas of agreement/disagreement with the quote and the evidence on which you base your arguments.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

October 8, 2019

Readings:

- Richard J. Light and David B. Pillemer, *Summing Up: The Science of Reviewing Research*.
- Heather Schwartz, "Housing Policy is School Policy: Economically Integrative Housing Promotes Academic Success in Montgomery County, Maryland." The Century Foundation, 2010.
- Ludger Woessmann, "Countries with Performance Pay for Teachers Score Higher on PISA Tests." *Education Next*, Spring, 2011.
- Yong Zhao ."What Works May Hurt: Side Effects in Education, *Journal of Educational Change*," February 4, 2017.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Plan to comment on the Schwartz and Woessmann readings, using criteria drawn from *Summing Up* and any other sources you believe are relevant. What are the methodological issues that need to be considered in designing this research? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each of the studies? In your view, are the research findings valid? Are the implications drawn from these findings supported by evidence? Why? Why not?
- Please select a research issue that you believe could productively be studied and (1) prepare a short (one paragraph) problem statement giving your rationale for the choice and (2) delineate the research questions that would guide your study and the outcome measures you would use.

Please distribute to the class a PowerPoint-type outline that lists the main points you plan to make in discussing each of these topics.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

October 15 and 29, 2019

October 15

Readings:

- *The New York Times*, “Justice Department backs Suit Accusing Harvard of Discriminating Against Asian-American Applicants,” by Katie Brenner, August 30, 2018.
- *Harvard Gazette*, “Hundreds of Experts, Scholars back Harvard in Admissions Suit,” by Colleen Walsh, August 31, 2018.
- United States’ Statement of Interest in Opposition to Defendant’s Motion for Summary Judgment. United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts Boston Division, Students for Fair Admissions, Inc., Plaintiff v. President and Fellows of Harvard College (Harvard Corporation), Defendant, Civil Action No. 1: 14-cv-14176-ADB, Document 397, Filed 8/30/18.
- Brief of Amici Curiae the American Civil Liberties Union and the ACLU of Massachusetts, Inc., in Opposition to Plaintiff’s Motion for Summary Judgment. United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts Boston Division, Students for Fair Admissions, Inc., Plaintiff v. President and Fellows of Harvard College (Harvard Corporation), Defendant, Civil Action No. 1: 14-cv-14176-ADB, Document 508, Filed 8/30/18.
- *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003). A short summary of the case can be found on the Justia site.
- Rachel Baker, Daniel Klasik, and Sean F. Reardon, “Race and Stratification in College Enrollment over Time.” Stanford,

Discussion Issues:

- The briefs by the Department of Justice and the American Civil Liberties Union were chosen to represent the opposing arguments in the Harvard case. Please be prepared to describe the main arguments on each side and the evidence presented to support them.
- What is the relevance of *Grutter v. Bollinger* to the Harvard case? Of the research findings in the article by Baker, Klasik, and Reardon?
- More generally, what might universities do to address the problems Baker et al describe? The federal government? States? Schools?

Policy Analysis:

Please write a 3-page essay that describes the relevance of the research by Baker et al to the arguments made by the ACLU in the Harvard case. What might be the impact of the problems described in the article if Harvard loses the case?

October 29

Class debate: issues to be discussed in class.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

November 12, 2019

Readings:

- Milliken v. Bradley, 418 U.S. 717 (1974), Justia Opinion Summary.
- Milliken v. Bradley, Dissent by Justice Thurgood Marshall (1974).
- Angela Hanks, Danyelle Solomon, and Christian E. Weller, "Systematic Inequality: How American Structural Racism Helped Create the Black-White Wealth Gap. Center for American Progress, February 21, 2018, Introduction and Summary, pages 1-19.
- Erik Moshe, "How Our Government Segregated America: An Interview with Richard Rothstein, Columbian College of Arts and Sciences, The George Washington University, History News Network, October 27, 2017.
- Jonathan Spader and Shannon Rieger, "Are Integrated Neighborhoods Becoming More Common in the United States?" Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, September 19, 2017.
- Amy Stuart Wells, et al, "A Shared Future: Addressing the Patterns of Resegregation in Urban and Suburban Contexts: How to Stabilize Integrated Schools and Communities Amid Metro Migrations." Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies, July 6, 2018.
- Kfir Mordechay and Jennifer Ayscue, "White Growth, Persistent Segregation: Could Gentrification Become Integration?" The Civil Rights Project, UCLA, December, 2017.

Discussion Questions:

- Please be prepared to discuss the main arguments Justice Thurgood Marshall makes in his dissent in *Milliken v. Bradley*. What is the connection between his arguments in the 1974 case and tonight's other readings, published more than 40 years later? In your view, would the problems described in the current readings have been alleviated if the dissenting opinion had prevailed? Why? Why not?
- In what ways are the wealth gap, housing policies, and school policies interrelated?
- In what ways could education policies help mitigate the educational effects of the wealth gap and housing segregation? In your view, have they done so? In what ways have they exacerbated the problems?
- How have these issues played out in Washington, D.C.?

Policy Analysis:

We know that the education variables central to education policy programs often play a much smaller role in achievement outcomes than the societal factors—the wealth gap and housing, discussed tonight, and others, such as family poverty, school poverty, unemployment, health, and discrimination. Please write a 3-page analysis that discusses how we might modify education policy programs so that these contextual factors become an integral part of the curriculum and the policy research we conduct.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

November 19 and December 3, 2019

November 19: The International Context, Part 1

Readings:

1. Clifford Adelman, "The Spaces between Numbers: Getting International Data on Higher Education Straight," Institute for Higher Education Policy, November, 2009, pages 1-25.
2. Malcolm Gladwell, "The Order of Things: What College Rankings Really Tell Us," *The New Yorker*, February 14 & 21, 2011 issue.
3. Maurice Crul & Jens Schneider, "Children of Turkish Immigrants in Germany and the Netherlands: The Impact of Differences in Vocational and Academic Tracking Systems," *Teachers College Record*, 2009.

Discussion Issues:

1. What are the factors that make it so difficult to compare higher education systems in different countries? How have the comparisons led to invalid interpretations? In your view, can the methodological problems be solved? How?
2. What are other examples of national or international comparisons (apart from the ones we have discussed in class) that might be subject to similar problems?
3. What does Gladwell describe as the overall problem in attempting to use a variety of indicators to rank institutions that are very different in purpose, size, demographics, and other factors? How does the sports car analogy apply?
4. The article analyzing the impact of different policies on the educational outcomes of Turkish immigrants in Germany and the Netherlands takes a very different comparative approach. Please be prepared to discuss the benefits and disadvantages of each approach in terms of interpretations drawn and potential relevance to policy.

Please prepare a Power-Point type outline highlighting the main points you plan to make in the class discussion.

Methodological Notes:

The list below highlights factors to consider in analyzing research. Some of the points are similar to those described in *Summing Up*; others raise additional issues.

- Is the question posed researchable?
- Are the independent variables and the outcome measures operationally defined?
- Are confounding variables accounted for? Is it possible to account for confounding variables in research on this topic?
- Are samples comparable?
- How did the design of the studies influence the results? How might different study designs help explain apparent inconsistencies of results among studies?
- Is the study designed to identify how variations in the independent variables and the outcome measures affect the results? Does it provide the information needed to explain inconsistencies in results between studies on the same topic?
- Are the interpretations of the results and the policy recommendations supported by the research evidence? Why?/Why not?
- Is more research needed on this topic? Why?/Why not? If more research is needed on the topic, should future research be framed differently from current research? What changes would you suggest?

December 3: The International Context, Part 2

- Issues to be discussed in class.

FINAL EXAM

Please respond to the following questions. Each response should be 10 pages long (excluding references) and written as you would a paper, using APA style. You are free to draw on any references that you wish in responding to the questions. The exam is due ~~at our last class~~ on *December 12th*.

1. The class has considered methodological issues in comparative studies—for example, comparisons of test scores (both national and international) and higher education attainment. Please describe the main methodological problems that arise in making comparisons and draw on three examples to show how these problems influence the findings and the interpretation of the findings. These examples can be selected from those we have considered in class or from other sources, but if you choose international test-score comparison as one of the examples please draw on a recent PISA comparison rather than the comparison used for your first paper. I suggest that your response to this question be organized by methodological problem (for example, sampling or definition of variables) rather than by individual studies.
2. A large amount of research has been conducted on policy issues such as test-based accountability, school choice, and the link between resources and outcomes. Yet, the conclusions of these studies are often inconsistent. Please describe the factors (for example, different ways of framing the research question, different research methodologies, different outcome measures, or different contexts) that contribute to the apparently inconsistent findings and draw on examples of studies—both those we have considered in class as well as others—to show how these factors influence the findings and the interpretation of the findings. *Summing Up* and other methodological discussions will be helpful in conducting this analysis. I suggest that your response be organized by each of the factors contributing to the inconsistent findings rather than by individual studies.