

Educational Politics for Social Justice

Catherine Marshall, Cynthia Gerstl-Pepin, Mark Johnson

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Education is a complex political reality. To dismiss this truth is to be oblivious to the power dynamics that comprise the educational system. All one has to do is consider the myriad of impactful processes involved in education, including the development of strategic plans, composition of school boards, hiring practices, curriculum development, funding priorities, and instructional design, to see that this is true. In this well-researched text with various

helpful diagrams and charts, veteran educators Catherine Marshall, Cynthia Gerstl-Pepin, and Mark Johnson describe the realities of educational politics and identify where they see it lacking. Their task is not merely to expose the soft underbelly of education, but also to propose a social justice framework in which to imagine its repair and reconstruction. Their concern for an authentic, inclusive education for all should have broad appeal to public and private education leaders, school administrators, concerned teachers, engaged students, and responsible taxpayers.

In the first chapter, “Power, Democracy, and Social Justice Values,” the only chapter in Part I, “Centering Justice in Educational Politics,” the authors do not hold back in exposing the injustices they see in our educational system. An overarching critique they observe is the injustice that flows from inequitable power structures. From the inception of schools in America, these power dynamics have disadvantaged many to the benefit of the fortunate few. With its myriad of economic inequalities, classicism, and elitism, our present system—not to mention its blatant discrimination and, in some cases, outright oppression—proves problematic for a democracy that celebrates inclusivity. It does not prepare our students for an honest future.

The authors judge our current educational system to be broken. It is fractured, particularly in its assistance of students in need. It is inadequate and favors those who are privileged because of their positions of power. The authors are not without hope but recognize that significant repair work by all is needed. Their proposal is grounded in a social justice framework.

“Multiple Arenas of Educational Politics” is an accurate description of the second part. It peels back the layers of politics and demonstrates how they are connected. As the authors discuss governance structures and policymaking processes in this section, they point to and explain from their perspective the power structures that pay more attention to some issues, concerns, and people than others. There is an effort to rectify the systematic injustice through honest assessment, active dialogue, and collaborative steps.

Chapter 2, “Micropolitics: ‘Hidden’ Conflicts and Power,” digs deeply into the microlevel of politics evidenced in personal relations and community engagements. Chapter 3, “Democracy and Community in Districts?” begs the question of what and how democracy is meted out when communities either have been ignored or chose not to be concerned with educational policy. Chapter 4, “State Policy Shifts and Cultural Idiosyncrasies,” fills the void of civic knowledge so pervasive among the citizenry. It names the critical people in government that need to be called to greater accountability. Chapter 5, “Federal Policy Communities and Interest Groups,” discusses the local, state, and federal politics: their weight, and how they intersect. Chapter 6, “Global Education Politics,” builds upon the first chapter in this section. Conversations are happening, and policy is being composed on the international level that cannot be ignored.

Finally, the third part, “Making Connections for Policy Action,” is the authors’ clarion call to action. From their experience, the authors propose practical ways to navigate the system. Their practical response is a social justice framework whose goal is equity. An inclusive process, it may involve uncomfortable conversations that challenge historical narratives that have preempted the advancement of ideas and truth. Personal experience should not be dismissed as subjective but must

be taken into account. Chapter 7, “Policy Webs, Pendulum Shifts, and Interconnections,” demonstrates the interconnected nature of education policies and larger civic problematic matters. Where there are challenges in one area, they most assuredly reflect a deficiency or concerns in another. Chapter 8, “Leading for Justice and Equity,” is rich with practical illustrations of how those concerned with the future of education have successfully achieved safer equitable spaces and strategies.

This text is not for the fainthearted. Although some might find it hopeful, I would argue that most would find it problematic for all the wrong reasons. It is distressing to read as the authors reveal the politics and policy processes that have militated against equity. Educational and political leaders may dismiss it as yet more evidence of the signs of the times they believe, falsely, will eventually simmer down or vaporize, or as simply another appeal to the diversity, equity, and inclusion crowd—a crowd they are also hoping will dissipate. It will not; it cannot. Students’ lives are at stake. The burden of social justice then, in the absence of attentive and risk-taking educational leadership, falls to parents and teachers who historically have made the needs of their students a priority, often to the point of self-neglect. Parents and teachers are called to be front-line advocates for social justice. *Educational Politics for Social Justice* provides an essential guide to appreciating the landscape of the educational system in America (although I suspect that their observations, conclusions, and suggestions could apply to other systems throughout the global village), understanding its underlying political bedrock, and proposing specific tools and strategies to advocate for the centering of social justice in educational politics.