

RESEARCH ON POLICY

The Interest Group for the Anthropology of Public Policy (IGAPP) promotes the anthropological study of policy, including its making, workings and effects. IGAPP seeks to advance the contributions of the anthropology of policy to theory and method in anthropology, as well as to research in public policy.

Privatization Policy in Public Education

The Case of Philadelphia

ELAINE SIMON
EVA GOLD
JOLLEY BRUCE CHRISTMAN
RESEARCH FOR ACTION

In 2001, Philadelphia became the largest urban school district ever to be taken over by a state. Initiated by a conservative governor and state legislature, the new governance arrangement resulted in a complex privatization scheme that included a "diverse provider" model of school management, expansion of charter schools and extensive outsourcing of district functions. This pushed Philadelphia to the forefront of a still relatively new, but growing number of reform efforts based on market strategies. The governor proposed to outsource many central office functions as well as up to a quarter of the district's schools to Edison Schools, Inc.

Student, advocacy and community groups, all of which had gained legitimacy as partners in the previous reform era, joined by Philadelphia unions and city hall, protested Edison's role. In response, the state overseers altered the privatization plan, giving Edison a lesser role and inviting other groups to run some of the city's lowest performing schools. The turbulence soon settled down and we wondered why Philadelphians seemed to accept this radical privatization scheme. Our interest led us to focus on how this new governance arrangement so quickly attained legitimacy and how policy channeled public participation from resistance to assent. Our focus is particularly important for public education, where active and broad participation is needed for accountability, equity and the sustainability of effective programs. We traced changes in public participation as it played out in a set of interconnected sites—city economic struggles, state politics, public school district policies and practices and education-focused local organizations.

Anthropology of Policy

Our impulse to follow the policy shift under state takeover echoes Susan Wright's urging policy anthropologists to "follow a flow of events as they move up and down, back and forth, across the field." Looking at multiple sites—the economic and political context of the city, the school district and education-focused organizations working on the ground—enabled us to understand how policy originates, becomes legitimized, is transformed into a set of practices and eventually shapes subjects' experience and community power relationships.

The City Context

As Philadelphia struggled to find a niche in the global economy, city and business leaders focused on courting the educated middle class as vital to the city's future. They saw it as "common sense" that good schools in the most desirable neighborhoods were critical for attracting such "knowledge workers." This often meant sidelining the needs of high poverty and crime-stressed neighborhoods. Into this environment, political actors and officials, acting as what Adam Sheingate calls "policy entrepreneurs," moved decisively to institute school privatization at a rapid clip and build credibility for the application of market solutions to education.

The School District: Privatization Policy and Exclusionary Practices

The literature on the anthropology of policy suggests that policymakers' manipulation of language and symbolism affects subjects' perspectives, experiences and identities. We not only studied the rhetoric of policy, but also identified how school district officials transformed it into concrete practices that channeled subjects' interactions with the institution. District officials defined interactions with the public in the language of the marketplace—with constituents becoming "consumers," "vendors" or "audiences"—and developed a set of practices that limited options for interaction.

First, the district assumed a corporate governance structure where decision-making was centralized, lacked transparency and provided few opportunities for public input. Second, to turn around the system's negative image and restore confidence, district officials hired a PR firm and structured communications as a way to market the district and manage public opinion. This approach cast the public in the passive role of audience. Third, the district greatly expanded the practice of outsourcing through contracts, eventually spending a quarter of its operating budget on contracts with outside groups. Many community-based groups became fiscally dependent on the district and their relationship to the district narrowed to the terms of their contractual agreements, muffling potentially critical voices. Fourth, district policy increasingly focused on individual choice and charters, which increased from 40 in 2001 to 61 today, presently enrolling 15% (31,000) of the district's students. Finally, the district embraced a "customer service" orientation and created a myriad of programs to respond to parents' individual needs including a call center, hotlines and school-based parent welcome desks. Both choice and customer service practices cast parents as individual consumers.

The district's translation of the language of markets into concrete programs shaped subjects' understandings of the options for interaction and their identities as public actors; legitimizing some forms of interaction and delegitimizing others. Privatization policy created an opportunity structure that favored the ideology of individualism and discouraged collective forms of engagement, redefining schools as commodities or consumer goods rather than as public institutions serving a public good.

Education Organizations: Experiencing Education Policy on the Ground

Four case studies reveal how differently positioned groups, with different goals for education in the city, fared under the new privatized regime. We followed the activities of student organizing groups active in two low-income minority neighborhoods, a downtown revitalization organization, an African American group promoting school choice and a city-wide education advocacy coalition. The downtown and African American school choice groups, aligned with the city's market and pro-growth agenda, were able to use political and elite networks to gain influence in the district and successfully achieve their goals. The youth organizing groups and the education coalition, which used collective strategies to forward equity agendas that called for increased resources for poor neighborhoods, struggled to gain legitimacy for their agendas and influence with the district. These cases showed that the district's practices reinforced existing power hierarchies, resulting in an imbalance in the voices that contribute to setting the education improvement agenda.

The privatization story in Philadelphia reflects a broader policy trend of diminishing public services, with public schools as the "final frontier." Our publications explain how the privatization of public education became a "legitimate" policy, while alternative perspectives and the groups that purveyed them were discounted. As a consequence, school privatization, which had been mightily resisted, just happened.

The authors are associated with the Philadelphia-based non-profit research organization Research for Action. This column draws from two publications: A Philadelphia Story: Building Civic Capacity for School Reform in a Privatizing System by Eva Gold, Elaine Simon, Maia Cucchiara, Cecily A Mitchell and Morgan Riffer (2007), available at www.researchforaction.org, and Radical Privatization in Philadelphia: The Role of School District Leaders as Policy Entrepreneurs by William Boyd, Jolley Bruce Christman and Elizabeth Useem (in press). □