



JIMMY CARTER

AS EDUCATIONAL POLICYMAKER

Equal Opportunity and Efficiency

DEANNA L. MICHAEL

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Educational Policymaker

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DEANNA L. MICHAEL

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Introduction

IN 1955, two unrelated events occurred that would have far-reaching effects on educational policy in the United States. The first received national attention: on May 31, the United States Supreme Court issued its second decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, which ordered the end of racial discrimination in public schools “with all deliberate speed.” The second was hardly noticeable to anyone outside of Sumter County, Georgia, where the grand jury, the local governing body, appointed Jimmy Carter to the Sumter County Board of Education.¹ As Carter’s political career unfolded in the decades that followed, culminating in the presidency, the equal opportunity mandate articulated in the *Brown* decisions would significantly alter the shape of education policy in the United States, challenging the emphasis on efficiency that had guided educational policymakers for decades.

In the 1950s and 1960s, as the nation struggled to desegregate and provide equal access to education for previously underserved minority groups, Carter developed both a personal commitment to equal opportunity in education and a fundamental belief that the efficiency of our educational system would be improved by applying the principles of scientific management. As his political influence grew and his sights shifted from local to state and federal educational policies, Carter became increasingly involved in the debate over the future of public education as he sought to reconcile these often conflicting objectives. Combining his talents as an administrator, businessman, and humanitarian, he pursued new policies that expanded access to education, but he also supported efficiency measures such as the placement of students in classes based on intelligence tests and centralization of policymaking, contributing to the legacy of tension between equal educational opportunity and efficiency that continues to influence the structure of educational policies in this country today.

As the twenty-first century begins, the nation is once again actively pursuing educational reform with the expressed goals of increasing efficiency and

improving the quality of education, while leaving no child behind. Although these themes have been recast in contemporary terms, they are in many ways a continuation of the educational efficiency movement that began in the early 1900s and reemerged during the Carter administration. Thus, reflecting on Carter's role in the history of education is both a vehicle for exploring the tensions that exist when efficiency and equal opportunity are juxtaposed, as in the accountability movement of the 1970s, and a lesson in reconciling these seemingly incompatible objectives. Because of his involvement in educational policy on all governmental levels, Carter's political career also offers a unique opportunity to study the formation and implementation of educational policies on the local, state, and federal levels and to witness the centralization of educational policymaking on the state and federal levels in the latter half of the twentieth century.

THE EDUCATIONAL EFFICIENCY MOVEMENT

Educational policymakers seldom begin their work with a clean slate.² Instead, educational policy typically evolves over time in response to a host of external influences, including political, economic, and social pressures that may have little to do with specific academic goals and objectives. The educational efficiency movement is a good example. Early in the twentieth century, Frederick W. Taylor introduced the business world to a new management approach that he designed to eliminate waste and increase productivity by applying a set of principles that came to be known as "scientific management." These principles involved using time and motion studies to analyze work methods, systematically selecting and training workers for specific jobs based on their aptitudes and abilities, and controlling all aspects of the production process.³ Taylor and his followers had a substantial impact on industrial management, developing the concepts of work design and measurement, production control, and other efficiency measures that completely changed the way industry organized and managed labor.

Impressed by the industrial reforms that scientific management triggered, education administrators, professors, and socially prominent school board members looked for ways to adapt Taylor's principles to school administration. For example, education administrators, who typically lacked the training, time, and money "for painstaking, thoughtful, thorough research,"⁴ analyzed the function of schools and looked for ways to test and place students based on their abilities and to exert greater control over the educational process. Many of their studies centered on the cost of teaching a class rather than on how students learned or how teachers taught, leading to the use of cost accounting procedures to establish optimal student-teacher ratios and intelligence testing to sort students according to their talents.⁵

Although the industrial use of scientific management had waned by the mid-1920s, dramatic changes had already occurred in the organization of schools. Graduate schools of education had trained a generation of new school administrators under the supervision of professors like Ellwood P. Cubberley, a prolific writer of textbooks, who supported the use of industrial methods in managing schools. In a discussion of special classes for gifted students, those with special learning needs, and those with special interests, he explained that “to reduce waste, speed up the rate of production, and increase the value of the output of our schools” districts needed to design specialized classes. Continuing the analogy, he outlined the problems with the public schools in terms of running a factory. He explained,

the waste of material was great and the output small and costly—in part because the workmen in the establishment were not supplied with enough of the right kind of tools . . . largely because the establishment was not equipped with enough pieces of special-type machinery, located in special shops or units of the manufacturing plant, to enable it to work up the waste material and meet modern manufacturing conditions.⁶

Teachers needed the correct tools—specialized classes—to produce the desired output—students who understood their place in business and society.

In the march toward the efficient use of taxpayer monies, many new administrators turned to statistical studies, surveys, and the adoption of routine intelligence testing to measure students’ inherent abilities.⁷ Advocates of such testing argued that IQ tests would enable educators to use science to predict more accurately the results of education before the public made an investment. Furthermore, because students were the “products” of the schools to be molded according to their measured abilities, prudent placement would result in the best use of scarce resources.⁸ Advocates stressed that because student ability was the basis of the placement in academic or vocational curriculum, the use of the tests followed democratic principles.

Critics protested the blanket application of scientific management in public education and pointed out that intelligence tests tended to reflect existing racial and economic divisions in society and, therefore, increased discrimination rather than alleviated it. For example, those who scored highest on these exams were typically white males from the Northeast, who had the greatest access to educational institutions, while those who scored lowest were generally black southern males, who had the least access. John Dewey criticized such classification of individuals as a violation of the democratic ideal in its attempts “to fit individuals in advance for definite industrial callings, not on the basis of trained original capacities, but on that of the wealth and social status of parents.”⁹ Both critics and advocates sought to define the place and the purpose of the public school in American society. The advocates of scientific management viewed the schools as gatekeepers with a

responsibility to train students to fill their place in society. For the critics of efficiency, the public schools served communities as a source of education. By the middle of the 1950s, however, placement for efficiency became less important than placement for separation.

After the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision ordering the desegregation of public schools, intelligence testing continued to be used widely in the South and elsewhere for many years, providing support for both the notion of white supremacy and the continued segregation of the school systems. During Jimmy Carter's service on the Sumter County Board of Education, even this small school district with fewer than 2,000 students voted to adopt scientific management principles, using intelligence testing for student placement in programs. While the members of the board made few statements regarding the purposes of this testing, the decision to administer intelligence tests throughout the district occurred in 1957 as school districts across the South struggled to maintain segregation at all costs.

During the 1960s when Carter served in the Georgia state senate, support for scientific management dwindled briefly in the face of mounting demands for equity in education. In contrast, as the governor of Georgia early in the 1970s, he and the member of the Georgia General Assembly joined the "back to basics" movement, with its focus on accountability and minimum competency testing, and brought the principles associated with scientific management into the limelight once again. According to policy analyst Arthur Wise, state politicians designed their educational policy mandates emphasizing accountability to "reveal how to make students learn."¹⁰ As with the early efficiency studies, policymakers sacrificed the process of teaching and learning to the end product. As president, Carter continued his strong support of both the "back to basics" movement and the use of testing to increase accountability within the public school system. He believed that programs such as these would not only improve the efficiency of the schools themselves, but also eventually offer equal educational opportunity for all children.

EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

Although one of the frequently cited justifications for the use of scientific management in student placements was its theoretical impartiality, the *Brown* decision with its declaration that "separate was inherently unequal" galvanized the leaders of the civil rights movement to demand equal access to educational facilities and resources. Like the scientific efficiency approach to education, the decision ordering the desegregation of public schools had strong and powerful supporters. However, southern politicians and school officials resisted the desegregation of school systems segregated since the 1870s. Throughout the southern states, black children often attended sub-standard schools with fewer materials than their white peers and, in rural

areas, where funding for education was low, boards often reserved high school education for white students.¹¹

Despite resistance to the *Brown* verdict and its supporting decisions, educational opportunity slowly expanded in both urban and rural areas across the nation. In anticipation of court challenges to their segregated public schools, southern governors and legislators sought to shore up the equal provision of the earlier Supreme Court ruling, *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which had enshrined segregation in education and other social arenas through the “separate but equal” doctrine. As the pressure to desegregate garnered increasing attention in the federal courts, southern politicians began to build new schools for African American children in the hope that more genuinely equal facilities for black and white students would mitigate the mounting court orders pursued by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Despite the efforts to equalize educational facilities by state legislatures and public school officials, the demands by black citizens and other groups for equal access to education continued until they gained at least a token response. School districts began various plans that allowed small numbers of black students access to facilities intended for white students. Against the backdrop of this crack in the wall of segregation, Jimmy Carter’s exposure to politics at the state level increased dramatically. Following his election to the Georgia state senate in 1961, he focused his efforts on educational policy as a member of state senate education committees and the Governor’s Commission to Improve Education. Through these activities, he gained a broader perspective on educational policy, using it as a key issue in both of his gubernatorial campaigns—the one he lost to segregationist Lester Maddox in 1966 and the one he won in 1970.

While he was governor, the NAACP returned to court to protest the meager desegregation efforts in Georgia, and other places, citing the slow pace and small numbers involved. In response, the federal courts endorsed more sweeping measures that included the use of busing. In Georgia, a federal judge answered the resistance of the Richmond County School Board (Augusta) with an order to desegregate the district through busing. In Atlanta, however, Judge Griffin Bell allowed the NAACP and the school district to reach an agreement to hire more African American administrators and teachers in exchange for busing students for racial parity. Governor Carter’s reactions to these decisions—support for the local agreement in Atlanta and rejection of the court-ordered busing—reflected the national political response to the involvement of the federal court in the desegregation of schools and to later court decisions concerning equity for other groups. He believed that the laws mandating equity addressed the civil rights of minorities and that the equalization of access through the distribution of funding and services would provide for their needs. The movement of students to desegregate schools reflected an ideal that, in his opinion, was detrimental to public schooling.

As president, Carter faced a crumbling economy and many social demands from the public. Because of his belief that the federal government's fiscal responsibilities were limited by its ability to pay for them, his administration focused on rationalizing and expanding existing federal programs. Although he began new programs in energy and environmental protection, in education he advocated the equitable distribution of funding for existing compensatory programs intended to offer all groups equal educational opportunity. He also attempted to begin voluntary national standardized testing to encourage student achievement and increase accountability for teachers. His administration dropped voluntary national standardized testing from its legislative agenda, but Carter believed that such a program would increase achievement for students who were failing. For students attending institutions of higher education, he increased the amount of student loans and expanded the base to include more of the children of middle-class parents. Through these programs and the creation of the United States Department of Education, Carter believed existing federal programs could serve the needs of citizens more equitably.

After his defeat by Ronald Reagan, Carter turned his attention to the development of the Carter Center of Emory University (CCEU). Although the majority of the programs of the CCEU focused on international poverty, health, and agricultural development, the project coordinators often invited Atlanta teachers to participate in panels and curriculum development. After Atlanta won the 1996 Summer Olympics, he used the international attention that the city received to initiate The Atlanta Project (TAP), which he intended to address the conditions of the urban poor in the same manner that the CCEU concentrated on poverty in other countries. Through TAP, he began to see that education depended as much on the ability of a community to support the children living in it as on the programs implemented by the state and local educational bureaucracies. For children living in poverty, the lack of economic opportunity for their parents weighed as heavily on their shoulders as poorly furnished schools.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Can equal opportunity and educational efficiency be reconciled or are these goals so antithetical that the achievement of one requires substantial compromise on the other? This book will explore the interaction and potential conflict between these objectives during the turbulent years following the *Brown* decision when our nation struggled to redefine its educational priorities. Because Jimmy Carter was an advocate of both, analysis of his actions as a school board member, state official, and ultimately president provides a lens through which the issues surrounding these objectives can be explored on several levels. The goal of this analysis is to better understand how educational

policy evolved under Carter's leadership and how his efforts to reconcile these often conflicting priorities shaped its development. The lessons that can be learned from such an investigation are not strictly historical. The insights gleaned from this examination of Carter's development as an educational policymaker have implications for today's educational policymakers insofar as his actions and beliefs highlight many of the fundamental issues and conflicting priorities that continue to challenge efforts to reshape our schools.

The chapters of this book are arranged chronologically to follow educational policy development and Carter's development as an educational policymaker in a period of enormously complex social and political realities. Certain topics and issues appear in each chapter because of their continuing importance in the southern states and in the nation as a whole during this period, including desegregation and racial awareness, funding and school efficiency, social and racial stratification, and equal opportunity. These topics offer continuity to the narrative and the opportunity for analysis of how Carter's views changed as his understanding of the issues as well as his political influence grew.

Before the 1950s, educational experts and officials described educational opportunity in the language of scientific efficiency. The schools sorted the students by their potential talents and the needs of society.¹² Once the desegregation of the public schools loomed before southern legislators and school officials, educational opportunity acquired its own status as an educational goal. In chapter 1, Carter's experiences as a school board member in Plains, Georgia, offers a view of a local school board's response to the political resistance that ensued following the court order to desegregate. It also establishes a foundation for his interest in and attention to scientific efficiency and educational opportunity as his political career unfolded. At this level of educational policymaking, Carter believed that the efficient use of community resources was the surest road to equal opportunity. His view of resource management reflected the national movement toward the consolidation of small school districts.

Although little attention has been given to Carter's service in the state senate, his term of office began at the conclusion of southern massive resistance to desegregation when most southern states, including Georgia, passed laws reducing the state's financial support for the public schools if they were desegregated. In chapter 2, this last act of overt resistance and Carter's role in it are examined along with his participation on Governor Carl Sanders's blue-ribbon education commission to reform education in Georgia. Although desegregation is ignored in the commission's report, the document does reveal the fundamental problem of social and economic stratification in southern education in the early 1960s. In his initial exposure to state policymaking, Carter began the process of separating fiscal efficiency from social and political equal opportunity.

While the problems of high dropout rates and drastic differences in funding in the stratified southern school systems were still present when Carter became governor, he faced the additional political issue of metropolitan busing for school desegregation. Whereas the early resistance to desegregation was concentrated in the Georgia legislature, the response to busing was local, emotional, and squarely in the national spotlight. As a politician with a growing reputation for progressive thinking on racial issues, Carter's position on court-ordered busing cast doubt on his sincerity. In chapter 3, his indirect encouragement of resistance to busing and his support of the out-of-court desegregation agreement in Atlanta are analyzed within the national debate on busing.

In the 1970s, educational accountability began to appear as part of reform packages that increased school funding and services. Carter's Early Childhood Development Program and his Adequate Program for Education in Georgia (APEG) reflected this national movement as well as his belief in planning and efficiency, equal opportunity, and educational excellence. In chapter 4, these programs along with his position on access to higher education place Carter within the national movement for educational accountability and increased access to higher education. His often tense relationship with the state superintendent and the teachers' union provides different contexts for efficiency. Both the state superintendent and the teachers' union viewed teacher benefits and salary increases as the most effective use of funds, while Carter believed that the expansion of the state educational system to include kindergarten better served the people of Georgia. These different interpretations reflected two technocratic approaches to educational efficiency, one emphasizing personnel and the other programs.

As the president of the United States, Carter continued Lyndon Johnson's legacy by increasing funds for equal educational opportunity programs. He also continued his policies supporting efficiency. Chapter 5 focuses on his attempts to reorganize educational programs to increase access, which culminated in the creation of the cabinet-level Department of Education. While the establishment of the department was his most visible and political educational reform, he also added a basic education title to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, attempted to begin voluntary national standardized testing, and increased access to higher education through loan and grant reform. Examination of his policy initiatives—both those that were successful and those that never left the planning table—provides insights into his priorities in federal educational policy.

The sixth chapter addresses Carter's continued involvement in education after his unsuccessful bid for a second term as president. Through TAP, he attempted, with mixed results, to coordinate educational, social, and economic reforms for people living in poverty in the Atlanta metropolitan area. The Carter Center of Emory University, however, represents a successful

attempt to offer education as a tool for social change in an international context. While some might argue that the mission of the Carter Center is a departure from educational policy and planning, Carter has repeatedly claimed that educating both leaders and the general populace in countries where the center operates is one of its most important missions. Hence, the work of the center represents the final stage of Carter's development as an educational policymaker. It is also an example of the limitations imposed on efficiency by the traditions and needs of communities. By examining the community context rather than merely the programs offered through TAP, the relationship between efficiency and equal opportunity becomes apparent. The abandonment of communities in the name of progress caused the conditions of the urban poor in Atlanta. The reform of schools in Atlanta offered little to the students living in poverty in the city.

The implications of Carter's policies on the local, state, and federal levels and the lessons that can be learned from them are examined in the conclusion. His twin commitments to efficiency and planning on the one hand and to equal educational opportunity on the other are reflective of a larger national movement in educational policy. When these commitments came into conflict, his attempts to reconcile them reveal both his own shifting priorities and the complex social and political obstacles facing educational policymakers both then and now.

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ONE

The Resistance to Equal Opportunity and Efficiency

IN NOVEMBER 1955, the Sumter County Grand Jury appointed Jimmy Carter to the Sumter County Board of Education, beginning a political career that would span twenty-six years. Although this rural area of Georgia was far from Washington, D.C., the *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka, Kansas* (1954 and 1955) decisions had changed the mission of the board and the state's role in education. From these decisions, which declared "segregation inherently unequal" and mandated the end of racial discrimination in public schools "with all deliberate speed," Carter learned that fear could frustrate efficiency and that the illusion of equality could replace equal educational opportunity. How the state and local resistance to desegregation averted his efforts to reform education in Sumter County requires an understanding of the southern social and political milieu of the 1940s and 1950s and the issues facing local school boards in the wake of the *Brown* decision.

SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL

For most of the twentieth century, the Democratic Party was the only active political party in the South and segregation was firmly entrenched in the political structure of the southern states. Only whites voted in elections, and the winner of the Democratic primary typically became governor. Among the key campaign issues in nearly every election was white supremacy—an issue that often paved the road to political office. As V. O. Key explains, "In its grand outlines the politics of the South revolves around the position of the Negro." In this political environment, white politicians and educational officials dismissed the need of African Americans for an education.

Throughout the South, schools reflected the social and political environment surrounding them. In urban areas like Atlanta, African American students had access to school facilities and materials similar to those provided to white students, although seldom new or in the same quantity. In rural areas, such as Sumter County where Jimmy Carter lived, white children attended school in buildings designated for that purpose with adequate materials to support the limited curriculum the rural districts could afford. The black children, however, typically only attended school between harvest and planting seasons and went to school in community churches so that the local board could avoid providing transportation or buildings. African American teachers were often overloaded with students and just as often lacked the necessary materials to teach them.² Although the United States Supreme Court had justified separate facilities for black and white Americans with the “separate but equal” doctrine in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), separate was the only part of the phrase most southern policymakers acknowledged—until the threat of desegregation and the desire to attract industry made equalization more attractive.

In the late 1940s, the poor conditions of the schools in Georgia concerned both the relatively small segment of the white population interested in economic growth and the even larger segment that wished to maintain segregation. Earlier in the decade, the Legal Defense Fund for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had begun a series of court cases concerning higher education and teacher pay to prove that racially segregated schools were unequal. In 1944, Gunnar Myrdal, a Swedish economist, published *An American Dilemma*, a two-volume work on the “mistreatment and evident hatred of the Negro” in the United States.³ This work shed light on the deplorable conditions that black children and their teachers endured in their schools and their communities.

In response to the mounting pressure, the Georgia General Assembly turned to one of the tools used by proponents of efficiency and appointed a committee to survey the public schools in 1946. The survey confirmed the existence of racial and geographic differences in public school funding and recommended that the state provide the necessary assistance for the equalization of Georgia’s schools. In 1949, the General Assembly passed the Minimum Foundation Program for Education (MFPE), which incorporated many of the recommendations from the survey. This legislative package distributed more state funds to poorer districts to compensate for lower local revenues. It also included raises for teachers, both black and white, a building program, transportation for all county district students, and a 180-day minimum school year. Through this educational reform legislation, the General Assembly not only addressed the needs of African American students, but also those of rural white students.⁴ Such a massive equalization program, of course, required a tax increase.