

Discussion Questions for 17.317, U.S. Social Policy

Part IV: Policy in Practice

- This part of the course examines a number of policies in practice. We will both employ what we've learned so far to examine new policy areas as well as learn about new concepts like implementation and the political implications of program design.

Education Policy: Vouchers

- Some preliminaries:
 - Why do countries fund public education?
 - In what ways is education policy similar to or different from other policies we've studied this semester in terms of target population, universality, level of government, inequalities
- A major concern with education is that student achievement is not as high as we'd like it. What are the factors that go into student achievement? Which of these is amenable to public policy solutions?
- According to Chubb and Moe, what is wrong with public schools' organization? (too bureaucratic; top-down control; reliance on rules and regulations; unions)
- What is their vision? Market rather than democratic/bureaucratic control
 - Private schools are subject to indirect control through markets – what are the mechanisms?
- What kinds of reforms have been tried traditionally in public schools, and why have they failed in these authors' eyes?
- What kinds of innovative reforms have been tried, and why have these fallen short?
- How do vouchers work, and how would they fulfill the authors' vision?
- The market – vouchers – is supposed to take the politics out of education. Is that likely? Possible?
- Do private schools produce superior results in student achievement? Do Howell and Peterson find that test scores are higher for voucher students in private school? If they only find differential results for one group of students – African Americans – in one city, what does that say about the effects of vouchers and private schools?
- How do they explain differential results across cities? What other factors would you like to see measured in their study?