



Puzzles in Pluralism: Weighing Requests for Cultural and Religious Accommodation

Paula McAvoy¹

Spencer Foundation & Illinois State University

In 2006, I was enrolled in a graduate course in gender and education and was assigned to co-facilitate a discussion on multiculturalism and feminism. Having just completed a master's thesis which made a philosophic argument for how liberal societies ought to think about arranged marriages for young girls from particular cultural backgrounds, my partner and I decided to build off of this work and presented four different groups in the class with one of the following scenarios about a 15-year-old girl:

(Continued on Page 3)

¹ Paula McAvoy (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2010) is on leave from her position as assistant professor of education at Illinois State University and currently working for the Spencer Foundation. Her research focuses on problems that arise at the intersection of political philosophy and the aims of public schooling--particularly with regard to cultural and religious groups. Her dissertation, "Cultural Accommodations in Public Schools: Weighing Competing Values" (chaired by Harry Brighouse) was supported by a fellowship from the Spencer Foundation and was the Politics of Education Association's Outstanding Dissertation Award winner for 2010-2011. She is currently working on a book with Diana Hess titled, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* to be published by Routledge Press.

A Popular Tax? The Case of California's School District Parcel Tax

Imre Meszaros²

University of Southern California

Whether the focus is on achievement on standardized tests, high school graduation rates, per student spending, funding for construction and modernization, funding equity across the state, student/teacher ratios, or the proportion of students with limited English proficiency, public K-12 education in California has been in a very difficult situation for years. And, the financial conditions for California schools have become even worse in the last four years. Inflation-adjusted per student spending has decreased by 23% between 2007-2008 and 2011-2012. This translates into a reduction of \$1,414 per student per year (Oliff & Leachman, 2011). A recent report ranked California 46th among US states in K-12 spending, 47th in spending as a percentage of personal income, and 50th in number of students per teacher (Kaplan, 2011).

(Continued on Page 11)

² Imre S. Meszaros (Ed.D., University of Southern California, 2010) is Associate Director of the School of Communication at the USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism in Los Angeles, California. His dissertation, titled *The Political Economy of California School District Parcel Tax Elections* and chaired by Lawrence O. Picus, received a Dissertation of the Year Award from the USC Rossier School of Education in 2010 and was a finalist for the Politics of Education Association's Outstanding Dissertation Award for 2010-2011.

TABLE of CONTENTS

Page 1	<i>Puzzles in Pluralism: Weighing requests for cultural and religious accommodation</i> Paula McAvoy Spencer Foundation & Illinois State University
Page 1	<i>A Popular Tax? The Case of California's School District Parcel Tax</i> Imre Meszaros University of Southern California
Page 2	Message from the President
Page 7	2012 William L. Boyd National Educational Politics Workshop: A Call for Participants
Page 7	Call for Officer Nominations
Page 8	<i>Perspectives—The California State Board of Education: Then and Now</i> Michael Kirst California State Board of Education Stanford University
Page 9	Publications Committee Report
Page 10	PEA Outstanding Dissertation Award: Call for nominations
Page 15	Treasurer's Report

Annual Breakfast UCEA Convention 2011

Date: Friday, November 18th
Time: 7:00-8:00 am
Location: Westin Hotel, Crawford East

*The Politics of Immigration: Schooling,
Nativism and the Attack on Children"*



Gerardo Lopez
Indiana University--Bloomington

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

CATHERINE A. LUGG
RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

Welcome to another academic year. There are a number of upcoming events and points of business of which PEA members might take note. First, a “thank you” for the yeoman work of Jeffrey Brooks (Iowa State University) and the ad hoc by-law committee including: Tirza White (Emory University), Samantha Paredes Scribner (IUPUI), Kyle Ingle (Bowling Green State University), and Bradley Carpenter (University of Louisville). The committee completed the revisions to the PEA by-laws which have been unfolding for a few years. The revised PEA by-laws are now being reviewed by AERA’s counsel. The by-laws needed to be revised to comport with our status as an official AERA SIG. Hopefully, the membership of PEA will be voting to approve these in the near future.

Secondly, many thanks to Tamara Wilder Linkow (Abt Associates) who served as the AERA program chair for PEA. Many thanks are also due to her committee, which consisted of:

- Eric Houck (University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill)
- Patricia Miller (Prairie View A&M University)
- Terri Wilson (Southern Illinois University)

We thank them for their work in pulling together what we hope will be a terrific convention program. Details will be forthcoming once AERA has released the final program.

There will be upcoming elections for PEA officers. We will have two openings at the close of the 2012 AERA Convention; an “at-large member” and President. If you are interested in serving PEA in a greater capacity, please see the announcement in this bulletin by Rebecca Jacobsen, who is the committee chair.

And finally, please be aware that PEA will be sponsoring a breakfast at the UCEA convention in Pittsburgh. We will be meeting on Friday, November 18th at 7:00 AM at the Westin, Crawford

East. Gerardo Lopez will be presenting on the topic of: *The Politics of Immigration: Schooling, Nativism and the Attack on Children*. Given recent events in Alabama, his talk is exquisitely timely. For those of you who are able to attend the UCEA Convention, I look forward to seeing you there.

-Catherine Lugg



Puzzles in Pluralism...
(McAvoy, continued from page 1)

1. Phoua was born in a Thai refugee camp to a Hmong family that fled Laos following the Vietnam War. She is the fourth youngest of sixteen children. When she was two years old, she and her family were relocated to the United States, where she now lives within a large Hmong community in the Midwest. Her parents do not speak English and live on public assistance and the help of her older brothers. She attends a public high school and hopes to go to college to become a teacher. One day her parents inform her that they have secured a 'good match' for her to a 17-year old boy from a local Hmong family that has recently purchased their own home. A condition of the arrangement is that the couple will have to marry immediately and Phoua will be expected to move in with her in-laws and live as a daughter and wife within their family.³
2. Zahra is an American-Yemeni girl who was born in Michigan to immigrant parents. Her family practices a fundamentalist form of Islam and lives within a large ethnic enclave in Dearborn where they live as best they can by their traditional practices. Zahra's

³ Phoua's situation is based on two 1.5 hour interviews (2005) I had with 'Mai' a twenty-five year old Hmong-American woman, conversations with Professor Stacey Lee at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Lee's (2005) book, *Up Against Whiteness*.

parents, and most of their neighbors, plan to live and work in Michigan until the family saves enough money to retire to a comfortable, middle class life in Yemen. One day her parents tell her that they fear she is becoming too Americanized and have arranged for her to marry the son of a local Yemeni family. She will marry as soon as possible.⁴

3. Stacey lives within a small community in Utah. Her father and mothers are members of a fundamentalist sect of Mormonism that believes practicing polygamous marriage is the only way to earn a place in the highest realm of heaven. One day the leader of her community tells her that she and her sister have been 'sealed' to a 42-year old man and must become sister-wives to him and his other 12 wives.⁵
4. Ashley is from a working class family in the Midwestern United States. Her mother was recently diagnosed with a rare, life threatening disease. The disease can be treated with a costly procedure, but Ashley's family does not have health insurance. A wealthy, thirty year-old man known to the family offers to pay for the entire cost of the treatment if Ashley's father agrees to give Ashley to him as his bride. As part of the agreement, Ashley must drop out of school and become a stay-at-home wife and mother. Her father explains to Ashley that he can see no other way of saving her mother and that she must do this for the family.

Each group was asked to assume that in each case the young woman is upset by the impending

⁴ Zahra's situation is loosely based on research subjects in Sarroub's (2005) book, *All American Yemeni Girls*. It should also be noted that child marriage is not a tenet of Islam, but is a practice within fundamentalist sects.

⁵ Stacey's situation is loosely based on the work of Kent (2005) and Krakauer (2004). The Church of the Latter Day Saints (aka The Mormon Church) does not recognize these sects or the practice of polygamy.

marriage and speaks to a teacher at school. The group would then decide how the public school teacher ought to respond (interfere, not interfere, or something else). I thought that I had carefully crafted a set of scenarios in which people would disagree about what to do and so spark a lively discussion. More specifically, I guessed that everyone would want to stop Ashley's and Stacey's marriages, but would be hesitant to get involved in Zahra's and Phoua's. This would then lead to the question: Why would we treat these girls differently? To my surprise, when each group reported back to the class, every single group said the school should do nothing. In cases 1 and 2 "schools should not interfere with culture;" in case 3 "schools should not interfere with religion" and in Ashley's case, if she "chooses" to save her mother it would be allowed because it is "a free country." My co-facilitator and I tried to push their thinking to consider that perhaps all or some of the girls were being coerced, and these were not "free choices." We asked them to consider that there might be a rights violation in one or more cases. Certainly many in the room felt badly for the girls and acknowledged that there was something unfair happening, but the class stood firmly by the belief that cultural, religious, and family practices were none of the school's business.

In retrospect, I should not have been surprised by this highly accommodationist attitude because it reflects a convergence of political views from both the political right and the left. On the right, there is a widely accepted argument that schools should defer to the wishes of parents. This is the position that drives much of the school choice movement, undergirded by the idea that schools should be acting in the interests of the family. On the left, the movement to embrace difference and multiculturalism in schools has resulted in a message that questioning cultural or religious practices within a public institution is a type of liberal imperialism. Public schools, in this view, should be tolerant and not impose "dominant" views upon cultural subgroups. Taken together, and to the extreme, we arrive at a troubling position of unreflective cultural relativism in which, apparently, parents are allowed to sell their daughters for medical coverage.

There is certainly truth within the positions on both sides of the political spectrum. Parents do have considerable authority over their children, but not absolute authority (Brighouse & Swift, 2009; Gutmann, 1999). Second, the liberal state must allow for many ways of living well and strive toward reasonable diversity, but the state must also recognize that not all ways of living are good (Callan, 1997; Macedo, 2000, Okin, 2002; Reich, 2002). While there are sound justifications for *parental authority* and *state tolerance*, my classmates overlooked two other and equally important competing values: the liberal *state's authority* to teach toward particular civic values (toleration being one among many) and what Harry Brighouse (2003) calls the "*future interests of children*" or the child's right to grow into a self-governing adult. For most families within modern liberal society there is sufficient convergence about these values. Parents are willing to send their children to public schools and support the school's authority to develop an appropriate educational plan for their children. Other parents adhere to cultural and religious beliefs that find the aim of public schools or particular elements of the school culture and curriculum objectionable. Indeed, what some parents find unacceptable are the ideas that children should be "tolerant" of other belief systems, or that children should grow up to see themselves as rights bearers. Difficult cases emerge when groups that are internally illiberal 1) make requests for public institutions to protect their illiberal practices or 2) when groups make requests to exempt themselves and their children from the democratic project of citizen building.

My dissertation focuses on these "difficult cases" that arise when fundamentalist families ask public schools for cultural and religious accommodation on behalf of their children. At the heart of these cases are philosophic differences about the aims of public schooling and the rights of parents and children. More specifically, these are cases in which a particular group has a fundamental disagreement with the project of liberalism.

The Argument

In order to explore what justice requires in cases like these, I use the tools of applied political and

moral philosophy to examine three particular requests for accommodation. In each case, I draw upon social science research about the groups involved to develop a normative argument that attends to real-life constraints, such as poverty and racism, as well as the foreseeable outcomes of particular decisions. Once argued, I use the cases to develop a model for how school officials and policy makers in plural, liberal societies should weigh the competing values embedded within requests for cultural and religious accommodation more generally.

Case 1

One of the most often cited examples of cultural accommodation in public schooling is the ruling in the Supreme Court case *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972), in which Amish parents sought to exempt their children from compulsory schooling after eighth grade. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the parents, arguing that high school attendance interfered with the parent's religious rights. The decision was and remains controversial, and many argue that the decision violated the future interests of children who may decide they want to live outside of the group.

In this case I ask: In a world with *Yoder*, what (if anything) does a liberal state owe to Anabaptist children? I answer this question by considering William Galston's (2002) conditions for securing a right to exit and argue that empirical evidence does not support his view that Anabaptists have met these conditions. I build this case around the experiences of an excommunicated Mennonite woman to show that fundamentalist enclave groups like the Anabaptists technically allow exit, but that cultural coercion and modern realities outside of the group make the costs of exit prohibitively high. I argue that the solution to this problem is not overturning *Yoder*, and instead argue that when justice requires the state to accommodate parental interests at the expense of the future interests of children then the state must mitigate the foreseeable costs to children. In this case, the state owes dissenting adults educational opportunities that will facilitate entrance into another way of life.⁶

⁶ See McAvoy (in press) for full argument.

Case 2

Next, I address the first 3 cases of arranged marriage that opened this essay. Drawing heavily from anthropological studies of immigrant students, I highlight how the contextual differences are important when deciding how to proceed. From here, I develop a framework for thinking about how public schools in liberal societies ought to respond to instances of arranged marriages for girls from deeply communitarian cultural groups. I show that neither the type of tolerance demanded by group rights theorists, nor Susan Okin's (2002) claim that liberal societies should "enforce" women's rights provides us with a satisfactory response. Instead, I argue that Rawls's concept of overlapping consensus provides us with a more just way to think through these tensions between cultural values. Through this discussion it becomes clear that a) specifics matter and b) what we must not do when making policies, is move girls from one autonomy-limiting situation into a different non-autonomous situation.⁷

Case 3

I build upon the arguments in the previous two cases to look at policy making within schools. In each of the previous cases girls appear to be the more vulnerable members within the group because the groups involved are patriarchal. This chapter looks more closely at gender dynamics and asks whether or not cultural tolerance requires us to be tolerant of patriarchy.

This case uses Loukia Sarroub's (2005), *All-American Yemeni Girls*, to set up two semi-fictional situations facing a high school principal. In the first, a group of Yemeni-American girls ask the principal for a girls-only physical education class so that they will be better able to participate without being watched by the boys in their community. The second situation involves a disagreement between the athletic director and the girls swim team, in which the girls (and their parents) object that the athletic director will not let the team wear bikinis to promote their carwash fundraiser. I argue that both of these situations are requests to accommodate patriarchal norms. From here, I make an argument for why the Yemeni accommodation is justified and

⁷ See McAvoy (2008) for full argument.

the other is not. Finally, I show that school administrators often do not respond well to these requests because responses are targeted at girls and neglect to take into account how gender relations play-out within an unequally gendered society. If schools aim to educate for a more gender-egalitarian society, then educators need to institute interventions directed toward boys.

Conclusion

Finally, I step back from the cases to draw conclusions about how school officials within liberal societies ought to think about requests for accommodation. These cases show that there is a limit to the state's ability to force groups to comply with liberal principles. It is tempting to conclude that because the state has limited authority, that it must become highly accommodationist and allow groups to fully control their children's lives. But, taking this view leaves children vulnerable to private sphere coercion that can be grossly unjust. Rather than view accommodations as negotiation with a winner and a loser, I argue that schools need to consider the normative trade-offs within requests for accommodation and institute policies that open up opportunities for children in ways that further their short- and long-term well-being. Thinking through these situations requires decision-makers to consider the following set of questions:

1. What are the specific goals of this group as far as living in a liberal state—are they in enclaves or integrating within society? What do they hope for their children?
2. Does accommodating/not accommodating put children in immediate danger?
3. Does not accommodating leave children better or worse off, and in what ways?
4. What are the foreseeable costs of accommodating? What are the specific social forces within and beyond the group that are unjust?
5. If accommodation is necessary, how can institutions be structured to mitigate the costs to children? How, in other words, can the state further their long-term autonomous development and leave them with more options in the future?

In thinking through these answers, the aim is not to “uphold” justice, but to further the aims of justice. As the cases I discussed show, the specifics of the group matter, and so there will not be a simple answer that applies to all. Instead, policy-makers need to understand the values at stake and make decisions that are philosophically sound, and help students to live in a ways that they can accept from the inside.

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2012 WILLIAM L. BOYD NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL POLITICS WORKSHOP:

A CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

*KYLE INGLE
BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY*

*TAMARA YOUNG
NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY*

The Politics of Education Association and the University Council for Educational Administration sponsor the annual Williams L. Boyd National Educational Politics Workshop. Held in conjunction with the annual meeting of AERA, the workshop is open to graduate students and recent doctoral graduates to give emerging scholars the opportunity to learn about current and promising research in the politics of education field, participate in break-out sessions related to their current career stage, and interact with leading politics of education scholars in their areas of interest. Break-out session topics have been expanded to include:

- Transitioning from graduate student to junior professor
- Managing the work/life balance
- Incorporating issues of social justice in research on educational politics
- Developing a research focus within the fields of educational politics and policy
- Teaching educational policy/politics of education
- Employment options beyond the professoriate

If you are interested in attending the 2012 William L. Boyd National Educational Politics Workshop in Vancouver, British Columbia as either an emerging scholar or mentor, please complete the appropriate online application form at the following websites:

[Emerging Scholars](#)
[Volunteer as a Mentor](#)

When/Where: The workshop will take place on April 13th, 2012 from 2:30-5:00 pm at a location convenient to the AERA conference hotels.
Eligibility: All students with an interest in educational politics and currently enrolled in graduate schools in the U.S. or abroad are welcome to attend as are educational researchers who earned their doctoral degrees after March 1, 2010. There is no fee to attend. If you have any questions, please contact Kyle Ingle at wingle@bgsu.edu or Tamara Young at tamara_young@ncsu.edu.

CALL FOR OFFICER NOMINATIONS

*REBECCA JACOBSEN
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY*

This is a call for nominations for the positions of PEA President and one (1) at-large member. These positions are for two-year terms beginning at AERA in 2012. Please send Lance Fusarelli your nominations by November 10th. His email is: lance_fusarelli@ncsu.edu. Members may nominate someone or you can nominate yourself.

The election committee, comprised of Hanne Mawhinney (University of Maryland), Lance (North Carolina State University) and myself, will solicit bios from nominees shortly thereafter. The due date on the bios will be November 15th. We look forward to receiving your nominations.

The Association for Education Finance and Policy 37th Annual Conference

*Hyatt Regency, Boston
Boston, Massachusetts
March 15-17, 2012*

**Proposal Submission Deadline:
November 8, 2011**

PERSPECTIVES ~

The California State Board of Education: Then and Now

Michael Kirst

*President, California State Board of Education
Professor Emeritus, Stanford University*

Below is an edited version of an interview with longtime PEA member Michael Kirst. Kirst is in the unusual position of serving twice as President of the California State Board of Education, with 33 years intervening between the two appointments by California Governor Jerry Brown.

The original interview between Louis Freedberg and Kirst was published in Ed Source⁸ online September 15, 2011 (See below for a link to the full interview). The comments are edited to focus on Kirst's reflections on how state education politics and policy development have changed over the intervening years.

Most Surprising Non-Change. There are some things that are different, and then some things that surprised me that haven't changed. Among the things that haven't changed is that there's hardly any more technology in the classroom now than there was then. We were at the beginning of the technological age then, and we had a few computers in the back of classrooms. So I go back on the board in 2011, go to the classrooms, and there are (again) a few computers in the back of the room. I would have thought in all these intervening years that there would have been a considerable transformation of the technological delivery of education services, and that has not happened.

Governor's Focus on Education. Governor Brown's focus on education has been intensive – particularly in the last two-to-three weeks of the legislative season—and will be so again in the next three-to-four weeks going ahead. This is because either he has to either sign the bills passed out or

⁸ <http://www.edsource.org/extra/2011/kirst-reflects-on-the-state-board-of-education-then-and-now/1216>

they will become law without his signature. Prior to that, he was involved in particular issues, but mainly involved in budget issues. In that area he works heavily with the California Department of Finance. When I came back to the board, I was told “you are part of the Executive Branch of government.” That's very different from when I started 33 years ago. When I was on the board before, we were sort of like a board to Wilson Riles, the State Superintendent. Now we're part of the Executive Branch, like the Executive Office of the President in Washington D.C. So we are paired with the Department of Finance and the State Board of Education, and some people in the governor's inner office. That's a tremendous reversal from the past when I worked with the same governor.

Change in Governance Structure; Elimination of Secretary of Education Position. I think that the Secretary of Education's office became just another layer that people had to work through. Brown doesn't like lots of layers and bureaucratic, up-the-line kind of things. People said then it wouldn't be missed, and I don't see that it is being missed at this point. So far the state board is functioning well with a much smaller staff.

An area where the elimination of the Secretary of Education position from the Cabinet could be missed would be in higher education, for which there is still no administrative structure in the executive branch of government. But for K–12, I think we're able to run with a lot fewer layers and check points, and a lot less conflict in terms of three or four people arguing over turf.

The arrangement is unusual. Governor Brown cut about twenty positions in the Secretary of Education's office, and some more positions in the inner office and the horseshoe (the U-shaped corridor of offices in the governor's office in the State Capitol). For K–12 education, he now has a direct line between his office and the State Board president and the executive director of the State Board, Sue Burr. So the State Board not only is in the middle of policy, but we're also in the middle of legislation, in that there are a hundred or more bills that have come to the Governor. Sue Burr and I worked with him directly on legislative matters on some of these bills. So that is very different.

How the Board Spends its Time. Dealing with charter schools is one of the biggest additions since I came back to the board. The thing we spend the least time on now compared to the old days is special education. Even though it consumes 21 percent of our expenditures, we're spending less time on it and more on charters.

Parental Engagement. Parental engagement comes up around particular issues. For example, parent empowerment issue brought in busloads of students and parents from the Los Angeles area. I can't recall an issue in my whole last tenure where we had that many people coming to the Board in consecutive months.

The Board has shifted a lot from being a wholesale policy organization to being what I call a retail organization. We're making decisions on specific schools, and specific districts, and this gives us less time and energy to focus on broad policy. I am worried that we will lose the broad policy focus, which is the board's essential rationale in the state's constitution.

Legislators and the Confirmation Process. Board members were interviewed by various state Senators who asked us to meet with them. The Republican group was particularly interested in career and technical education, and we have a chance of forging some common policy there. We're going to try some bi-partisan things [that came] out of this confirmation process—which may have been very useful in getting us to know the senators, and what some of their concerns are.

State Fiscal Situation. Fiscal crises are not new to education in California. I was president of the Board in 1978 when Proposition 13⁹ was passed.

⁹ Proposition 13 established the base year value concept for property tax assessments. Under Proposition 13, the 1975-1976 fiscal year serves as the original base year used in determining the assessment for real property. Thereafter, annual increases to the base year value are limited to the inflation rate, as measured by the California Consumer Price Index, or two percent, whichever is less. A new base year value, however, is established whenever a property, or portion thereof, has had a change in ownership or has been newly constructed. Under Proposition 13, the property tax rate is

We went through some severe cutbacks at that time. A lot of the school districts went down to five periods a day. But we were able to accomplish some things in that era. So while schools are extremely hard pressed, I think we'll be able to make some moves forward.

If the state continues to go down in school funding, some of the conditions might be even worse than last time. For example, we have been asked to approve a waiver from Inglewood (Unified School District) to increase class sizes to 38 as a base level. That is beyond anything I ever saw in the '78 to '82 era. So it's problematic, but at this point I think we can move forward.



PUBLICATIONS COMMITTEE REPORT

JANELLE SCOTT
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

On behalf of the PEA Publications Committee, I am happy to announce the selection of the 2013 PEA Yearbook, which is published as a special issue of *Educational Policy*, and 2013 Special Issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education*. Each special issue will advance the study of the politics of education.

The 2013 Yearbook editors are Rebecca Jacobsen from Michigan State University, and Tamara Young from North Carolina State University. The theme of this important issue is "The Politics of Accountability." Rebecca and Tamara have assembled a dynamic selection of authors and articles, and we look forward to this publication.

Erica Frankenberg from Pennsylvania State University, Sheneka Williams from the University of Georgia, and Kathryn McDermott from the University of Massachusetts, will be editing the special issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education*. The theme of this issue is also timely and important and brings together a diverse set of scholars to

fixed at one percent of assessed value plus amounts required to repay any assessment bonds approved by the voters.

examine educational equity. The title of the issue is: "Contesting Equity: The Politics of Educational Opportunity."

We are also pleased to announce the publication of the 2012 special issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education*, edited by Enrique Alemán, Andrea Rorrer, and Laurence Parker from the University of Utah. The issue's theme is "Postracialism in U.S. Public School and Higher Education Settings: in The Politics of Education in the Age of Obama."

Thank you to the PEA Publications Committee, and to the authors and editors of these important publications for their hard work. PEA members interested in submitting proposals for the 2014 Yearbook should look for the call for proposals in the spring.

**PEA OUTSTANDING
DISSERTATION AWARD 2011-2012:
CALL FOR NOMINATIONS**

**CAROL KARPINSKI
FAIRLEIGH DICKINSON UNIVERSITY**

The PEA Outstanding Dissertation Award is designed to foster and support graduate student research and publication on political processes and outcomes in organized education grades pre K-16, from the United States and abroad. One aim is to highlight and reward scholars studying political issues in education, as distinct from the interdisciplinary approaches taken by policy studies.

The PEA Dissertation Awards Committee welcomes any nominated dissertation that addresses the politics of education, including, but not limited to, those that focus on questions of democracy, voice, governance, inequality/equality, power, authority, political accountability, interest group interactions, coalitions and agency at any level of analysis (federal/national, state/provincial, local). Acceptable methods include, but are not limited to, comparative political analysis, case-study analyses of broad trends and reform efforts, qualitative

studies, political history and biography, primary and secondary data analysis.

The Award: A \$250 cash award, editorial and stylistic suggestions for publication from the PEA Awards Committee, and recognition at the annual business meeting of PEA held at the annual meeting of AERA. In addition, all finalists will receive a one-year honorary membership to the Politics of Education Association. Finalists and winners will be announced in the spring *PEA Bulletin* and honored at the annual PEA business meeting at the regularly scheduled AERA meeting in April 2012. The winner will also be invited to be the featured article in future editions of the *PEA Bulletin*.

Eligibility: Dissertations from students who have successfully defended a dissertation for either an Ed.D. or a Ph.D. in political science or education between June 30, 2010, and July 1, 2011, are eligible for nomination.

The Review Process:

The nomination process initially involves submitting a scholar application form including a four-six page (1,200 word maximum) abstract of the dissertation, which describes the topic and any conceptual underpinnings, details the methods of data collection and analysis, and briefly describes the findings and the conclusions. In addition, a nomination form from the dissertation sponsor is required. The sponsor's nomination should describe why the dissertation is exemplary and assess its contribution to the politics of education. It also verifies that the doctoral degree was earned between June 30, 2010, and July 1, 2011. Completed nominations received by December 1, 2011 will be reviewed by the PEA Dissertation Award Committee. No incomplete nominations will be considered.

Four to six finalists will be selected for further consideration by January 2012. Finalists will be asked to submit a complete electronic copy of the dissertation to the chair of the PEA Awards Committee for review by committee members.

Application and Nomination Forms: Application and nomination forms can be requested from Carol Karpinski at karpin@fdu.edu. Once completed,

these forms must be returned via email by December 1, 2011 to Carol Karpinski. Emailed applications will receive a brief confirmation of receipt.



A Popular Tax?

(Meszaros, continued from page 1)

While the challenges are great and the financial resources meager and declining, the options for increasing revenues are few. Because of restrictions within the California school finance system, local authorities have limited flexibility in raising revenue and in allocating resources, and they have difficulty in projecting future revenues. This was true even before the economic downturn in 2008, but in recent years the problem has been underlined in dramatic fashion.

The only option that California school districts have for generating a substantial and predictable stream of supplemental discretionary revenue is the parcel tax. The parcel tax--a fixed amount per parcel without regard to the value of the parcel--is a special tax that districts may impose with a two-thirds majority vote in favor. According to the not-for-profit organization EdSource, there have been 542 California school district parcel tax elections from November 1983 through November 2010. The majority of these (53%) passed at the required two-thirds threshold. Another 39% failed with majority support. Only 8% failed to achieve simple majority support. It is surprising to realize that in California, the state famous for the 1978 tax revolt and Proposition 13, there is a type of tax measure that has received majority support in 92% of the cases in which voters have been asked to decide. Despite the strong track record of support that these measures have had for almost thirty years, only a small fraction of California districts currently receive revenue from this source.

Few studies have focused on elections within the unique school finance system of California and still fewer have focused particularly on the parcel tax (Brunner, 2001; Ellsworth, 2007; Jones, 1996; True, 1996). No study of the parcel tax produced in the last decade has been primarily focused on

understanding the characteristics of districts that pursue parcel taxes, what characteristics are associated with support for the measures, and what the untapped potential of this funding mechanism is.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to come to a better understanding of the potential of the school district parcel tax in California as a mechanism for generating badly needed discretionary revenue by providing answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the demographic and structural characteristics of California school districts that seek approval of parcel taxes and how do these characteristics differ from those of school districts that do not seek approval of parcel taxes?
2. What demographic and structural characteristics of California school districts help to explain the level of support that school district parcel tax referenda receive?
3. For those California school districts that have not pursued passage of a parcel tax during the period under study, what is the likelihood that a parcel tax measure would pass?
4. What would be the likely effect on parcel tax passage rates of a reduction in the threshold from two-thirds to 55%?

Literature Review

Scholars have offered two theoretical approaches for understanding school finance elections. These can be broadly categorized as the rational actor tradition and the social-psychological tradition (Enelow & Hinich, 1984; Piele & Hall, 1973; Rasinski & Rosenbaum, 1987; Sears et al., 1980).

In the rational actor tradition, the economic self-interest of voters drives election outcomes. In economics and political science, this approach is referred to as median voter theory or the spatial theory of voting. In sociology and psychology, it is referred to as social exchange theory. The main premise in this theoretical tradition is that individuals will act to maximize their benefits and minimize their losses. Anthony Downs' (1957) *An economic theory of democracy* is one of the classic works in this tradition. Downs proposes that voter

behavior can be well-understood in terms of a median voter model. In this model, voter policy preferences are represented as points along a continuous dimension. Since Downs, this model has been used by many to explain a wide variety of voter behavior. In this approach, factors that may be studied in relation to school finance elections are whether voters have children, whether these children are in public or private school, whether the voters are property owners, the expected effect of passage or defeat on property values, the cost of the proposed funding measure and who is to pay that cost, and the general economic climate at the time of the election.

The social-psychological tradition is the theoretical rival to the rational economic actor tradition. In this model, outcomes are influenced by multiple psychological and social variables of individuals and communities. Positions taken by voters tend to be habitual and governed by long-term attitudes rather than by short-term economic interests. This approach is exemplified by a study authored by Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960), *The American voter*. They found party identification to be the most important factor accounting for voting behavior in presidential elections. They viewed party identification as a result of psychological attachment. A variety of other socioeconomic factors may be explored within this approach. In the context of school finance elections, these may include age and various measures of socioeconomic status.

Several studies have focused on the California school district parcel tax (Brunner, 2001; Ellsworth, 2007; Jones, 1996; Rueben & Cerdan, 2003; True, 1996). Taking these studies together, what emerges is a pattern that is largely consistent with the findings in the broader literature on the political economy of school finance but that is in some respects at odds with them. Specifically, the general literature suggests that parenthood is probably positively associated with support for school funding while having children in private school suppresses such support. But, there is a suggestion in the parcel tax literature that parenthood may be unrelated or negatively related to support for these measures while private school attendance may actually be associated with an increase in support

for parcel taxes. Finally, in contrast to the predominant finding in the general literature, a proportion of minority students may suppress rather than enhance support for parcel taxes.

This study focused on the 322 school district parcel tax elections held from November 1991 through June 2008. The data for the study included demographic data for school districts, structural and regional characteristics of school districts, outcome information for parcel tax elections, and economic climate data. The choice of predictor variables was guided by findings from the literature review.

Investigation of the first research question required comparison of districts that have put forward parcel tax measures with districts that have not attempted such measures. The comparisons were made using either the independent-samples *t*-test, Pearson's chi-square test, or the Mann-Whitney test depending on whether the variables were at the ratio, nominal, or ordinal levels of measurement.

Investigation of the second research question required the comparison of school district characteristics with electoral outcomes. The outcomes of the elections were evaluated in terms of the percentage of favorable votes. The relative importance of the predictor variables was determined using a stepwise regression procedure. The stepwise method was chosen because the primary intent of the study was to increase practical understanding of the parcel tax election phenomenon rather than to test existing school finance election theory. Stepwise regression allows the researcher to predict outcomes with the fewest possible predictor variables. The final model included eight predictor variables and had an adjusted R^2 of .429. The error of the estimate of the percent vote in favor was about ± 7.6 percentage points.

The third research question was addressed by comparing the demographic and structural characteristics that are predictive of passage of school district parcel taxes to the profiles of school districts that did not conduct parcel tax elections during the interval under study. The regression model developed in answering the second research

question was used to project election outcomes for districts that did not conduct parcel tax elections.

The fourth research question was addressed by reviewing the data on outcomes of school district parcel tax elections that occurred during the interval under study with the assumption that those that failed with favorable votes of 55% or more would have passed had the passage rate been set at a 55% threshold. The 55% level was chosen for analysis rather than a simple majority standard because 55% is the minimum level required for passage of school construction bonds in California and because reduction to a 55% threshold for school parcel taxes is widely discussed in California public policy circles. This research question was also addressed by examining the hypothetical parcel tax outcomes from the third research question to determine the likely effect of a reduction in the threshold on those districts that did not hold a parcel tax election during the period under investigation.

Summary of Findings

- Districts that proposed parcel tax measures were substantially different as a group from those that did not propose parcel taxes. Districts that offered parcel tax referenda to their voters were larger and had larger schools, were more urbanized, and had more affluent and highly-educated populations than districts that did not propose parcel taxes. And, parcel tax measures were largely concentrated in the San Francisco Bay Area.
- Support for school district parcel taxes was strongly associated with the percent of the population with a college education. Other factors that were positively associated with support but with less strength were percent of population living in poverty, the elderly percent of the population, location in a small town, and location in the Bay Area. Factors that were negatively associated with support were the American Indian share of the population, the unemployment rate, and average school size.
- A number of factors often implicated in the theoretical literature as being important in explaining the passage or failure of school district parcel taxes did not prove significant. These include size of the district, property values, parenthood, and median income. This

suggests that school finance election theory is in need of further development. In particular, one area that is ripe for further research is the question of whether demographic characteristics that help to explain support for school funding operate in the same way at the state and local levels.

- There probably were school districts that would have been able to pass parcel tax measures between November 1991 and June 2008 had they attempted to do so. However, these probably represent a small fraction of the districts that did not propose parcel taxes and they probably do not include any of the large school districts with a student population of 50,000 or more. Many of the likely candidates would have been very small districts that are able to raise revenue through direct contributions.
- Of parcel tax measures placed on the ballot between November 1991 and June 2008, about 56% passed. If these measures had required only a 55% supermajority to pass, 91% would have passed. This reinforces that idea that the school parcel tax really is a popular tax.
- Moreover, if the requirement for passage had been 55% rather than 66.7%, many more districts would have attempted parcel tax measures. It is possible that hundreds of additional districts would have been able to pass parcel taxes. An estimated 75% of the districts that did not propose parcel taxes between November 1991 and June 2008 would have had at least a 50% chance of passage in this time frame assuming a 6% unemployment rate--a rate that was typical during the period studied. This group includes a number of large districts: Fresno Unified, Long Beach Unified, Los Angeles Unified, Sacramento City Unified, San Bernardino City Unified, and San Diego Unified.

Conclusions

Under the current school finance system in California, the parcel tax is the one avenue available for districts to pursue a stable and significant source of supplementary discretionary revenue. One of the fundamental drawbacks of this funding mechanism is that it adds to school finance inequity between districts (Ellsworth, 2007; Lianides, 2006). The fact

is that many of the districts that are able to pass parcel tax measures under the current system are the same districts that are best positioned to supplement budgets with contributions from private educational foundations. While reducing the threshold for passage from two-thirds to 55% would not eliminate this inequality, it would greatly expand the feasibility of the parcel tax as a funding mechanism for hundreds of school districts. Expansion of the parcel tax would have the additional benefit of strengthening district accountability to local voters.

Even if the threshold were reduced to 55% there would still be many districts that are not able to achieve passage. Therefore, additional adjustments to Proposition 13 should be considered. Some possibilities include increasing the maximum property tax rate from the current one percent, allowing assessed value to grow at a rate higher than two percent per year, and subjecting commercial property to less favorable treatment than residential property.

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TREASURER REPORT

TAMARA V. YOUNG
NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY

The financial statement for our AERA account is listed below. As we move forward, we anticipate the following revenue and expenditures until the end of the fiscal year:

- A. A substantial influx of funds from membership income paid at the beginning of the membership cycle (i.e., December 2011/January 2012)
- B. Payment for the publication and shipping of PEA Yearbooks published in the *Peabody Journal of Education* or *The Journal of Education Policy*
- C. UCEA-November 2011
Breakfast meeting

AERA SIG Politics of Education Association Financial Statement (1/1- 8/11)

Description	Beginning Balance	Income	Expenditures	Ending Balance
Beginning Balance	\$6,925.07			
Membership Dues Income		\$4,600		
PEA Dissertation Award 2011			\$250.00	
Contribution Income (balance forwarded from Florida checking account)		\$3.56		
William L. Boyd National Education Politics Workshop at AERA 2011			\$1,555.86	
AERA SIG management Fee (07/11-06/12)			300.00	
	\$6,925.07	\$4603.56	\$2105.86	\$9,422.77

Membership. The total number of members as of October 13, 2011 is 226. Currently, 59 (26%) of our members are students.

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In addition to its presence on the AERA program, PEA membership provides members with an electronic *PEA Bulletin* (the Association's newsletter), recent publications, and information about upcoming conferences, books, articles, and events related to the politics of education. Members also receive the special double issue of *Educational Policy* (January/March) which serves as the annual yearbook of the Politics of Education Association and a biennial special issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education*. The association also maintains its own web site <http://www.fsu.edu/~pea/>; offers course materials for teaching courses related to the Politics of Education, POETS (Politics of Education Teachers Services); sponsors timely presentations from senior scholars and political insiders; and provides mentoring for new faculty and graduate students.

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Please note that all SIG memberships will *expire* at the same time the AERA membership expire—generally, at the end of the year.

The Politics of Education Association (PEA) was formed in 1969 as the Politics of Education Society. In 1978, it became the Politics of Education Association, as part of AERA. Interest in educational policy and politics expanded so that in 1987, the Association successfully called for the formation of a new division within the American Educational Research Association. Today, that division is known as Division L: Policy and Politics. The Politics of Education Association continues as a Special Interest Group affiliated with the American Educational Research Association

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