

Americans support local control of schools

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A study led by Michigan State University education scholar Rebecca Jacobsen argues that Americans support local control of education. Credit: Michigan State University

Despite criticism that local school boards are "dinosaurs" that need to be replaced, Americans support local control of their schools, Michigan State University education scholars argue in a new paper.

The public believes that all three levels of government – local, state and federal – should be involved in education policy and that local officials should be in charge of day-to-day operations of the schools, said Rebecca Jacobsen, lead researcher on the project.

Jacobsen, assistant professor of education, and doctoral student Andrew Saultz analyzed some 40 years of public surveys involving education. Their analysis, in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, comes as federal education

initiatives such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top have led many policy advocates to focus on federal control of schools.

But Jacobsen said it's a mistake to discount the popularity of local school boards. There are more than 90,000 locally elected school board members serving on nearly 15,000 school boards in the United States.

"A lot of policymakers today think they can just go around the local boards; that the federal government can create a policy that goes directly to the schools or works around the existing institutions," Jacobsen said. "But that's not going to work in the long run, because local control is not dead. People still feel it plays an important role."

When it comes to policy decisions related to equitable funding and standards across all schools, the public favors state and federal government control, Jacobsen said.

"At the national level we want schools to be relatively equitably funded, and we want schools to teach relatively the same topics and make sure kids have access to the same types of curriculum," she said.

But the public also believes local officials should be in charge of "running schools" or "improving schools," the paper found. These findings are particularly powerful, Jacobsen said, given that this preference remains strong even as national policy discussions have criticized local control and taken steps to diminish local decision-making ability through [policy](#) changes.

"Some argue that local [school](#) governance is a 'dinosaur' that needs to be replaced, but local leaders are going to be the ones implementing these federal policies," Jacobsen said. "So if they're going to have a major hand in how these policies get shaped at the local level, then we better pay attention to their resources, their capabilities, and not just dismiss

them."

Provided by Michigan State University

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