

The Politics of Elementary and Secondary Education Act Waivers

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Purpose: This study was conducted to evaluate the manner in which past state-level educational policies, political leanings, and financial resources impacted the decision-making of state education departments when filling out the ESEA waivers.

Subjects: 42 State Departments of Education

Research Question: How much of a relationship is there between a state's adjusted per-pupil expenditure, percent of students federally funded, state political ideology, percent of non-white enrollment, the selection of the state to the federal Race to the Top grant program, and the state's choice to have a dual accountability system and that state's choices when filling out their ESEA waivers, considering design decisions such as using different AMOs, growth, super subgroups, performance indexes, other test subjects, and non-test information?

Research Methods: This study used linear probability models to analyze six decisions that state departments of education made on their Elementary and Secondary Education Act flexibility waivers. The six decisions were: using different AMOs, growth, super subgrouping, performance indexes, other test subjects, and non-test information. To learn more about the makeup of the states that chose each of these options, the researchers included the following state-level variables: adjusted per-pupil expenditure, percent of students federally funded, state political ideology, percent of non-white enrollment, whether the state was a Race to the Top grant recipient, and whether the state has a dual accountability system

Findings: States with higher adjusted per-pupil expenditure were significantly more likely to use different AMOs and less likely to use super subgroups. The higher the percentage of federally-funded students suggested significance for use of super super group, use of performance indexes, and use of non-test information at a $p < .10$ level. The strength of a state's political ideology led to an increased used of super subgroups. The higher the percent of non-white enrollment, the lower the chance that those states use different AMOs. Being a Race to the Top grant recipient suggests a higher chance of other test subjects being used in a state's accountability system. While having a dual accountability system was found to have a significant relationship with using a performance index at a $p < .10$ level.

Implications: The findings that education policies, political beliefs, and financial resources impact what go into states' ESEA waivers has ramifications for both the federal government, who should be aware of this finding when drafting new legislation, and for states, as reflecting on those factors can help solidify the direction in which a state decides to go.