



Understanding Agenda Setting in State Educational Policy:  
An Application of Kingdon's Multiple Streams Model to the  
Formation of State Reading Policy<sup>1</sup>

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**Citation:** Young, T. V., Shepley, T. V., Miskel, C., & Song, M. (2010). Understanding agenda setting in state educational policy: An application of Kingdon's multiple streams model to the formation of state reading policy. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 18(15). Retrieved [date], from <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/771>

**Abstract:** Drawing on interview data from reading policy actors in California, Michigan, and Texas, this study applied Kingdon's (1984, 1995) multiple streams model to explain how the issue of reading became prominent on the agenda of state governments during the latter half of the 1990s. A combination of factors influenced the status of a state's reading policy agenda, including feedback from parents, teachers, and business groups; student achievement data; political pressure from the state administration; regional and national interest; a pervasive belief that reading is a building block for student success; and a widespread perception that the decline in reading achievement was symbolic of the failure of public schools. In addition, governors promoted reading to high agenda prominence by influencing which issues were placed on the decision agenda (agenda setting) and

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<sup>1</sup> Accepted under the editorship of Sherman Dorn.

which alternatives were given serious attention (alternative specification). Finally, the findings suggest that the applicability of Kingdon's national-level model to the state level may depend on both the issue being examined and the participation of the state executive branch.

**Keywords:** politics of education; policy formation; reading.

**Comprendiendo los procesos de definición de las agendas en política educativas estatales: Una aplicación del modelo de Kingdon de flujos múltiples en la formulación de políticas de lectura del estado.**

**Resumen:** Tomando como base datos de entrevistas con actores en el área de políticas sobre lectura en los estados de Michigan, California y Texas, este estudio utilizó el modelo de flujos múltiples de Kingdon (1984, 1995) para explicar cómo el área de lectura llegó a ser prominente en la agenda de los gobiernos estatales durante la segunda mitad de los años 90. Una combinación de factores influyeron para establecer las agenda políticas estatales de lectura, incluyendo comentarios de padres, profesores y grupos económicos, el rendimiento escolar; la presión política de la administración estatal, además de grupos de presión a nivel regional y nacional. Otros factores que también contribuyeron fueron la creencia que la lectura es la base para el éxito de los estudiantes y la percepción que la disminución del rendimiento en el área de lectura representa simbólicamente, el fracaso de las escuelas públicas. Por otra parte, el Gobierno promovió la lectura al principio orden del día, que influyen en qué temas se colocaron en la agenda de decisión (definición de personal) y qué alternativas deben recibir más atención. Por último, los resultados sugieren que la utilización del modelo de Kingdon del nivel nacional para el nivel estatal depende tanto de la cuestión que se examina como de la participación del poder ejecutivo en el estado

**Palabras-clave:** políticas da educación; formación de políticas; lectura

**Compreendendo a definição de agendas de política educacional do estado: Uma aplicação do modelo de correntes múltiplas de Kingdon na formação da política de leitura dos estados**

**Resumo:** Baseando-se em dados de entrevista com atores políticos da area da leitura em Michigan, na Califórnia e no Texas, este estudo aplicou o modelo de múltiplas correntes de Kingdon (1984, 1995) para explicar como a leitura tornou-se proeminente na agenda dos governos de Estado durante a metade final dos anos 90. Uma combinação de fatores influenciou a configuração da agenda de política estadual de leitura, incluindo os comentários de pais, professores e grupos de econômicos; dados de desempenho escolar; pressão política da administração do Estado; além de interesse regional e nacional. Contribuíram também fatores como a crença de que a leitura é a base para o sucesso do estudante e a percepção de que o diminuição no desempenho da leitura representava, simbolicamente, o fracasso das escolas públicas. Além disso, os governantes promoveram a leitura ao topo da agenda, influenciando quais questões eram colocadas na pauta de decisão (definição de pauta) e quais alternativas deveriam receber mais atenção. Por fim, os resultados sugerem que a aplicabilidade do modelo de nível nacional de Kingdon ao nível estadual depende tanto da questão a ser examinada quanto da participação do grupo executivo do Estado.

**Palavras-chave:** políticas da educação; formação de políticas; leitura.

## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The research was supported in part by grants from The U.S. Department of Education's Field Initiated Studies Program, PR/Award R305T990369 and The Spencer Foundation's Major Grants Program, Grant 200000269. Content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of The U.S. Department of Education or the Spencer Foundation, and you should not assume their endorsement. We wish to thank several

The Reading Wars of the last two decades did not present a new phenomenon. How children learn to read has been debated for over a century (Ravitch, 2000). However, during the latter half of the 1990s and even today, the perpetual Reading Wars dispute has shifted from an ideological debate about pedagogy among reading researchers and practitioners to a topic of controversy involving the political elite. It extends to dialogues about equity, teacher quality, standards, testing, and accountability. Both Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush have been well regarded for their reading advocacy efforts at the national level. However, before their national initiatives, both presidents garnered attention for reading at the state level during their tenure as governors. They are not the only governors to use their bully pulpits, fiscal authority, and powers of appointment to initiate reading reforms. Motivated by an array of ideologies, personal experiences, constituencies, and research findings during the latter half of the 1990s and early 2000s, several governors led the charge to explain and resolve the question of “Why Johnny Can’t Read.” For example, Governor Don Siegelman of Alabama pushed for financial support of the Alabama Reading Initiative. In 2001, Florida’s Governor Jeb Bush signed into law *Just Read*, a reading program that helps train teachers on how to utilize research-based teaching methods and materials. Governors Pete Wilson and Gray Davis of California also proposed several state reading initiatives, including the adoption of instructional materials, classroom pedagogy, professional development, and teacher certification. By 2002, 35 states had created reading initiatives (Manzo, 2002). This plethora of state reading policy legislation in numerous states suggests that policy windows had opened for the issue of reading. What is less clear is how and why reading spilled over into the political arena to occupy the attention of the political elite. As such, the purpose of this study is to understand the progression of how a largely ideological disagreement amongst educational professionals became a key feature of state politicians’ platforms, as well as a matter of considerable interest to the public, the media, and a diverse array of interest groups. Specifically, we attempt to understand how and why reading became prominent on the state governmental decision agenda. By answering this question, we make the agenda setting in the state educational policy process more transparent, advance our knowledge of the politicization of reading in particular, and shed light on policy-readiness strategies in general—allowing educational policy actors to understand how and when their issues might be given serious attention by state government policy decision makers.

## Theoretical Background

### Multiple Streams Framework

Kingdon’s (1984, 1995) multiple streams model (MSM), a modification of Cohen, March, and Olsen’s (1972) garbage can model of organizational choice, is a popular theoretical perspective used to explain the dynamic and complex agenda-setting process (King, 1994; Sabatier, 1999). Indeed, MSM has been used to guide policy research across a wide range of policy domains and institutional settings (eg., Kingdon, 1995; Oliver, 1991; Shibuya, 1997; Travis & Zahariadis, 2002; Zahariadis, 1992, 1995, 1996) and has shown promise in explaining educational agenda setting in the U.S. and other countries. (DeJaeghere, Chapman, Mulkeen, 2006; Edlefsen, 1993; Holderness, 1992; Houlihan & Green, 2006; Lieberman, 2002; Stout & Stevens, 2000). Kingdon’s model of policy making is based on a metaphor of three process streams: problems, policies, and processes. The

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colleagues who were responsible for the planning and data collection aspects of the Reading Policy Project at the University of Michigan from which the data for this study are derived: Cecil Miskel, Ruth Athan Isaia, Jane G. Cogshall, David E. DeYoung, Celia H. Sims, and Rich Osguthorpe. An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the National Reading Conference (December, 2002) in Miami, Florida.

streams primarily develop and operate independently, but they can become coupled at critical junctures, a circumstance that dramatically enhances the likelihood of an issue being placed on the government's decision agenda.

The problem stream involves the process of problem recognition (Kingdon, 1995). According to Kingdon, societal conditions capture the government's attention and are deemed problems by way of systematic indicators, dramatic focusing events, or negative feedback from existing policies. Indicators assess the magnitude of the condition. When conditions are bad enough or circumstances have changed significantly, policy decision makers see the condition as a problem. Crises or disasters, popularization of powerful symbols, or the personal experiences of government officials are focusing events that capture the attention of the policy makers. Finally, the feedback that officials receive from constituents or program evaluators can bring issues to the attention of the government.

Operating concurrently, the political stream also explains the relative prominence of issues on official agenda (Kingdon, 1995). Like the problem stream, there are primarily three mechanisms in the political stream: swings of national mood, the balance of organized political forces, and events within government itself. A swing of national mood reflects the political climate or the presence of a broad social movement. Policy decision makers' sense of the national mood can lead to the promotion or downgrading of an issue's prominence on the policy agenda. Government decision makers' perception of the level of support, or opposition from organized political forces, can also influence the relative prominence of an issue. Lastly, the political stream is characterized by events within the government such as turnover in key personnel or shifts in the jurisdictional boundaries, changes that can facilitate or hinder the prominence of a policy issue.

While both the problem and political streams concern agenda setting, the policy stream addresses alternative specification: the generation and specification of policy solutions to problems by members of the policy community. Policy communities include policy actors inside and outside of the government who interact with each other, exchange ideas, and formulate and reformulate policy alternatives. Individuals who actively invest resources to advocate particular proposals or prominence of an idea are policy entrepreneurs. As policy entrepreneurs build acceptance for their proposals, they soften up both the policy community and larger publics (and improve the receptiveness to their ideas) by introducing bills, making speeches, amending proposals, and issuing studies and reports.

Kingdon (1995) conceptualizes each of the three streams as following its own rules and dynamics. Yet at critical moments a policy window briefly opens in the problem or political streams, and policy entrepreneurs couple their solutions to the problem or take advantage of the political climate and bring about the convergence of all three streams, which brings an issue to the top of agenda for authoritative action by governmental officials.

A handful of scholars have applied MSM—as first described in Kingdon's (1984) key work *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies* or its second edition (1995), which includes some additional reflections on the theory but does not modify the original concepts. These scholars use Kingdon's approach to explain state-level educational policy process for a wide range of issues as well as several policy contexts, such as state decentralization of higher education (McLendon, 2003), teacher tenure in Colorado (Elrod, 1994), diversity in Minnesota (Stout & Stevens, 2000), gifted education in New Mexico (Holderness, 1992), and school reforms in Chicago (Lieberman, 2002) and Ohio (Edlefsen, 1993). The application of MSM to state educational policy domains has led scholars to recommend modifications to account for the unique characteristics of state educational policymaking: the presence of a state department of education that can dominate an educational policy community (Holderness, 1992); contextual conditions arising in the state government, in the policy domain, and

for any particular issue (McClendon, 2003); and the role the media plays in policymaking, the competition between issues, and the opening of policy windows for policies that develop over a long term (Stout & Stevens, 2000). Despite these valuable insights, we have little systematic comparative evidence of the applicability of MSM to educational policy. Furthermore, the differences in the theoretical questions, methodological approaches, and empirical contexts limit our ability to identify any underlying patterns of agenda setting within or across the states revealed by MSM. Additionally, several of the MSM-based studies found governors acting as policy entrepreneurs in at least one of the MSM streams (Edlefsen, 1993; Elrod, 1994; Lieberman, 2002; McLendon, 2003, Stout & Stevens, 2000). Yet no study systematically addressed the specific activities of the governors within the streams, forgoing a unique opportunity to understand the influence state governors wield over the agenda-setting process. This study addresses these limitations. In particular, it looks at a single issue across multiple states—reading—permitting us to compare across contextual settings and to subsequently identify the corresponding and idiosyncratic features of agenda setting in state educational policy. Furthermore, we use the same theoretical lens, MSM, to pay close attention to the governors' role in agenda setting, allowing us to explain how governors promote an issue to agenda prominence.

### **The Issue of Reading**

With the increasing politicization of curriculum and instruction, many educational issues find their way into the political spotlight and onto the governmental agenda. However, there are several advantages to focusing our attention on the issue of reading: Reading is fundamental to achievement; reading-achievement data is commonly used as an important gauge of equity and excellence in schools; reading policies affect a large number of students (i.e., all students from preschool through to third grade); and reading is associated with prominent educational policies (e.g., class size, federal funding, teacher credentialing, No Child Left Behind [NCLB], standards, assessment, and accountability) (Young, 2005). For the purposes of this study, reading policy involves activities related to the regulation of reading guidelines for students in the early elementary grades. Reading policy often encompasses or extends to pedagogy, standards, assessment, and accountability, curriculum and instruction, teacher education programs, professional development, and instructional resources. It often incorporates dialogue about race, language, geographical location, disability, and sociocultural or economic-based achievement gaps.

Additionally, innovative policy changes generally occur when there is heightened attention surrounding an issue (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). Thus, studying the prominent issue of reading will allow us to improve our understanding of policy innovation (Young & Miskel, 2004). Lastly, focusing on reading will permit two types of comparative analysis. First, because the issue is common among many states, we can conduct state comparisons of the policy processes across an issue. Second, because the issue has a recurring role on the educational agenda, we can compare the future incarnations of the Reading Wars and state reading-policy reforms with these findings, permitting study of an issue over time. A strength of the comparative approach is that it allows us to identify both universal and specific aspects of policymaking, thereby facilitating our understanding of context and policy process.

### **Methods**

We analyzed data derived from The University of Michigan's State Reading Policy Project (SRPP), which examined the development of reading policy in nine states during the mid-1990s to

early 2000s (see Miskel et al., 2003; Song & Young, 2008; for additional details). A description of the research methods specific to this study follows.

### **Participants**

Because a key focus of this study was investigating the role of governors in educational agenda setting, we selected the states in the SRPP database that had sufficient gubernatorial participation: California, Michigan, and Texas. As differences exist in the political situations and political practices across the three states, we had sufficient variation in policymaking environments to discern idiosyncratic and traditional features of the agenda setting process. To ensure that we used a sample that could provide us considerable insight, we conducted a purposeful sample. We reviewed archival data (e.g., legislation, policy statements, media, and academic journals) to identify participants associated with relevant government departments, committees, or other obviously important interest groups, and we also followed recommendations of a consultant who was familiar with the reading policy in the state. Lastly, we asked participants to suggest other policy actors they believed we should interview. If multiple individuals recommended an actor and further review of the archival data substantiated their choice, then we included the actor in the sample. In most instances, participants indicated that our list of participants was comprehensive and they did suggest an additional actor to be included in the sample. The response rates for California, Michigan, and Texas were 90%, 98%, and 73% respectively, with an average overall rate of 87%. We interviewed knowledgeable informants who were influential, people who were close to decision makers, and the decision makers themselves. Of all those interviewed, 32% were inside state government, including elected officials, appointed officials, and civil servants representing the governor, the state superintendent of public instruction, the state board of education, the secretary of education, the state legislature, and various relevant commissions and boards. Of all those interviewed, 68% were outside state government: including school district employees, reading researchers and professors, consultants, lobbyists, educational professional organizations, citizen groups, and the media. Of the 151 respondents, 67 were interviewed in person, 83 on the telephone, and 1 responded by email.

### **Data Collection and Management**

A standard open-ended structured interview schedule served as the primary data collection instrument (Miskel et al., 2003; Song & Young, 2008; Young 2005 for interview questionnaire). Adopted from Kingdon (1995), the following question illuminated the problem stream: During the past 5–10 years or so, what significant issues in reading have you and others been addressing? To reflect the political stream, we asked respondents: Have there been political events that have brought reading to the top of the policy agenda? Finally, to describe the policy stream, we asked respondents: Changing to possible solutions over the past few years, what new approaches or programs in reading have been proposed in the state? To shed light on the policy entrepreneurs, we asked participants to indicate who they thought were the most influential policy actors. All interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, and placed in the qualitative data analysis software program ATLAS.ti (Scientific Software Development, 2001). To ensure anonymity, respondents' names were replaced with randomly assigned alphanumeric codes. The transcripts were stored and coded in ATLAS.ti (Scientific Software Development, 2001).

### **Analysis**

We performed two types of coding to analyze the data: selective coding, systematically coding with respect to MSM-based categories (Kingdon's, 1995), and open coding, or coding to allow new categories to emerge from the data set categories that do not necessarily correspond to

MSM. Two researchers independently coded each interview transcript and then compared their coding of data segments. When they agreed, we used that consensual judgment. However, when disagreements arose, they discussed the data segment and resolved their differences. Then, using the pattern-coding approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994), we identified single-case (state specific) and multi-case (across states) themes that emerged within the coded segments.

## Results

Table 1 quantifies participant accounts for the reasons for the prominence of reading on the agenda of the participant's state.

Table 1  
*Factors promoting the prominence of reading on state agenda*

Streams	Frequency <sup>a</sup>	% <sup>b</sup>
<b>Problem Stream</b>		
<i>Indicators</i>		
California	30	57%
Michigan	19	34%
Texas	19	44%
<i>Focusing Events/Crises/Symbols</i>		
California	37	70%
Michigan	35	63%
Texas	28	65%
<i>Feedback</i>		
California	19	36%
Michigan	19	34%
Texas	13	30%
<b>Political Stream</b>		
<i>National Mood</i>		
California	15	28%
Michigan	16	29%
Texas	7	16%
<i>Organized Political Forces</i>		
California	32	60%
Michigan	32	57%
Texas	34	79%
<i>Government</i>		
California	11	21%
Michigan	7	13%
Texas	16	37%

<sup>a</sup> The number of policy actors who mentioned the theme at least once in their interview. <sup>b</sup> The percentage of policy actors who mentioned the theme at least once in their interview. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Lastly, to discern the relative prominence of various concepts, we counted the number of policy actors who mentioned the theme at least once in their interview. If participants rarely mentioned certain factors to explain how and why reading gained agenda prominence in their respective states,

we could presume that these factors were less important than factors mentioned more frequently by study participants.

### **Problem Stream**

On the whole, feedback, indicators, and focusing events propelled reading onto and up the state government agenda. However, the relative importance, content, and temporal nature of these problem stream channels varied across the three states.

*California.* According to 36% of policy actors interviewed from California, feedback from parents and teachers (and occasionally others) brought attention to the issue of reading in the state of California. For example, as one interest group participant said, “I think the central core cities and rural areas’ parents and activists started saying, ‘What the hell is going on? This is unacceptable.’” A newspaper reporter also shared the feedback from teachers with us—which echoed the views of many other participants: “Teachers began calling us [and] ... were very concerned about the [whole language based] methods that they were being required to use and really felt like they themselves were not being successful.” Though feedback was clearly important, focusing events were more prominently mentioned. In fact, 70% cited at least one focusing event; examples included policymakers’ personal experiences, symbols, and a sense of crisis. Certain topics dominated each of these themes. At the forefront of the personal-experience stories that played an important role in placing reading at the top of the agenda was California State Board of Education member Marion Joseph’s account of a family member struggling to learn to read. She made reading reform her “personal crusade” because she believed that her grandson had difficulty learning to read due to whole-language-based curriculum. Another major focusing event was the release of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results in 1992 and 1994. As a member of the state board of education explained: “I think probably the wake-up call, with the abysmal showing of California in the NAEP scores... was embarrassing for the state. I think it pretty well verified what a lot of people were feeling—that we had very serious literacy problems.” In short, while the Golden State was formerly known for leading innovation in education, California had lost its premier status. Lastly, many believed that poor reading achievement captured in a nutshell the problem with education. In conjunction with the widely held view that reading is a gateway skill, (or as one respondent put it, “if you don’t get that right, then you’re going to have huge problems with everything else,”) this belief gave reading an inlet into the decisional agenda. Demographic shifts, the actions of state government officials, and standards based initiatives were also salient focusing events.

For 57% of participants, indicators of the problem were also evident, but indicators were less prominent in the problem stream than feedback and focusing events. Though some participants such as reading pundits challenged the adequacy and accuracy of the NAEP as an indicator, the NAEP was the most compelling indicator of the reading problem. The presence of sizeable race/ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status-based achievement gaps in NAEP reading scores captured the attention of the concerned advocacy groups, the media, and public officials. As one respondent noted, “The low performance of schools, particularly schools serving kids in poverty and kids who are English learners—their performance is really quite poor and unacceptable to people.” Students’ low scores on state and local-level standardized tests and the unexpected low performance of white suburban children were also critical indicators of the magnitude of the reading problem.

*Michigan.* Contrary to California where feedback from parents and teachers brought the reading problem to the attention of government officials, 34% of Michigan interviewees said that feedback from the business community was crucial to the issue of reading gaining political support. A respondent offered a personal example that embodied the concerns of many business groups,

sharing: “My husband is a small business owner... and [he] tells me about people who come in to apply for jobs and have... someone else fill it [the application] out for them because they can’t read or write.” As in California, focusing events were key to reading’s gaining agenda prominence in Michigan (63% of respondents). The personal experiences of policy decision makers, reading research, events within other states, national initiatives, and the focus of Governor John Engler’s administration reading were all important focusing events. Also like California, low reading achievement was commonly perceived as a symbol of the failure of public education and a fundamental element for effective reform. A state official’s comments epitomized this view: “Reading is the primary underpinning of the rest of the skills. If you can’t read, you really can’t get to math and science and social studies. So it has a primacy.” The Michigan Assessment Educational Program (MEAP) was the most prominent indicator of the severity of the reading problem in the state according to 34% of Michigan participants. A representative from a teachers association explained how the MEAP made the reading problem apparent: “I think the persistent failure of some of our schools on the MEAP... [There] has been a persistent pattern, I think... [and it] created the need for action.” Other indicators of the reading problem included achievement gaps and national test scores.

*Texas.* Feedback primarily from the business community brought attention to reading in Texas, according to 30% of participants in the state. A policymaker described the uproar from business interests: “It came up from the business community, primarily, initially... the concern that [they] were getting kids with high school diplomas that don’t have the skills to do what we need them to do.” Teachers were also voicing alarm. A representative from a teachers association explained the concerns of teachers: “Our teachers were reporting to us over and over again that they were getting these kids that couldn’t read in their fourth, fifth, sixth grade classes. Not only were they not learning, but they were holding other kids back.” Similar to both California and Michigan, 65% of Texas participants mentioned focusing events that contributed to the problem stream, primarily the personal experiences of policymakers; the actions of Governor George W. Bush’s administration; standards, assessment and accountability initiatives; and Ross Perot’s special commission on education, research, and the significance of reading to learning. Interestingly, several actors said that that the attention given to reading began in the 1980s and its rise on the agenda had been a long-term process. As one policy actor explained, “I think a lot of this just came out of 1984 to ‘85, when the Perot Commission first looked at education here in Texas and started establishing standards. This has been a... process that has taken 15 years to get to the point where we are now.” Policy actors also revealed that reading was the “cornerstone” to academic success and standards-based reform brought attention to reading. The state test, The Texas Assessment of Academic Skill (TAAS), was the most frequently mentioned problem indicator (44% of Texas participants). A representative of a teachers association described how TAAS highlighted the reading problem, explaining “[There were] about 21% of our third graders who couldn’t pass the reading portion of the TAAS.... We were convinced that there was no way we could have a school system functioning at any sort of level with 21% of its students unable to read.” Achievement gaps were also prominently mentioned.

### **Political Stream**

Like the problem stream, the political stream influences the agenda-setting processes. Events within a state government could create a political climate receptive to reading policy initiatives: changes in jurisdiction, turnover in positions, shifts in state and national mood, and organized political forces from both inside and outside of the government, including those with different political affiliations.

*California.* According to 21% of participants, changes within the government propelled reading to the top of the agenda. The elections of Governors Wilson and Davis garnered attention and support for reading. Interestingly, the policy focus did not shift with a turnover in administration. Rather, it continued with the next administration. This continuity and bipartisan support further bolstered the importance of reading. A reading researcher commented on the absence of a policy shift: “The policy didn’t change. I mean, most of us thought that if we changed parties we might change policy. And in fact, it didn’t change.” Wilson’s appointment of a phonics state board of education also greatly enhanced the issue of reading prominence. Mood played a role, according to 28% of California study participants, with general concern about educational achievement and reading in particular, which in the state and nation created a political environment receptive to the issue of reading. An educational policy analyst said of the mood, “People seem to think the education system is failing. You can argue about whether that’s true or not. Reading is just the most simple-to-grasp lightning rod for that issue.” Among California participants, 60% said that the advocacy efforts of political forces were also constant and important in the agenda setting process. Outside state government, the publishers, professional organizations, foundations, conservative groups, and Ron Unz were perceived as directly and indirectly responsible for the prominence of reading. Within the government the governors, their appointed secretary of education, the state department of education, the state board, and Marion Joseph were all viewed as organized political forces promoting reading as a policy issue. By far the two political standouts were governors and Marion Joseph. A policy researcher commented on Marion Joseph’s efforts: “I really think the advocacy of Marion Joseph was crucial.” A representative from an administrators association agreed: “Marion identified from her own family experience this [low reading achievement] as a problem, and it became for her a major issue, that we were losing a generation of children who couldn’t read.”

*Michigan.* Advocacy efforts of organized forces, including businesses, educational associations, and conservative groups, were the most significant factor for the attention given to reading; 57% of state participants mentioned this theme. A policy actor remarked of conservative efforts: “I would say it, the far right or ultra conservative right, was beginning to lobby against defective educational practices.” A representative from the state department of education also commented on conservative groups: “You also had a set of very conservative parents and legislators and policymakers in this state who bought into the phonics idea as an easy answer.” The governor and legislature were particularly strong advocates for reading. A state legislator shared that “the Governor came in and did his State of the State and said that every child should learn to read by third grade. And [presented]... his initiative... it was a political process.” Individuals and organizations at the national level, as well as the efforts of governors in other states, were also viewed as factors contributing to reading gaining agenda prominence. According to 13% of Michigan participants, turnover in government or changes in jurisdictional boundaries only slightly influenced the rise of reading on the state agenda in Michigan. However, there was little consensus about which government changes were important. Two respondents mentioned the election of Governor Engler, two respondents mentioned changes in the jurisdiction of the state department of education, and one respondent mentioned changes in the legislature and the state board. Mood “paralleling national concern” also played an important role in the rise of reading on the agenda, at least for 29% of Michigan participants.

*Texas.* Changes within the government such as the election of Governor George W. Bush and the appointments of Mike Moses and Robin Gilchrest to the Texas Education Agency were key influences on the agenda process; 37% of Texas participants mentioned this factor. A newspaper reporter said, “When [Bush] became Governor, reading was his thing.” A policy actor elaborated:

“When you say political events clearly when Governor Bush came in... I guess that would be ’96 [Bush beat incumbent Gov. Anne Richards in 1994]... when he entered this thing; that was one of his first initiatives that he announced.” Organized forces from inside and outside of the government were powerful proponents of reading reform; 79% of Texas study participants mentioned advocacy as a key factor. The push for agenda status came from the state department of education, the legislature, the state board of education, and the office of the governor. One respondent described the governor’s political pressure: “It’s one of his major priorities. And of course, he has been very persuasive as far as bringing the legislature around to his way of thinking on this.” Of the state board, a policy actor said, “And another point I would bring up is that the state board is very active in Texas, and of course it has been a big debate there for many years.” Interest group pressure from the business community, conservative citizen groups, and reading groups were also paramount to reading gaining prominence. One respondent remarked that business groups have been “very supportive of a pretty hard line approach to reading instruction... they also bring in the big money.” Other actors commented on the involvement of the Christian Coalition, one saying, “I think the Christian Coalition, the right wing in the state, was really advocating that reading be taught through a phonics approach”. Political forces did not act in isolation; rather coalitions were the norm and opposition, though present, generally disregarded. For example, one policy actor noted, “There’s opposition at the university level, too. U.T., primarily, is a whole language institution... There was political friction there between the governor and his supporters.” Mood was the least mentioned mechanism in the political stream; 16% of participants referred to the concept. A policy actor summarized general public opinion in the following way: “I think it certainly has been a hot-button issue with the public, because there are a lot of frustrated parents out there who are upset that their children have not gotten an effective curriculum.”

### **Policy Stream**

*Policy community and alternatives.* The reading policy communities in California, Michigan, and Texas involved numerous policy actors. From the government, the governor, state superintendent of public instruction, state board of education, the secretary of education, the state legislature, and various commissions and boards were all actively involved in the reading policy community. From outside the state government, local school districts, reading researchers and professors, consultants, lobbyists, educational professionals, organizations, citizen groups, and the media engaged reading policy in the state. Policy solutions that were given serious attention within the policy stream primarily focused on standards-based reforms, such as standards, assessment and accountability initiatives. However, each state emphasized and eventually enacted some distinct solutions. California, for example, shifted focus from whole language to phonics instruction and revised their standards, teacher credentialing, professional development and instructional materials to stress a balanced approach that required phonics instruction. Texas, on the other hand, focused considerable resources on testing and accountability. Michigan is noted for both its focus on assessment and its efforts to include family as well as early prevention of illiteracy to improve reading achievement in the state.

*Policy entrepreneurs.* Policy entrepreneurs included state officials and members from interest groups. We identified many active policy entrepreneurs who were involved in shaping reading policy in the three states; however, we limit our discussion to the entrepreneurs perceived as most influential in reading policy. In California, the policy actors perceived that state board member Marion Joseph, and Governors Wilson and Davis were the most influential policy entrepreneurs. Other entrepreneurs included members of the state legislature, such as Steve Baldwin and Kerry Mazzoni and the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Delaine Eastin. Among interest groups,

Alice Furry of the Sacramento Office of Education, Reid Lyon, reading consultants from the University of Oregon, Edward Kame'enui and Deb Simmons ranked sixth, seventh, and eighth in influence as perceived by policy actors in the California reading policy arena. In Michigan, the most influential policy entrepreneurs included Governor Engler and his representatives. Members of the State Department of Education ranked third in perceived influence. Among interest groups, the Michigan Education Association and the Michigan Reading Association ranked second and fourth respectively. Texas policy actors identified Governor George W. Bush as the most influential person in reading policy. His representatives Margaret LaMontagne (now Spellings) also received considerable recognition for her efforts to shape policy. The Texas Education Agency and TEA officials Mike Moses and Robin Gilchrist ranked second. The Texas State Senate and House of Representatives were seen as influential as well, ranking fourth and fifth respectively. Policy actors identified the efforts of Senators Teel Bivins and Bill Ratliff, and Representative Paul Sadler. The Governor's Business Council, the Texas Business and Education Coalition, and the Center for Academic Reading Skills at the University of Texas Houston were perceived as the most influential nongovernmental policy entrepreneurs.

### **Governors and Agenda Setting**

Our second focus of the study is to examine the role of the governor in raising reading to the top of the policy agenda, and to answer the question: How does the governor facilitate or impede the prominence of reading on the state governmental agenda?

*Problem stream.* Discussion of the governors' role in the agenda setting process generally occurred within the problem stream as policy actors described focusing events that contributed to the perception of reading as a public problem. In particular, reading policy actors in Texas and Michigan mentioned the governor's initiatives and personal experiences as events that spotlighted the reading problem in their respective states. Texas respondents identified the actions of Governor Bush and his familial connections as important reasons behind why reading had captured the attention of policy decision-makers. One respondent spoke of Bush's interest: "I think it was a result of the influence of George W. Bush. Of course, his mother is very much into the literacy issue, as is his wife." As in Texas, some actions of Michigan's governor Engler were also viewed as focusing events. A policy actor indicated that the State of the State Address was an important focusing event, stating, "A lot of it does come from the governor... So when he makes his State of the State [Address], he is kind of the leader of the state and [says] what he would like to see happen. And you know when it comes down to it, what also gets enacted [in education is] up to him."

*Political stream.* More than any other policy actor inside or outside of the government, the personal ideologies and actions of the governor dominated the political stream in all three states. In particular, our results show that the governors were perceived as the chief political force that pushed reading onto the decision agenda. Thirty-one percent of California's reading policy actors identified the governor as an organized force. A member of a conservative citizens group remarked of Wilson's political pressure: "Governor Wilson decided to push phonics [and] that probably was... the one catalyst that really started the ball rolling." A policy actor spoke of Davis: "The governor wanted to make education [his] number one platform". Twenty-eight percent of Michigan's respondents cited Michigan's Governor Engler as a political force. A policy actor noted the governor's use of his political power to ensure appropriate funding for new reading policies, commenting: "[Governor Engler] did ... take the bull by the horns and saw to it that there were appropriations enough to put together thousands and thousands of reading kits." The governor's power in this area was associated both with the power of the office as well as with Governor Engler's longevity in the position. One policy actor pointed out, "When you have a three-term

incumbent governor, the governor seems to be setting the agenda on reading as well as a lot of other issue areas in the State.” Of the three governors, Governor Bush received the most mentionings by participants as an organized political force within his state. Fifty-three percent of Texas respondents described Bush’s advocacy efforts. As one respondent put it: “What this governor did was, he said he was actually committed to it and stayed remarkably focused on it and provided the resources and the political muscle behind a lot of the initiatives....” Another policy actor elaborated on Bush’s influence: “His prime focus is having all kids reading on grade level by third grade. ... It’s one of his major priorities... He has been very persuasive as far as bringing the legislature around to his way of thinking on this.”

*Policy stream.* Governors of California, Michigan, and Texas were active members of the reading policy community in their states as well. The governors proposed policy solutions to resolve the reading problem, acted as policy entrepreneurs to build receptiveness of their policy proposals, and used the bully pulpit to soften up the policy community. Not surprisingly, a governor’s initiatives received serious consideration by other members of the policy community and by the state legislature. In California, Governor Wilson’s and Governor Davis’s reading initiatives steered policy. A former representative of Office of the Secretary of Education commented on the governor’s involvement in reading: “We were the initiator. ... [We] took the lead in addressing legislatively and budgetarily the reading problems.” A member of the state curriculum commission agreed with the previous observation, revealing that “[Pete Wilson] was really the person behind the California Reading Initiative of 1996.” Like Pete Wilson, Gray Davis also focused on reading and proposed several solutions. For example, during his first few months in office, Governor Davis called a special session of the state legislature and proposed a comprehensive reading initiative. Davis’s plan built on Wilson’s initiatives that addressed standards and assessment, and it focused considerable resources on both accountability and professional development in reading

In Michigan, Governor Engler’s Reading Plan for Michigan (RPM) or at least one of its component parts, such as the Michigan Literacy Progress Profile (MLPP) and the Model Summer School Program, and Read, Educate And Develop Youth (READY) kit, were popular policy alternatives. A state official commented on the governor’s place in the policy stream, “I think the policy agenda around education in general simply is a reflection of [Governor] John Engler’s will.” Governor Bush’s Texas Reading Initiative (TRI) was also described often by reading policy actors (by 89%). A state official explained the crux of TRI, stating: “I think [Governor Bush] believed that that was a pretty straightforward [policy] to get kids reading by the end of third grade and have them reading on grade level... [the Governor] became very, very passionate about that.” The TRI policy was nearly always accompanied by a discussion of the importance of the accountability measures that were intimately connected to the TRI. This point was especially important to policymakers, as a state official remarked: “So I mean, [the Texas Reading Initiative] is bigger than just kind of reading and the grade-to-date and all that business. It’s really more about an accountability system.”

Overall, the governors used their position as chief administrator to promote their reading initiatives. General use of the bully pulpit involved speeches to the legislative decision makers, as well as addresses to the general public. A policymaker commented on Bush’s bully pulpit activities: “The governor participated as a part of the... you know, bully pulpit stuff in ‘96, literally probably did twenty-some reading summits around the state between him and Mrs. Bush.” One of the most effective softening-up strategies involved the governors’ use of the State of the State Address. California’s Governor Davis declared in his first State of the State Address that education would be his “first, second, and third priority.” Like Davis, Michigan’s governor used his 1999 State of the State Address to focus attention on reading. Engler announced that his goal was to ensure that every child could read by the third grade. A Michigan respondent commented on Engler’s strategic use of

the State of the State Address: “Most major initiatives are crafted and announced in timing associated with the State of the State message.”

### **Cross Case Summary**

Feedback and indicators were prominent mechanisms for advancing reading onto or up the agenda; however, they were ineffectual by themselves. Focusing events were the determining factor for capturing the attention of the public and the governmental decision makers. Interestingly, some indicators had also reached focusing event status. The NAEP, for example, indicated the magnitude of the reading problem and the changes in reading across time, but actors created an interpretation of the NAEP scores to craft a sense of crisis. Additionally, the duration of the streams varies. In California and Michigan, the reading problem stream appeared to be intermittent—flowing most strongly after a rain or in some cases a torrential downpour; for example after the release of NAEP scores in California. Texas, on the other hand, had a blue line problem stream—it flowed relatively continuously across time. Descriptions of the actions of organized political forces dominated the political streams in the three states. In the case of reading, it was actors inside the state government who advanced the status of reading on the agenda. National mood—generated by the presidents’ federal initiatives and a bandwagon effect, whereby governors throughout the states were proposing reading initiatives—cultivated a receptive environment for reading in the states as well. Additionally, because the public was already familiar with much of the rhetoric and symbolism associated with reading, crafting a problem definition and designing policy solutions was somewhat uncomplicated, presenting overwhelmingly politically advantageous circumstances for government insiders to move reading onto or up the agenda.

A policy window opened in the problem stream in California and in the political streams in Michigan and Texas. Either the state governors or their appointees acted as policy entrepreneurs and took advantage of this receptive environment. When the window opened, they coupled the streams and pushed reading onto the decision agenda. State administrators not only influenced which topics were placed on the decision agenda by state policymakers, but also generated the alternatives considered. Generally, the key to the governors’ influence over agenda setting and alternative specification was their ability to influence all three streams. Governors proposed policies and acted as policy entrepreneurs in the policy stream, applied political pressure in the politics stream and created focusing events in the problem stream.

## **Discussion**

Our findings demonstrate that MSM (Kingdon, 1995) can be applied to the state-level education domain to illuminate the agenda-setting process. Overall, our results indicate that there are both similarities and differences in how and why reading gained such agenda prominence during the latter half of the 1990s. Within the problem stream, for example, our results indicate that state policy actors relied on different indicators of the reading problem. In California, the NAEP served as the primary indicator of the magnitude of the reading problem, while in Texas and Michigan state tests functioned as the key indicator. This difference may be explained by the fact that California did not have a consistent statewide test in place throughout the 1990s, while Texas and Michigan students did not perform as poorly as California students; hence, references to the NAEP may have been ineffective at conveying the severity of the problem. Feedback differed as well. Parents and teachers’ views were most responsible for the issue of reading garnering attention in California. Yet in Michigan and Texas feedback from the business community was tantamount. Finally, the states emphasized different focusing events. The NAEP was perceived as the most important focusing

event in California, while in Texas and Michigan the actions of the governor were viewed as the most crucial determinant of the agenda status of reading. The specific policy entrepreneurs and the size of the community also varied across the three states. The size and complexity of the states, the demographics of the student populations, and the institutional and historical context may account for differences in policy, community size, and involvement.

Within the political stream, our findings show that an active and influential governor dominated the political stream in these three states. Also pervasive in the political stream were the nation and state's occupation with students' educational achievement (i.e., mood). And since reading was commonly perceived as an essential channel—the gateway skill—to raising education overall, reading became symbolic of education accomplishment or failure. Also, as a general political theme, respondents believed that reading was a safe issue for gubernatorial involvement, offering policymakers an issue with minimal opposition or political risk. Indeed, there was virtually no strong opposition to placing reading on the policy agenda. As one reading policy actor explained, “You know being against... sound reading policy is like being against motherhood or democracy.” Another respondent similarly remarked that the issue of reading was like “Mom, [the] American flag, and apple pie.” While we identified alternative proposals in the policy stream, and some political efforts in the political stream by the reading research community (particularly from proponents of whole language based instructional approaches), they did not receive serious consideration: key actors suppressed, ignored, or discounted the alternatives as unsupported by their perception of research.

Our findings also demonstrate that reading rose to the top of the policy agenda through multiple mechanisms, suggesting that in order to promote an issue to agenda status, policy actors must activate multiple mechanisms within each stream. Within the problem stream, an indicator and feedback are insufficient, they simply fertilize the terrain. A focusing event is the necessary ingredient for opening a policy window in the problem stream. And, within the political stream, mood and changes in the government are important, but political pressure—preferably with multiple forces advocating action in the same direction—is tantamount. Finally, Kingdon (1995) found that at the federal level the President can significantly advance an issue onto the decision agenda. Our study demonstrates that governors have parallel influence at the state level.

Our findings suggest that the application of Kingdon's model (1995) from a policy domain at the federal level to a discrete issue within a state education policy domain is influenced by the nature of the issue as well as the advocacy efforts of the executive branch. The health and transportation policy domains as described by Kingdon attracted a considerably larger number of policy community members than most policy domains in state educational policy (Holderness, 1992). Holderness, for example, found that aside from a few specific gifted advocacy groups, no special interest lobbies benefited from the changes in gifted education, and thus the policy community was relatively small. However, because more people are affected by reading policy, and different kinds and amounts of resources are altered with changes in reading policy, we find a larger policy community with more political forces at work in our study of reading policy than Holderness's study of gifted education. The involvement of the governor as a primary policy actor also affects the applicability of the model. The federal health and transportation policy domain respondents (Kingdon, 1995) highlighted the important role the President played in raising health and transportation issues to the top of the agenda. In Holderness's (1992) study, the governor did not play an active role in raising gifted education to the top of the state policy agenda. The gifted education issue does not have the public attention and potential political cache that the reading issue does, and hence there is little incentive for active support from the state's chief administrator. In

comparing our findings with Holderness's results, we suggest that the nature of the streams and the resulting policy processes vary with governor participation.

Finally, we found that policymaking in other states and at the national level influenced the rise of reading on state governmental agendas—diffusion effects on the political, policy, and problem streams. Within the problem stream, for instance, national reports and initiatives acted as focusing events that brought attention to the reading problem in their states. The NAEP test sponsored by the federal government served as the primary indicator of reading achievement and the key focusing event for bringing attention to the reading problem in the state of California. Within the policy stream, some of the alternatives proposed were federal proposals or initiatives from other states, as well as President Clinton's efforts to soften up the national policy community for his reading initiative *America Reads*, which helped build receptiveness (i.e., policy softening-up) in the states for placing reading on the agenda. Finally, within the political stream, the national drive to improve education was a mood that led to increased attention to the issue of reading in all three respective states. In brief, agenda setting and alternative specification at either the national level or in other states influences the development of the streams within a state—a diffusion process. Interestingly, this diffusion process is not evident when we focus on a domain at the national level, as Kingdon did.

This application of Kingdon's (1995) multiple streams model to state educational policy agenda setting provides practical insights for educational professionals seeking to move issues onto or up the policy agenda. In light of our findings, we suggest that to increase the likelihood of their issue reaching the policy agenda, educational professionals should participate in all three streams. Because windows open in the political and problem streams, participating in both streams increases the opportunities to cultivate a policy environment for a window to open. Further, political and problem streams only impact agenda setting. Involvement in the policy stream will allow professionals to craft policy solutions. Educational professionals should also invoke more than one mechanism in each stream. Simply bringing an indicator, such as low or declining test scores, to the attention of policymakers will likely be ineffective at achieving agenda status, especially for issues with reforms that are likely to be costly or impact a large population. However, soliciting parents to provide feedback to policy actors, along with an indicator, will greatly improve the likelihood of an issue attaining agenda status. Within the problem stream, professionals need to shape the interpretation of indicators, such as state testing results, state reports, or research studies. Kingdon (1995) asserts, "The data do not speak for themselves. Interpretations of the data transform them from statements of conditions to statements of policy problems" (p. 94). Professionals can help with the translation of the data, and hence influence the development of the problem stream. It should be noted that once an indicator has been selected and presented to the public and media, debating its adequacy (commonplace in professional circles) is futile for counteracting its influence on the policy process. These ineffectual attempts to change interpretations of evidence were quite evident in our data. For example, some educational professionals and reading researchers were fixated on debating the nuances of pedagogy and research. Yet the media, politicians, and public proceeded with the original framing or presentation of the indicators.

Within the policy stream, professionals who wish to shape policy should also serve on various boards that generate the policy alternatives (e.g., advisory boards, commissions, panels, and task forces). Furthermore, as noted by respondents' descriptions of the feedback and organized political forces mechanisms, there is a growing presence and influence of the business community on the development of education policy. Researchers and practitioners should consider directly addressing or forming coalitions with business groups, who could then mobilize and apply pressure on state policy decision makers, bringing into play both feedback in the problem stream and

organized political force in the politics stream. Lastly, educators wishing to influence policy should consider the election of new governors or appointees as an opportune time to push educational issues.

There are a few limitations to the present study. MSM (Kingdon, 1995) is not predictive (Mucciaroni, 1992; Zahariadis, 1998, 1999). However, Malen (1987) does not consider the lack of predictive power as a weakness of MSM. She concluded that, “Given the art and the complexity of the phenomenon, some degree of predictability in parts of the policymaking process is no small achievement. Kingdon takes us further than that.” (p. 99). Finally, this study only examines a single issue across three states with activist governors, and as such our findings are not generalizable to all issues. Future research should compare the rise of the same educational agenda item across several different issues within a single state to understand the interplay between the issue and its political environment. Scholars may also provide a better understanding of the agenda-setting process by applying multiple agenda-setting models to study the same issue (Kamieniecki, 2000). Given the increasing influence of state educational policy on classroom practices, it becomes increasingly important for educational professionals to shape educational policy. The more complete our understanding of state educational policymaking, the greater our ability to anticipate political action, and thus effectively mobilize and influence policy (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry 1997).

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Volume 18 Number 15 July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010

ISSN 1068–2341

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