This presentation will delve into why and how educators must study the politics of education. As we’ll discuss in future weeks, there is a large body of evidence that all organizations are subject to internal and external political pressures in their policy making and general operations. This presentation should help you understand the dynamics of politics in education.

As we noted in Session 1, the education sector is a government dominated environment. And government is a sector of the economy wherein politics is the lingua franca. Education decision-making is dominated by government made policies in political environments. One can even make a good argument that school boards, contrary to their original intent, are like state legislatures, just another political playing field. So it becomes very important for educational leaders to examine the politics of education if we are too fully comprehended and manage educational policy.

Political decision-making, and policy making, can be viewed from a variety of perspectives (Allison & Zelikow, 1971). There is one view that the government acts as a singular entity in making decisions. In this approach the government, and the bureaucracy that makes up the daily operations of the government, is regarded as a unitary decision maker. In this perspective we can anticipate or, after the fact, observe the way the government acts in certain policy situations. This analysis views the government as a unified rational actor (Allison & Zelikow, p.4), driven by certain operating procedures. It’s as if the government morphed into a human decision maker. The outputs are the results of the organization’s regular functions.

Another viewpoint on politics, frequently referred to as the new institutionalism, views government decision-making as the result of the standard operating procedures of the organization itself. It delves into the daily processes and procedures that it undertakes to survive and prosper. Further, the new institutionalism holds to determine which actions that government will take, we must also understand the broader environment in which the organization exists. What are the traditional habits of that organization’s peer and competitor organizations? What is the professional environment in which the organization functions: Is it made up of educators or engineers or business people? What are the traditions and acceptable practices of the profession and the environment in which the organization sits? For example, it is expected that, it is the norm for a school
system to divide students into classes based on age, and not on the basis of their intellectual development, because that is what all the organizations and people in the school environment expect.

There is substantial organizational theory that governments and bureaucracies do operate according to plan and tradition. However, organizations are not the rational actors in this perspective. This theory of political decision making holds that organizations are made up of people, politicians, and career employees, internal and external coalitions, all of whom are involved in an endless series of political games. Viewed from this viewpoint, wherein the actors are primary, decisions by the organization are impacted by the political games in which the organization’s people function. Traditions and the environment are the result of the interpersonal, both formal and informal, coalitions constantly forming and reforming within the organizations. Policy outcomes depend on the result of the perpetual game (Crozier, 1980) between individuals inside of the organization, as each tries to gain more freedom of action and/or organizational authority.

In the political actor model, each organization is different, and the individual actors struggle to find ways to survive and prosper within the organization. These games of power (Crozier, 1980) have a tremendous influence on how and what policy is made. Organizational traditions and rules set the formal boundaries of freedom for the actors in the organization. But those actors are constantly building and rebuilding internal political coalitions to increase their own freedom of movement.

The relationships of power within an organization create an entirely new set of informal relations, or coalitions, that are different from the formal organization (Crozier, 1980, p.44). Frequently, external groups will be power links for the inside groups. For example, university professors gain great support and freedom through their affiliation with their professional disciplines and colleagues. In the end, according to Crozier (p.155), the organization mostly functions according to a set of strategies that have been informally developed by the organization’s actors.

So, for example, in a low achieving school, many of the teachers may have informally given up on the children increasing their achievement. As a result, the informal relationships between the teachers and children have contributed to the organization’s functioning as a low performing school. And, this in turn means that
policies could then be adopted to have teachers just working to maintain the status quo.

So what is political power and how is it acquired?

Shaw (2008) points out that modern life is too complex for politics to be a pure democracy. Eventually, someone or some group emerges to gain the political domination, in every setting. However, they can only maintain it if the constituency continues to accept the circumstance and obey their political leaders. “Political power can only be exercised through this structure, and it is a structure whose evolution has rendered it increasingly impervious to any assertion of will” (Shaw, p.33). Max Weber (sociologist), Shaw contends, holds that the only way people in a modern state can gain and maintain democracy is to believe and follow a charismatic leader.

But Shaw (2008) believes that individuals can still take political control if they are committed and informed. Leaders can fall from power for all kinds of reasons. If the citizens or the members of an organization hold to some form of democratic ideals, they will find ways to compete for political power and control of the situation. Hence, we can follow Shaw’s position to the logical conclusion that empowering teachers, students and parents can give them the political power to change the organization.

The nature of power has been debated since before the time of the Greeks. In the twentieth century, Max Weber (Heiskala, 2001) wrote that power is a zero sum game. Through one means or another an individual or group manages to gain power over another group. Weber (1946) believed that all of this organizing for power eventually leads to the creation of bureaucracies to carry out the rules and regulations of those in charge, be they kings, mayors or superintendents. The bureaucracy carries out the administrative tasks.

Michel Foucault, on the other hand, believes that power is accumulated and is not zero sum. His philosophy is that power can be grown through alliances and thereby result in more power for multiple parties. Power can be built on relationships. For example, in the case of the guard and the prisoner, the guard may have power, but prisoners are constantly maneuvering for more freedom and control and power, there is a give and take in which the power of each is dependent on the other.
Nelson Mandela’s work while in prison is an excellent example of this relationship of power being worked to the advantage of the prisoners.

Foucault (Rabinow, 2010) believes that power operates in innumerable ways in our society. Our task is to figure out how to free ourselves of those institutions that enforce the various means of power, organizations such as the government, prominent institutions (universities and school systems?), and the professions. Foucault believes that people turn themselves into mere objects of power by becoming organized into professions or other groups that uphold the power structures. He states that as mankind grew more rational, created states and then furthered science, progress actually made us less free as we aligned ourselves to all sorts of powers, such as those mentioned earlier.

As we discussed in Session 2, policy implementation, design and advocacy are intertwined with politics. Depending on which stakeholders have the resources and ability to control the political situation has a great deal to do with what policies are adopted and how they are implemented. In this session, we have discussed managing the politics of policy. We have also discussed utilizing power to advance political strength in support of your policy ends. A policy maker may view policy politics as being carried out by rational organization acting as a unitary entity; or as an institution that takes actions based on the norms, traditions and rituals of other like-minded organizations; or as a group of actors whose informal relationships drive the organization in particular directions. Whichever methodology we focus on to analyze the policy-making and implementation, the analyst must take into account the nature and accumulation of power by those people and organizations controlling the policies.