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Chapter 10

Institutional Theory and the History of District-level School Reform: A Reintroduction

Judith Kafka

In 1995 David Tyack and Larry Cuban published *Tinkering toward Utopia*, in which they presented an institutional history of American schooling as a tale of general constancy matched with an undercurrent of incremental change.¹ Introducing the notion of a “grammar of schooling,” which they defined as practices, such as grouping students by age, that have remained constant for over a century and in effect define what we think “school” is, Tyack and Cuban argued that reform efforts that pushed schools too far afield from what was expected of them were doomed to fail. School reform could happen, they argued, and school reform had happened, but often slowly, and only with support from the outside and acceptance from within. “Change where it counts the most—in the daily interactions of teachers and students—is the hardest to achieve and the most important,” they wrote, but this kind of change requires “not only political will and commitment but also an accurate understanding of schools as institutions.”²

Tyack and Cuban’s focus on schools as institutions, and their particular understanding of institutions, reflected what was then a relatively new perspective in institutional theory, often termed “neoinstitutionalism.” Emerging from the fields of sociology and organizational studies in the 1970s and 1980s, neoinstitutionalism was largely a response to portrayals of human and organizational behavior as context free, self-guided and intentional; neoinstitutionalism instead emphasized the ways that norms and culture shaped actions, constrained choices, and favored stability.³ Tyack and Cuban had both drawn on and helped to shape neoinstitutionalism in their earlier work on the history of schooling (although both had cleverly avoided theoretical

terminology in doing so). Tyack's *One Best System* sought to explain how and why urban school districts across the nation developed in the generally similar way that they did, while Cuban's *How Teachers Taught* takes as its starting point the "apparent invulnerability of classrooms to change" and the "apparent uniformity" of classroom instruction "irrespective of time and place."⁴ Both of these works remain highly influential in the historiography of American education, as does the notion of a "grammar" of schooling.

Yet while historians of education today often grapple with the role of social theory in the writing and understanding of history, the role of institutional theory has gone relatively unexamined. This is in part, I submit, because our scholarship has moved away from institutional histories, and in part because of the analytic limits of early neoinstitutionalism, which explained sameness and constancy far better than it did variation and change.⁵ In recent decades, although some scholars have produced broad historical narratives about American schooling, our field as a whole has shifted both deeper and wider—producing a store of district-level cases that situate schools within their particular political, social, economic, and geographical contexts. These studies reveal how very local actions and factors affected the shape and structure of a district's schools, as well as how schools have had an impact on the broader context of which they were a part. Many of these district cases also place political conflicts over schooling within larger historical narratives of struggles over issues of race, gender, immigration, class, and even our understandings of core American principles like democracy and equality.⁶ Yet while instructive in many ways, our field's emphasis on the single district can obscure the extent to which individual cases and their histories resemble one another, and can make it difficult to determine which of the many factors and elements involved in the evolution of a particular school district were distinct in ways that ultimately mattered—or, to use Tyack and Cuban's term, "count." To

put it differently, we have become a field of case studies, but we struggle sometimes to explain what, exactly, our cases are cases *of*.⁷

Meanwhile institutional theory has continued to develop, and the field's focus has shifted somewhat from explaining constancy to exploring variation and processes of change. Specifically, recent theoretical developments in the notions of *organizational fields* and *institutional logics* provide a language and analytic lens that could be helpful to historians of education seeking to make sense of both sameness and variation across school districts and through time. Moreover, these concepts may also help historians to inform institutional theory, by using history to identify mechanisms of institutional change and explore the relationship between structure and practice in schooling—both within the classroom and beyond. In this chapter I make my case for the utility of institutionalism for historians of education, first by explaining institutional theory and how it has been applied to, and shaped by, the study of schooling, and then by applying new theoretical developments to district-level historical research using examples drawn from earlier chapters in this volume. Ultimately, institutional theory may help us to interrogate Tyack and Cuban's notion of institutional change in schools, by elaborating on their construction of the change process through specific, embedded, settings, and by rethinking how we determine what "counts" as change in schools and districts.

Institutional Theory and Schools

There are many variations of institutional theory across disciplines and orientations, but, as Marie-Laure Djelic explains in a comparative review, in general institutionalism "starts from the basic recognition that human activities ... are embedded and framed within larger institutional schemes that tend to be stable." An institutional perspective seeks to understand "how embeddedness matters, how institutions constrain and structure action, create regularities and stability, limiting at the same time the range of options and opportunities."⁸ Institutional theory has been used to study the existence of certain structures and

practices within organizations, to explain how and why specific organizations have or have not changed, and to make a case that certain kinds of organizations are *institutions* precisely because they seem not to change. Neoinstitutionalism, the strand of institutional theory that has been most influential in the study of schools in the United States, is closely associated with Stanford University, which is where many of its early developers were working or studying in the 1970s and 1980s, and where Tyack and Cuban worked together while writing *Tinkering toward Utopia*.⁹

Schools were actually central to early neoinstitutionalist work, in large part because of their apparent resistance to change, their reliance on practices that seemed anachronistic and ineffective, and their relative homogeneity.¹⁰ Scholars argued that for organizations like schools, which face a high degree of uncertainty and have unclear or even conflicting objectives, survival is dependent upon the acquisition and maintenance of apparent *legitimacy* rather than the production of a particular output or the performance of a specified function. Neoinstitutionalists also used the notion of institutional legitimacy to explain why schools look pretty much the same across the United States despite the absence of any real form of centralized school governance. Even though there were no federal rules defining what a school should be, there was nonetheless an accepted definition of what counted as “school”—i.e., Tyack and Cuban’s “grammar of schooling.”

Scholars have drawn on neoinstitutionalism and the “grammar of schooling” to explain why reformers have historically had such difficulty making any significant changes to the basic structures and processes of schooling in the United States—even when evidence seems to suggest that existing institutional arrangements are inadequate or ineffective.¹¹ While some parents and communities may be willing to have ungraded classrooms in their local schools, for example, or support the inclusion of alternative curricular offerings alongside traditional academic subjects, they still expect “school” to look like what school *should* look like, and are

unlikely to tolerate significant departures from those expectations. In this view even school reform enthusiasts are likely to revert back to institutional norms through time, in part because complying with general understandings of what is legitimate is far easier than working against those understandings.

Of course schools have made some organizational changes over the past century. School districts across the country desegregated, began to accommodate and instruct children with special needs, implemented curricula addressing new topics like temperance and human reproduction, and so on. But neoinstitutionalists largely consider these changes as primarily symbolic—so-called “myths and ceremonies” that ensure an organization is aligned with shifts in institutional expectations without having much effect on its core tasks, defined in the context of schools as classroom teaching. Indeed, until relatively recently, most scholars writing from a neoinstitutional perspective have tended to agree that whatever institutional changes *have* occurred in American education over the past 100 years have largely been unrelated to instruction—either because the core work of schools was “loosely coupled” with the structures that governed them, or because structural additions to schooling could be incorporated without displacing or even disturbing existing practices and the meanings attached to them. In this line of thinking, the introduction of football teams into American high schools might have been important to students and community members, but it did not affect schools’ central task of teaching students basic academic content and behavioral norms. Similarly, while school desegregation in the United States mattered a great deal both to those who supported and opposed it, the content and process of classroom instruction remained relatively unchanged. Even reforms that theoretically targeted teaching and learning—such as changes in course-taking requirements or teacher certification rules—were largely unrelated to what went on in the

classroom; schools and districts could signal legitimacy by creating new courses and hiring teachers who met the new certification requirements without really changing classroom experiences.¹²

In recent years, however, theorists have begun to complicate neoinstitutional theory—primarily by questioning the distinction between institutional and technical organizations and sectors, and thus the mechanisms by which institutions develop and change, and by taking more seriously the ideas of individual and organizational agency and interest (while still recognizing them as institutionally constrained).¹³ In the field of education, scholars have investigated the role of market-based reforms in shifting institutional norms and have explored how private firms have both expanded and reshaped the larger institutional sector of schooling.¹⁴ The biggest structural change U.S. schools have experienced in recent decades, of course, has been the introduction of “accountability” measures tied to student achievement as assessed by standardized test scores. Researchers studying the material and cognitive effects of this type of accountability have found that regulations targeting teaching and learning have, in many places, actually penetrated the so-called technical core of schooling, “recoupling” institutional structures with organizational practices, and, for better or worse, influencing curriculum, pedagogy, and classroom interactions.¹⁵ Scholars have also increasingly questioned the construct of “coupling” as a static feature of organizations, arguing instead, and in light of new evidence from schools, that coupling is itself a process that can vary based on local conditions, political alliances, and enacted leadership, and can wax and wane through time.¹⁶

Yet if early neoinstitutionalists were influenced by historical scholarship on schools as institutions, and vice versa, the development and elaboration of the two fields have occurred on somewhat parallel but distinct paths. Most recently, after decades of macro-level analysis,

scholars interested in institutional theory in schools have sought to understand the human component in organizational processes, which in terms of schooling has resulted in a focus on small, ethnographic studies of how teachers or other actors make sense of and/or contribute to shifting institutional norms and structures. Historians, on the other hand, as I mentioned above, have become less interested in organizational structures and classroom practices and have focused instead on locating the history of school districts within broader urban and suburban histories, and demonstrating how struggles over schools were part of larger cultural and political battles. The result has been that studies of schools employing institutional theory can seem ahistoric, while historians' district-level case studies often seem too far removed from the institution of schooling.¹⁷ I maintain that it is time to reintroduce historians to institutional theory, in order to both inform our work and the work of institutional theorists.

District Histories and Institutional Theory

While scholars primarily used early neoinstitutionalism to explain why organizations like schools all seem so similar, more recent theorizing in the field has sought to explain variation and change within institutional contexts—getting beyond the superficial similarities and recognizing the role of human actors in social processes. Two interrelated theoretical concepts in this regard—organizational fields and institutional logics—can be of particular help to educational historians. In this section I first explain each concept and then provide examples of how they can be useful to historians, by applying them to district-level scholarship from earlier chapters in this book.

At first glance an *organizational field* in institutional theory appears similar to what historians might call the larger context or environment. Yet the notions of context and environment tend to be treated as unbounded realms by historians of education—squishy

concepts that allow us to pull in whatever details seem relevant to our analysis or whatever data we are able to access. An organizational field, on the other hand, is more precise—broadly defined by W. Richard Scott as “a collection of diverse, interdependent organizations that participate in a common meaning system.”¹⁸ In the context of schooling, organizational fields take into account formal, authority-based relationships between schools and regulating agencies at the local, state, and federal levels, as well as informal relationships between schools and local, regional, and national organizations such as professional associations, community groups, media, testing companies, etc. Crucially, as Scott’s definition indicates, organizational fields bring together the material and the symbolic (or cognitive), allowing us to analyze the relationship between formal structures and patterns of activity within the context of shared—or at times contested—meanings. For historians, reconceiving our broad notions of context as a specific organizational field, with boundaries to identify, organizational actors to be named, and cultural understandings to articulate, could allow us to be more precise about the ways that schools are embedded within larger political, social, and economic systems as well as to be more specific about how various organizational actors both shape and are informed by institutional structures and symbols.

While organizational fields can help to both expand and bound cases, *institutional logics* aid in identifying what we might call cultural norms. Patricia Thornton and William Ocasio define institutional logics as “the socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, including assumptions, values, and beliefs, by which individuals and organizations provide meaning to their daily activity, organize time and space, and reproduce their lives and experiences;” put more simply, institutional logics are the various understandings that actors draw on to make sense of their world and inform their practices within and across

settings.¹⁹ The utility of logics as an analytic tool is that they can function as a bridge for understanding the interactions between large social structures, cultural institutions, and local organizations and micro-processes. Theorists posit that conflicting logics—between notions of social justice, for example, and the long-honored American tradition of funding schools through local property taxes—create space for organizational and institutional change. At the same time, conflicts between logics can explain organizational intransigence in that local actors will view new initiatives and structures through their existing understandings of the “way things are” or the “way things ought to be.” Education researchers interested in change processes have utilized logics to both explain how individuals interact with educational policies and explore how cultural norms and social structures from outside schools shape what occurs within them.²⁰ These most recent works highlight the notion, as Cynthia Coburn observes, that “the process of institutionalization is rooted in a recursive relationship between social structure and human agency” and hint at the ways that inequalities in access to power—derived from and informed by forces internal to educational institutions as well as by larger social and political structures—shape that process.²¹

Taken together, organizational fields and institutional logics have the potential to help historians explain change and variation across cases and identify which structural and cultural factors and processes seem to matter most across place and time, in terms of shaping behaviors and/or affecting outcomes. These analytic tools allow us to acknowledge the persistence of social, racial, and economic inequalities in education while recognizing the variability within that persistence, as well as the means by which local actions have influenced the structures and practices of schools and districts. There are numerous ways that historians may want to draw on institutional theory (and of course there are many aspects of institutional theory I did not discuss

in this chapter), but for the purposes of this discussion on district-level analysis I focus on three avenues that I think will be particularly useful.

First, while, as early neoinstitutionalists noted, the history of American schools is a history of structural similarities, those similarities contain differences in both process and outcome that may have “counted” quite a bit both locally and institutionally, and organizational fields and institutional logics can help us make sense of them. Our growing body of research on the history of district-level desegregation, for example, is one place where these tools might be utilized. While many districts across the country desegregated in the last decades of the twentieth century, they did so for different reasons, through different means, and, to some degree, with different results. The three chapters in this volume addressing the implications of metropolitan desegregation on regional development and educational outcomes are indicative. All three chapters take us through decades of legal decisions and school enrollment data and make a case for why local conditions may have affected outcomes in terms of educational quality and racial and socioeconomic segregation. The chapters by Ansley Erickson and Genevieve Siegel-Hawley and Stefani Thachik offer somewhat contrasting cases from school desegregation in the South, while Emily Hodge’s chapter details a northern effort to desegregate through district consolidation. There are many similarities and differences between the cases, but how do we make sense of them? Earlier neoinstitutional theory, while incomplete, provides an initial framework for understanding the similarities. Specifically, Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell developed a typology to explain the process of institutional *isomorphism* (which basically means different units, in our case school districts, adopting similar structures and practices).²² They argue that when institutions make changes that look similar, they are either responding to *coercion* (which in this case would be court decisions requiring similar action), *uncertainty*,

leading them look around to other units and copy their structures (which in this case might be the use of school choice mechanisms to facilitate desegregation, or the non-mandated decision to dissolve an urban district and become absorbed by a neighboring district), or *normative* pressures (which DiMaggio and Powell link explicitly to professionalism, but in this instance might include the expectations of business associations and civic organizations as well).

Utilizing this typology can get us part way in distinguishing the different sources of isomorphism that were exerted from above, or outside, of districts in the context of desegregation. Yet this typology ignores the many other ways change may be initiated, and obscures the iterative nature of change processes. Viewing desegregation efforts in terms of shifts in institutional logics within an organizational field helps us to make sense of the variation described in these chapters, while not losing sight of the overall structural similarities. Indeed, all three of these chapters show that school districts and district administrators did not merely respond to court orders or state laws in creating and implementing school desegregation; they also responded to changing demographics (which in some cases were *themselves* responses to court orders or state laws), as well as changing economies and housing development (which again at times were *themselves* in part responses to school desegregation). All of these organizations, structures and actors—the courts and the state and federal laws they upheld, the school districts and schools ordered to desegregate and/or consolidate, the real estate developers, the homeowners, the school boards and the voters who elected the school boards, the local civil rights groups and the national movements of which they were a part, parents, students, and teachers—together constitute a field. It is in the ways these individuals and organizations interacted with institutional logics about race and class, as well as logics about pedagogy and the purpose of schooling, that help explain the variation and similarities within these cases.

Hodge's chapter, for example, details how equity-oriented court mandates to detrack Woodland Hills school district in suburban Pennsylvania were met with local resistance—in part, Hodge asserts, because parents and teachers believed in the efficacy of academic tracking as a means of appropriately differentiating instruction. An institutional logics perspective could help to extend her analysis, by exploring how and why the court's definition of detracking changed through time, so that by 2003 the court focused on access to content rather than differences in when and how students accessed that content—essentially determining that what had traditionally been viewed as tracking was now allowed by law. Did the court adopt a new definition of tracking that more readily aligned with local instructional practices as a result of its own shift in logics concerning instruction, and if so, was this shift influenced by local actors and their existing organizational and instructional practices? Or was the court in this case responding to broader normative pressures exerted from within the state and federal judiciaries, as more and more court-supervised districts across the country were being declared “unitary,” suggesting a shift in institutional logics at the regulatory and/or judicial level? Or perhaps both? While a clear causal chain may be elusive, institutional theory could help historians interrogate and identify change processes more precisely. Scholarship on the interplay between regulating institutions such as courts and collective sense-making and structural enactment on the ground posit a “recursive, iterative model of institutional change” like this potential example, in which regulative, normative, and cognitive processes are “connected in complex and changing mixtures” that could enrich our historical analyses.²³

Second, as historians look to local actors and local actions to make sense of particular reform movements in particular locations, institutional theory can help us articulate mechanisms for organizational change (or resistance to change) within the larger field. In this volume, for

example, Emily Straus’s chapter about the history of the Compton public school district, and Tina M. Trujillo, Laura Hernandez, and Rene Espinoza Kissell’s oral histories of key stakeholders in Oakland public schools’ recent reform efforts describe school systems located within the same larger organizational field. Oakland and Compton were subject to most of the same state-level regulations and economic forces, were embedded within the same societal-level constructs related to race, ethnicity, and class, and confronted the same shifting institutional norms about the role of the market in school reform. Yet despite these commonalities, the districts engaged in somewhat different reform strategies during approximately the same time period. To what degree were these differences shaped by structural factors such as variations in metropolitan or regional economies, district size, demography, or district-specific regulations? To what degree can the districts’ adoption of different reform strategies be explained by cultural variations such as differing understandings about the role of schooling in relation to the larger community? And to what degree were the districts’ differences the result of shifting relationships between state and local actors, for example, or between families and school administrators? The two chapters in this volume were not written with those comparative questions in mind, but the authors’ careful attention to the ways that broad social forces interact with local conditions and actors lend themselves to an institutional analysis that may have greater explanatory power when viewed across cases.

Finally, historians can use institutional theory to interrogate the relationship between structures and practices in education—both within the classroom and beyond. Karen Benjamin’s study of three districts’ attempts at “child-centered,” progressive pedagogy in the interwar years, for example, finds that while some districts utilized “top-down” methods in an effort to change teaching practices and others were instigated by “bottom-up” reformers’ enthusiasm, both kinds

of efforts failed. From an institutional perspective these failures were predictable as they were working against long-standing institutional logics of instruction and thus had little chance of success in changing teachers' practices. Yet Benjamin also finds that the variation in her cases mattered quite a bit. While the instructional reforms imposed from the top-down without any real structural commitments nor efforts to change teachers' long-held instructional beliefs perhaps serve as examples of symbolic policies that were intended to signal a progressive orientation rather than change practices, Benjamin also found instances in which teachers were beginning to adopt new logics—of instruction and of racial difference—but ultimately lacked the structural support required to sustain the reform long enough for the shifts to be complete. In both models, instructional reforms were mediated through organizational structures and individual action, but they were also embedded in an organizational field experiencing structural and cultural shifts that informed and constrained classroom practices and teachers' cross-racial collaboration.

In another example, Norm Fruchter, Toi Sin Arvidsson, Christina Mokhtar, and John Beam's study of district-level reorganization in New York City found that the reorganization had very little impact on student achievement. Again, from a traditional neoinstitutional perspective this result was not surprising—the reform was aimed at organizational structures several levels above the classroom and likely had little to no effect on teachers' and students' day-to-day experiences. Yet while the district's reorganization was conducted in the name of student achievement, the mechanism it focused on was a redistribution of power away from community-level district administrators and toward centralized authorities on the one hand and school principals on the other. And indeed Fruchter et. al document a resulting tension between principals who supported a structure that they believed gave them more autonomy and the opportunity for greater professional collaboration, and community members and parents

concerned that their relative position had been weakened. While student outcomes—and in particular racial, ethnic, and class inequalities in student outcomes—did not change as a result of the reform, organizational-level relationships surely did.

Inversely, John Rury and Sanae Akaba's chapter on the distribution of cultural capital in metropolitan Kansas City makes clear that structural changes in the organizational field can have an impact on educational outcomes—in this case not due to pedagogical or organizational reforms but because of racialized and class-based institutional logics about neighborhood and school quality that through time led to increased racial and economic divides across school districts. Indeed, their study illustrates how crucial it is for us to study the material and symbolic importance of field-level logics through time, as the impact of those logics is not always clear in the short term.

Conclusion

David Tyack characterized his analysis in *The One Best System* as “exploratory and tentative” and noted that new in-depth research into specific schools and districts might lead scholars to “contest or refine” his assertions.²⁴ And yet forty years and slews of studies later, we have not developed a new synthetic institutional narrative of the history of schooling; *The One Best System* remains the preeminent text for the time period it covers and there is no equivalent for later eras. This is no doubt largely a testament to Tyack's uniquely readable, compelling, and convincing scholarship, but it is also the result of our field's drift away from institutional analysis. I have tried to make a case in this chapter for a return to institutionalism in the history of schooling, by arguing that historians interested in district-level research would benefit from utilizing institutional theory to broaden their analysis beyond individual cases, and that they could do so while not losing sight of the particular. I have argued that institutional theory—and

the concepts of organizational fields and institutional logics, specifically—can help us be more precise about identifying the conditions for and explanations of constancy, change and variation across districts and through time, while still taking into account large social forces and organizational and individual agency.

There is always a concern, when applying large theoretical concepts to existing scholarship, as I have done here, that the whole enterprise is just a bunch of smoke and mirrors, a game of picking and choosing examples to illustrate simple ideas with unnecessarily complex terms. Yet I hope to have convinced readers otherwise. I think institutional theory has real explanatory power for historical scholarship on schooling, and in particular I think new developments in the field can help us to extend Tyack and Cuban's earlier constructions of change in two ways. First, the idea that real institutional change requires political will from outside of schools and support from teachers within is ripe for elaboration. In considering just one side of that equation, many questions arise. Where does the political will come from? Can teachers or others from within schools influence or create that will? Does it matter how the political will is embodied, what structure it takes, and what processes it initiates? Does it matter how broad the political support is, or where it is located within the organizational field? These are empirical questions that historians can and should answer beyond individual cases. Second, as I think several chapters in this volume suggest, the idea that what "counts" in terms of educational change is what happens in the classroom is likely too narrow a perspective when we consider schools as institutions embedded within larger, dynamic fields. Surely any institutional change with material consequences—be they student graduation rates or residential housing patterns or the structure of the principalship—"count" in the context of schools, and can in turn influence other organizational structures and practices, including what occurs in the classroom.

Moreover, material consequences also have symbolic meanings that can shape the larger institutional environment and thus have effects far beyond any individual school or district. It is a discussion of this recursive relationship between structure and meaning, across and within organizations and fields, to which I think historians of education are particularly well-positioned to contribute—to the benefit of institutional theory as well as understandings of the history of schooling.

Notes

¹ David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). Tyack actually published a journal article with William Tobin first introducing the “grammar of schooling” a year earlier. David Tyack and William Tobin, “The ‘Grammar’ of Schooling: Why Has It Been So Hard to Change?” *American Educational Research Journal* 31 (1994): 453–79.

²Tyack and Cuban, *Tinkering*, 10.

³ The “neo” in neoinstitutionalism is meant to indicate a theoretical break from earlier social theorists like Weber, Durkheim, and Selznik who focused on institutions as structuring human behavior, although the degree of this break (and the proper antecedents to neoinstitutionalism) have been debated. There are also other strains of “new” institutionalism in political science and comparative history that share some common features with “West Coast” sociological neoinstitutionalism that are beyond the scope of this paper. For a brief discussion of the various strains of new institutionalism, see: Marie-Laure Djelic, “Institutional Perspectives: Working towards Coherences or Irreconcilable Diversity?” in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Institutional Analysis*, ed. G. Morgan, J. Campbell, C. Crouch, O.K. Pederson, and R. Whitley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15–40.

⁴ David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974); Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1890–1990*, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1984/1993), 1.

⁵ For a discussion on the role of theory in educational history, see: Eileen Tamura, Caroline Eick, and Roland Sintos Coloma, “Theory in Educational History,” *History of Educational Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2011): 148–9, and the entire special issue that follows their essay.

⁶ For example: Jack Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Jeffrey Mirel, *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System: Detroit, 1907–81* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993/1999); Adam Nelson, *The Elusive Ideal: Equal Educational Opportunity and the Federal Role in Boston’s Public Schools, 1950–1985* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Jonna Perrillo, *Uncivil Rights: Teachers, Unions, and Race in the Battle for School Equity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

⁷ Tracy Steffes makes a similar point in *School, Society, and State: A New Education to Govern Modern America, 1890–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

⁸ Djelic, “Institutional Perspectives.

⁹ The most seminal of the many, many works produced by Stanford scholars at the time is John Meyer and Brian Rowan, “Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony,” *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 2 (1977): 340–63. Tyack collaborated with neoinstitutionalists early in the field’s development. See, for example: John W. Meyer, David Tyack, Joane Nagel, and Audri Gordon, “Public Education as Nation-Building in America: Enrollments and Bureaucratization in the American States, 1870–1930,” *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 3 (1979): 591–613.

¹⁰ John Meyer, W. Richard Scott, David Strang, and Andrew Creighton, “Bureaucratization without Centralization: Changes in the Organizational System of U.S. Public Education, 1940–1980,” in *Institutional Patterns and Organizations: Culture and Environment*, ed. Lynne Zucker (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1988), 139–67; John Meyer and Brian Rowan, “The Structure of Educational Organizations,” in *Environments and Organizations*, ed. Marshall M. Meyer et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1978), 78–109; Richard Scott and John Meyer, “The Organization of Societal Sectors,” in *Organizational Environments: Ritual and Rationality*, ed. John Meyer and W. R. Scott (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1983), 129–54; Karl Weick, “Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 21 (1976): 1–19.

¹¹ Meyer and Rowan, “Institutionalized Organizations”; Mark Suchman, “Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches,” *Academy of Management Review* 20, no. 3 (1995): 571–610; Weick, “Educational Organizations.”

¹² See, for example: Charles Bidwell, “The School as a Formal Organization,” in *Handbook of Organizations*, ed. James March (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965); “Analyzing Schools as Organizations: Long-Term Permanence and

Short-Term Change,” *Sociology of Education Extra Issue* 74 (2001): 100–14; Meyer and Rowan, “The Structure of Educational Organizations”; Weick, “Educational Organizations.”

¹³ The most relevant works in terms of this paper are: Roger Friedland and Robert Alford, “Bringing Society Back In: Symbols, Practices, and Institutional Contradictions,” in *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, ed. Walter Powell and Paul DiMaggio (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), 232–63; Richard Ingersoll, “Loosely Coupled Organizations Revisited,” *Research in Sociology of Organizations* 11 (1993): 81–112; Walter Powell, “Expanding the Scope of Institutional Analysis,” in *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, ed. Walter Powell and Paul DiMaggio (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), 183–203; Richard W. Scott, *Organizations: Rational, Natural and Open Systems*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1998) and *Institutions and Organizations*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2014); and Patricia H. Thornton, William Ocasio, and Michael Lounsbury, *The Institutional Logics Perspective: A New Approach to Culture, Structure, and Process* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁴ Scott Davies, Linda Quirke, and Janice Aurini, “The New Institutionalism Goes to Market: The Challenge of Rapid Growth in Private K–12 Education,” in *The New Institutionalism in Education*, ed. Heinz-Dieter Meyer and Brian Rowan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 103–122; Brian Rowan, “The School Improvement Industry in the United States: Why Educational Change is Both Pervasive and Ineffectual,” in *The New Institutionalism in Education*, ed. Heinz-Dieter Meyer and Brian Rowan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 67–86; James Spillane and Patricia Burch, “The Institutional Environment and Instructional Practice: Changing Patterns of Guidance and Control in Public Education,” in *The New Institutionalism in Education*, eds. Heinz-Dieter Meyer and Brian Rowan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 87–102.

¹⁵ Ebony N. Bridwell Mitchell, “Theorizing Teacher Agency and Reform: How Institutionalized Instructional Practices Change and Persist,” *Sociology of Education* 88, no. 2 (2015): 140–59; David Cohen and James Spillane, “Policy and Practice: The Relations between Governance and Instruction,” in *Review of Research in Education*, ed. Gerald Grant (Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association, 1992), 1; Brian Rowan, “Commitment and Control: Alternative Strategies for the Organizational Design of Schools,” in *Review of Research in Education*, vol. 16, ed. Courtney Cazden (Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association, 1990), 355–89, and “The New Institutionalism and the Study of Educational Organizations,” in *The New Institutionalism in Education*, ed. Heinz-Dieter Meyer and Brian Rowan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 15–32; David

Stevenson and David Baker, "State Control of the Curriculum and Classroom Instruction," *Sociology of Education* 64 (1991): 1–10.

¹⁶ Cynthia Coburn. "Beyond Decoupling: Rethinking the Relationship Between the Institutional Environment and the Classroom," *Sociology of Education* 77, no. 3 (2004): 211–44; Bruce Fuller, "Overview: Liberal Learning in Centralized States," in *Strong States, Weak Schools: The Benefits and Dilemmas of Centralized Accountability (Research in Sociology of Education) 16*, ed. B. Fuller, M. Henne, and E. Hannum (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 2008), 1–29; Tim Hallet, "The Myth Incarnate: Recoupling Processes, Turmoil, and Inhabited Institutions in an Urban Elementary School," *American Sociological Review* 75 (2010): 52–74; Tim Hallet and Marc J. Ventresca, "How Institutions Form," *American Behavioral Scientist* 49 (2007): 908–24; J. Douglas Orton and Karl E. Weick, "Loosely Coupled Systems: A Reconceptualization," *Academy of Management Journal* 15 (1990): 203–23; James Spillane, Leigh Mesler Parise, and Jennifer Zoltners Sherer, "Organizational Routines as Coupling Mechanisms: Policy, School Administration, and the Technical Core," *American Educational Research Journal* 48, no. 3 (2011): 586–619.

¹⁷ Some educational scholars have sought to use longitudinal data to make a case about change through time, but without much historical context, for example: Cynthia Coburn, "Beyond Decoupling"; Jennifer Russell, "From Child Garden to Academic Press: The Role of Shifting Institutional Logics in Redefining Kindergarten Education," *American Educational Research Journal* 48, no. 2 (2011): 236–67.

¹⁸ Scott, *Institutions and Organizations*, 106.

¹⁹ Thornton and Ocasio (2008), cited in Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury, *The Institutional Logics Perspective*, 2.

²⁰ For recent use and discussion of institutional logics in the context of schools, see: Cynthia Coburn, "What's Policy Got to Do with It? How the Structure-Agency Debate Can Illuminate Policy Implementation," *American Journal of Education* 122, no. 3 (2016): 465–75; Virginie März, Geert Kelchtermans, and Xavier Dumay, "Stability and Change of Mentoring Practices in a Capricious Policy Environment: Opening the 'Black Box of Institutionalization,'" *American Journal of Education* 122, no. 3 (2016): 303–36; Jessica G. Rigby, "Principals' Conceptions of Instructional Leadership and Their Informal Social Networks: An Exploration of the Mechanisms of the Mesolevel," *American Journal of Education* 122, no. 3 (2016): 433–64; Jennifer Russell, "From Child Garden to Academic Press"; Sarah Woulfin, "Duet or Duel? A Portrait of Two Logics of Reading Instruction in an Urban School District," *American Journal of Education* 122, no. 3 (2016): 337–65.

²¹ Coburn, "What's Policy Got to Do with It?," 469.

²² Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields," *American Sociological Review* 48 (1983): 63–82.

²³ Scott, *Institutions and Organizations*, 238.

²⁴ Tyack, *One Best System*, 3.