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Building the Federal Schoolhouse: Localism and the American Education State (Studies in Postwar American Political Development)

Douglas S. Reed

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Over the past fifty years, the federal government's efforts to reform American public education have transformed U.S. schools from locally-run enterprises into complex systems jointly constructed by federal, state, and local actors. The construction of this federal schoolhouse-an educational system with common national expectations and practices-has fundamentally altered both education politics and the norms governing educational policy at the local level.

Building the Federal Schoolhouse examines these issues through an in-depth, fifty-year examination of federal educational policies in the community of Alexandria, Virginia, a wealthy yet socially diverse suburb of Washington, D.C. The epochal social transformations that swept through America in the past half century hit Alexandria with particular force, transforming its Jim Crow school system into a new immigrant gateway district within two generations. Along the way, the school system has struggled to provide quality education for special needs students, and has sought to overcome the legacies of tracking and segregated learning while simultaneously retaining upper-middle class students. Most recently, it has grappled with state and federally imposed accountability measures that seek to boost educational outcomes. All of these policy initiatives have contended with the existing political regime within Alexandria, at times forcing it to a breaking point, and at other times reconstructing it. All the while, the local expectations and governing realities of administrators, parents, politicians, and voters have sharply constrained federal initiatives, limiting their scope when in conflict with local commitments and amplifying them when they align.

Through an extensive use of local archives, contemporary accounts, school data, and interviews, Douglas S. Reed not only paints an intimate portrait of the conflicts that the federal schoolhouse's creation has wrought in Alexandria, but also documents the successes of the federal commitment to greater educational opportunity. In so doing, he highlights the complexity of the American education state and the centrality of local regimes and local historical context to federal educational reform efforts.

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