

Timmerhaus Fund Ambassadors Proposal (Revised January 2024)

Setting the Stage for Teachers as Policy Actors: A Policy Forum Proposal

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Project Summary: Last year, you approved our request to build off of our *Culture of Education Policy* course (UEDU 5240) by hosting a Colorado education policy forum through which our recent master’s graduates present and interact with national, state, and local policy actors, including academic experts, lawmakers, and students who receive and shape policy. The goal is to provide all attendees a stage where they can better understand their role as educational policy actors in Colorado. You asked us to provide updated numbers for our event, which is now scheduled for **Saturday, April 6, at CU-Denver’s Lawrence Street Center Terrace Room** for roughly 100 total attendees. Based on a shift in speaker focus and lower venue costs, we have revised our initial ask of \$17,000; **our request is now \$10,700.**

Project Purpose: Understanding education policy is difficult even for the legislators who make it, teachers and students who live it, and academics who research it. Ed policy can be as small as crafting a bathroom procedure in a classroom or as large as forming and enacting national academic standards. All Americans are actors in education policy, playing various roles depending on their position, gaze, and identity (Ball et al., 2011). We frame our master’s level *Culture of Education Policy* course (UEDU 5240) at CU-Denver with this “policy actors” lens, and our students—mostly K-12 educators within their first five years of teaching—grasp onto it, doing deep and important work exploring the relationship between their identity, education policy, and their role as a teacher. Most see themselves as receivers of policy where they are mostly “coping, defending” and have dependency on school and district policies (Ball et al., 2011, p. 626). This feeling of being at the bottom of a top-down system is common among the teachers in our MA program (and new teachers, in general), but we see our course (and the proposed policy forum) as a means through which new policy positions can be realized. Throughout the course, many of our students find their voices as policy critics, entrepreneurs, or disruptors. These more agentic positions can lead the way to counter-discourses that become what Ball and colleagues call “irritants to policy, making ‘official’ interpretations that much more difficult to sustain or just slightly less credible” (p. 632). In a profession that often upholds a culture of micromanagement, feelings of alienated labor, and one which exists as a frequent site of political tension or debate, teachers may regularly feel that their expertise is neglected or undermined. In response, we hope to explore how teachers can be resituated as policy actors in order to place them at the center of educational discussions and cultivate workplace agency.

While placing emphasis on the pedagogical lens of social reconstruction, we are careful to not exclude the many dimensions that intersect with educational policy (environmental, economic, housing, healthcare, etc.); moreover, efforts for reconstruction call upon unique pedagogical theories (Freire, Ladson-Billings, Paris, Muhammad, Kumashiro, Anzaldúa, Souto-Manning, Baker-Bell, Schiro, Eisner, etc.) to inform our liberatory praxis. Importantly, we believe teachers themselves are at a special intersection: their situated expertise contains privileged perspectives that can inform policies that directly impact the students they serve.

Because of this, this forum, “Teachers as Policy Actors: Policy as a Means of Social Reconstruction,” seeks to unite the critical examinations of educators in discussion with other policy stakeholders from the state and community regarding the various forms of policy that influence the classroom – legislative, classroom, administrative, or societal. The hope is to begin reconfiguring our current system into one that enables students to utilize and refine their innate tools to radically transform the society that we share – and the one they will

inherit – to one that will enable them to do more than survive, but flourish.

Why a teacher driven policy forum?: This evolution from more passive to active policy roles for teachers is particularly critical right now. Both nationally and locally, school districts are seeing the emergence and adoption of policies that marginalize the lived experiences and identities of so many students and their teachers. For example, “Don’t Say Gay” and anti-Critical Race Theory legislation has been passed around the country, narrowing curricula and stripping schools and teachers of their autonomy to create identity-affirming experiences for students. Most recently in Colorado, the Holocaust has become contested territory within the state education standards (Meltzer, 2022), and references to LGBTQ groups have been removed from the standards for our youngest learners (Young, 2022). It is these sorts of legislative moves and their resulting policies that are critical for our teachers and the wider community to come together to discuss.

In our policy course, students research and analyze an education policy of their choice. Past policy studies have included student grading, teacher pay, the Denver Preschool Program, charter schools, and the Every Student Succeeds Act. We encourage students to identify policies at all levels of enactment, from their classroom to the federal level. As such, we would like to showcase their emerging knowledge and analysis in tandem with established local, state, and national policy experts and community members (including students) at a **public education policy forum**. Anyone from the public would be welcome to attend, and we would target a mix of policy actors—those who create, shape, transmit, or receive education policy in various ways. This forum would help Coloradans better understand the policies that shape teaching and learning in the state, and allow teachers a much needed space for their voices to not only be heard, but taken seriously.

The Timmerhaus Fund’s focus on “promot[ing] public understanding of the value of higher education in Colorado and elsewhere” inspired us to come up with this idea of a policy forum. CU-Denver’s School of Education and Human Development (SEHD) sits at an interesting boundary in Colorado’s education landscape. It is an urban institution and, as a result, is a local, state, and national leader in equity and justice concerns in education. CU-Denver generally, and SEHD specifically, are uniquely positioned to drive a multifaceted conversation about education policy in Colorado.

“To be truly visionary we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality.”- bell hooks

Policy Forum Design: We envision a day-long event where current and recent graduate students share their learning and research around a variety of policy topics, including the implications of school start-times, threat of growing book bans, or humanizing pedagogical practices as official school policy. The following questions will frame the graduate student invitation to attend and present at this forum:

- *What is your role as a policy actor?*
- *Based on this role, what are the policies that help sustain or interrupt your work as a teacher working for equity in schools?*
- *Given your understanding of the reality of this policy and your work, how might you imagine things to be otherwise and take steps toward this vision?*

As they answer these questions, participate in roundtable discussions with other policy actors. Bookending these student presentations will be Leonardi's keynote and a panel featuring Leonard as well as policy experts Rep. Bacon, Badhessa, and Pharo Carter.

Potential Format of Event:

- 9-9:15: Brief Opening
 - Stickney, Kantor, and Flores-Amaro will briefly frame the day and thank those who helped make it happen.
- 9:15-10:30: Keynote from Dr. Bethy Leonardi, CU- Boulder
 - Leonardi's work around policy analysis and experience is central to our course. Her exploration and development for a Queer Democratic Framework to understand policy is an exciting emergent idea in the field; she has agreed to keynote and we have had an initial planning meeting.
- 10:45-noon: Roundtable presentations, first session
 - Our alumni may also choose to engage in roundtable presentations, where we will group similar topics and experts to engage in deep, targeted conversation.
- Noon-1: Lunch
 - Food will be catered.
- 1:15-2:15: Roundtable presentations, second session
 - Our alumni may also choose to engage in roundtable presentations, where we will group similar topics and experts to engage in deep, targeted conversation.
- 2:30-3:30: Mixed panel of educators, academics, and policy actors
 - Leonardi, Rep. Jennifer Bacon, DPS policy director, CU-Denver alumnus Deep Bashasha, and Reilly Pharo Carter, Director of Policy at Gary Community Ventures have been invited to take part. We hope to offer each (excluding Leonardi) a \$500 honorarium.
- 3:30-5: Optional happy hour
 - We hope to book a nearby bar or restaurant where we can invite attendees and presenters to continue the conversation and connection.

Impact: Our hope is that the presentations and conversations will inspire new connections among Colorado's various policy actors and eventually result in meaningful change that honors the state's teachers and students. We are unaware of such a forum—where graduate students lead conversations in tandem with policy experts for a varied, public audience—existing in Denver and/or Colorado. CU-Denver's SEHD currently doesn't offer anything like this, which is a tension we've identified once the policy course ends each summer. Few spaces like this exist for teachers in Colorado. Teach Plus is a national organization that offers "policy fellowships" for K-12 educators at the state level, and they exist in Colorado, as well. Our model is similar in that we want teachers to be involved in analyzing and crafting education policy, yet we see our policy forum as something more organic and teacher driven. We want to ask the questions: *Who learns from whom about education policy? Where does official knowledge come from? Who can have a say in how policy is developed and enacted?* Additionally, the lenses teachers encounter in their MA courses allow them to do *critical policy analysis* (Diem et al., 2019) where they will often question the difference between "policy rhetoric and practiced reality" and have deep concern "with the distribution of power, resources and knowledge as well as the creation of policy

‘winners’ and ‘losers’” (p. 6). Finally, this forum will be focused on creating networks of opportunity for these teachers so that their thinking, analysis, and suggestions for policies are not isolated to a day-long event.

We want to stress that we see *all* teachers as policy actors in their classrooms and want to equip them with frameworks and concepts that they can work with as opposed to limiting their forms of educator activism by making them fit a certain agenda. We wish the graduate students’ deep thinking, infectious energy, and inspiring commitment to their K-12 students could somehow be put in the public sphere to stimulate conversations. This education policy forum would fill that void.

Timeline: We have scheduled the event for April 6, 2024, at the Lawrence Street Center Terrace Room on the CU-Denver campus. Leonardi has agreed to be the keynote. We have invites out to our panelists. We have also drafted and shared a call for proposals for the forum, all with guidance from a group of students and alumni.

With those tasks complete, we are ready to invite various Colorado policy actors to attend and further work with alumni to present. Then we need to design and order swag and lock in catering details. We three, with the help of administrative experts (like the marketing director from SEHD), have been able to plan this event without stipends as part of our service expectations to SEHD.

Budget: The following rough budget would fund the one-day event:

- “Expert” speaker fees **\$6,500 (formerly \$12,000)**
 - Leonardi has agreed to keynote, participate in round table discussions, and serve on the panel. This includes her preparation to tailor a keynote to the “Teachers as policy actors” theme for \$5,000.
 - We have three additional panelists we would like to offer \$500 honoraria each for a total of \$1,500.
- Space rental: **\$300 (formerly \$1,000)**
 - We were unable to get the Jake Jabs Center; we were able to receive the LSC Terrace Room.
- Swag + Food: **\$4,000 (no change)**
 - We have budgeted \$15 per person for swag (water bottles, pens, stickers, etc.) and \$25 per person for food (light breakfast and lunch).
- **Total:** **\$10,700 (formerly \$17,000)**

References

- Ball, S. J., Maguire, M., Braun, A., & Hoskins, K. (2011). Policy actors: doing policy work in schools. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32(4), 625-639. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2011.601565>
- Diem, S., Young, M. D., & Sampson, C. (2019). Where critical policy meets the politics of education: An introduction. *Educational Policy*, 33(1), 3–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904818807317>
- Meltzer, E. (2022, October 12). How one Colorado Republican shaped what students will learn about the Holocaust. *Chalkbeat*. <https://co.chalkbeat.org/2022/10/12/23399528/holocaust-education-colorado-nazi-socialist-genocide-social-studies-standards>

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