

deemed best by our analysis of expected impact on educational performance is very expensive? Upsets the teachers' unions? Results in clear losers as well as clear winners? Such issues arise in frustratingly complex ways in virtually any attempt to apply the rationalist framework to questions of what should be done. Again, the fundamental problem is normative: What value do we use to judge what is the best alternative? Identifying and rank-ordering policy alternatives inescapably means identifying and ranking values (Anderson 1979, 711). Public policy, most agree, should promote social welfare; it should represent decisions and actions that further the public interest. Putting it this way, however, simply redefines the problem. How does one measure social welfare or the public interest? Anyone with even a passing comprehension of politics recognizes that what best serves the greater good is often in the eye of the beholder.

Rationalists have formulated a number of ways to deal with this key normative issue, ranging from the dismissive (ignore the problem altogether) to the inclusive (keep the methods and theory, but use a range of values to judge the comparative worth of policy alternatives; see Smith 2003). Perhaps the most common approach to dealing with this question, however, is to judge policy alternatives on the basis of a particular value: efficiency. The rationalist approach takes a good deal of criticism for relying so heavily on efficiency to solve its key normative challenge. In particular, the use of efficiency—as opposed to more democratic values such as equity—is at the core of a number of post-positivist criticisms. Yet using efficiency as the basis for judging policy alternatives is not done without justification. Rationalist reliance on efficiency is rooted in welfare economics, which provides a well-founded argument for using efficiency as the basis for deciding what is best.