

Reforming Urban Public Education Systems
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Schools in many of our inner city school districts are failing. Children who attend them are at risk. The risk is not just short term for it puts in jeopardy the learning careers of many students. Students in non-urban school districts are more than fifty percent more likely than urban students to score at or above the “basic” level in reading, mathematics, and science. Much of this performance gap is attributable to social and economic problems, such as poverty and racial discrimination, which fall especially hard on inner city children and are largely outside the schools’ ability to control. But the poor performance of inner city schools is not solely attributable to the low incomes and minority status of the populations they serve. Although white students in large central cities perform as well as their white counterparts nationally on SAT scores, for example, African-American students in large cities score substantially worse than their national counterparts. Forty six percent of non-urban students in high poverty schools reach the basic level in reading, for example, compared to only 23% in high poverty urban schools; in math the comparable rates are 61% to 33% achieving basic level, and in science they are 56% to 31%.

America has not been blind to the problem of poorly performing schools. Over the past two decades the need to improve the nation’s public schools has consistently been high on the public agenda. Public attention escalated in 1983, when the National Commission on Excellence in Education announced “a crisis in confidence,” and nearly two decades later education issues continued to be a prominent factor in the presidential platforms of both Albert Gore and George W. Bush. In a 2000 Gallup poll, only 36% of American said they were satisfied with the quality of K-12 education in the nation. Such sustained agenda status is unusual in a country where a fickle media and citizens with a limited span of attention have been known to shuttle issues in and out of the limelight with surprising rapidity. While much of the language of this broad school reform movement has been framed in more general terms, it is the special case of urban schools that has provided much of the imagery of failure and near despair.

Despite glimmers of success and incremental signs of progress, the results of this sustained attention have been disappointing. Hot new reforms and celebrated school reformers cycle through urban school systems in quick succession, raising high hopes that are soon deflated. This pattern, variously labeled “policy churn,” “spinning wheels,” “reform du jour,” has engendered a deeper sense of fatalism among some and a desperation-driven readiness to adopt radical solutions among others.

The Goal: Systemic Reform

There is no single, universally accepted definition of systemic school reform, but there are several widely accepted elements. The strongest unifying themes are that genuine reform comprises more than increased spending or changes in pedagogical techniques. More substantively significant elements include:

- introduction of less centralized and bureaucratic means of assuring accountability;
- attention to the ongoing interaction between schools and other societal institutions (i.e. family, work, and community);
- combining clearly defined goals;
- a long-term orientation and ways of measuring progress along the way.

It is beyond doubt that it is very difficult to forge and sustain a viable coalition around efforts to develop and implement systemic school reform in large US cities. The difficulty of actually crafting effective education policy certainly limits both public and elite action. Resource limits plague not only large central city schools, but also increasingly suburban jurisdictions. Even so, one might reasonably argue that generating political support for such efforts should be easier than suggested by available case material.¹ A fundamental source of reform failure is the propensity of education experts and “reformers” to conceptualize reform in narrow technical terms. Thus, they seek to resolve the public debate on education reform by identifying the correct set of programs or administrative reforms that will have desired outcomes, and ignore the broader political context in which reforms must be implemented. *To be successful reform must incorporate adoption and implementation strategies as well as program design.*

System Analysis

This question of how new ideas can be successfully incorporated into a political agenda has long been at the heart of political inquiry. While there is no clear consensus, there is little doubt that within established policy areas a systemic bias against change exists. Numerous scholars have noted that those opposed to change typically have the advantage in political conflict. “While advocates of change must win at all steps in the process – issue recognition, decision, and implementation – the defenders of existing policy need win only at one stage in the process. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that all systems have an inherent ‘mobilization bias’ and that this bias strongly favors those defending the status quo.”²

Mobilization bias exists not simply because of multiple decision points in the policy process, but also because of limited access to the decision making process itself.

¹ See, for example, Marion Orr, *Black Social Capital: The Politics of School Reform in Baltimore* (University Press of Kansas, 1999); Wilbur C. Rich, *Black Mayors and School Politics: The Failure of Reform in Detroit, Gary, and Newark* (New York: Garland, 1996); Jeffrey Henig, Richard Hula, Marion Orr and Desiree S. Pedescleaux, *The Color School Reform* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999); and Jean Anyon, *Ghetto Schooling* (New York: Teachers’ College Press, 1997).

² Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, *Power and Poverty* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 98.

Numerous scholars have documented the segmentation and specialization, which tends to occur within substantive policy areas. These policy centers are often labeled “policy monopolies.”³ Such policy monopolies have a clear institutional structure charged with making decisions, operating within a broad sense of legitimacy that supports the institutional base of the monopoly.

There is a good deal of evidence to support the view that local school districts are in fact governed by a policy monopoly. Some critics of urban education claim that the existing policy monopoly is so complete that there is no chance for any meaningful reform in the system. Chubb and Moe have found wide support for their view that the only real hope for genuine education reform is through a radical choice system that has the effect of dismantling the current education system.⁴ In his study of African-American mayors and school reform in three urban districts, Wilbur Rich concluded that education subsystems were nearly impenetrable.

My research suggests that the black political leaders in each city were by-products of the local political culture. This was particularly true of black mayors, as they were unable to penetrate the defenses of the school cartels or influence city economics. The central staff of the board of education was so bureaucratic and tradition bound, that outsiders did not stand a chance at fashioning remedies for dysfunctional schools. It is difficult if not impossible to graft school reform on this system.⁵

Civic Capacity and Urban School Reform

Local leaders’ inability to transform urban school districts is not due to an unwillingness to embark on reform. Change has been common. In a study of Atlanta, Baltimore, Detroit, and the District of Columbia, respondents reported a number of important types of changes occurring within their school districts.⁶ All four cities experienced leadership change in the superintendent’s office and significant change in school board membership. Numerous programmatic initiatives were launched: curriculum reform, increased graduation requirements, and strategic planning. In all four cities, some forms of structural reorganization were pursued: site-based management, charter schools, choice schools, and private management. Finally, the study found evidence of efforts to increase the capacity of the school district by linking it to key constituencies (business, parents, foundations) in the communities. Despite these efforts, systemic reform remained elusive.

The failure of education reform in cities like Atlanta, Baltimore, Detroit, and DC reflects a lack of civic capacity. Civic capacity means the ability to assemble a broad-set of

³ Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993).

⁴ John Chubb and Terry Moe, *Politics, Markets and America’s Schools* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1990).

⁵ *Black Mayors and School Politics*, p.203.

⁶ Henig, Hula, Orr, and Pedescleaux, *The Color of School Reform*.

community actors who might have the collective capacity to design and implement educational reform. “Too often local actors who agree on abstract goals become much less united when these abstractions are turned into concrete educational policy...Civic capacity moves beyond formal authority to determine educational expenditures and directs attention to the political capacity to reallocate existing resources and to generate new ones.”⁷ Effective schools clearly require not only adequate budgets but also programmatic cooperation and collaboration of other institutions and groups in the community.

Local Stakeholders

Schools are not closed systems; they are not islands unto themselves. School districts interact profoundly with their social, economic, and political environments. Systemic school reform often includes the involvement of local stakeholders beyond school officials and professional educators. Obviously, at the state level, the governor, legislature, and state education officials are major actors. Listed below, however, are local actors.

Central Office Administrators: Large and centralized bureaucracies usually dominate urban school systems. In Atlanta, for example, about 730 professional administrators, directors, and coordinators are housed in the school system’s central administration. Since the Progressive Era, a professional manager, or superintendent, sit at the apex of the huge administrative organization. However, the short tenure (average of 2.5 years) of many big-city school superintendents means that permanent administrators have substantial influence over the direction of school policy.

Teachers: Teachers comprise a large bulk of the school system’s employment base (in many districts representing more than 50% of all employees). Teachers are perhaps the most organized stakeholders in most urban school systems. Without exception their unions have wide power and influence. A recent study of school reform in 11 major US cities concluded that, for the most part, unions representing professional educators (but especially teachers’ unions) have not deviated from the traditional role of labor unions.⁸ They have not been progressive advocates for the thousands of inner-city children; rather they focus on the direct material interests of union members. This focus often pits teachers’ unions against progressive educational reform. Such opposition is often fatal to reform. Teachers are the stakeholders with the greatest power to veto or sabotage proposals for reform. With unionization, teachers have become significant electoral forces in a number of localities.

School Boards: Theoretically, school boards set education policy at the district level. For the vast majority of districts board members are elected, although a few districts have appointed boards. In my research in Baltimore, I found board of education members much more engaged in constituency service than in general policy formation and

⁷ Ibid. p.114.

⁸ Clarence N. Stone, Jeffrey R. Henig, Bryan D. Jones, and Carol Pierannunzi, *Building Civic Capacity: The Politics of Reforming Urban Schools* (University Press of Kansas, 2002).

oversight.⁹ Board members were not central to building a coalition devoted to systemic school reform nor were they key players in such a coalition. To be sure, school board members play highly visible and active roles, but their activity and visibility tend to be connected to narrower issues. For example, board members are often key access points for parents seeking input on relations that are school-specific or even child-specific. On broad policy matters, they lack the staff and information to challenge the superintendent's leadership – although (to consternation of the superintendent) this does not make them reluctant to micromanage on narrow issues on which board members, or their constituents, take special interests. Typically, school board membership is used as a stepping-stone to higher public office.

Parents: One of the most consistent and uncontroversial findings in the education literature concerns the importance of parent involvement for children's learning and schools' success. Parents, teachers, principals, and public officials readily subscribe to the premise that partnerships between parents and schools make a potent combination. There are perhaps three dimensions of parent participation: (1) child centered; (2) school-specific; and (3) collective-systemic. While all three dimensions are critical, in terms of systemic urban school reform, families and communities working collectively with other players are especially important. As parents and other education stakeholders learn to cooperate and trust one another, by acting together they can accomplish goals that could not be accomplished either separately or competitively. Many urban school districts need a collective reform movement that includes parents and communities; their problems are more daunting and the presumption of clear and common goals is more doubtful.

Business: As employers, business leaders have direct stake in the quality of the labor pool fed by public education. They may also see a connection between the quality of a city's schools and its prospects for economic development and growth. In addition, businesses often develop a sense of corporate civic responsibility and adopt an attitude of support for stability and growth in their communities as a matter of good public relations. Since the early 1980s, there has been a growth in the willingness of business leaders to assist in fund raising, provision of services, and sharing specialized technical staff resources. Given the limited amount of resources that urban school districts have at their disposal, the assistance of business can be crucial in most reform efforts.

Community-based sector: Independent community-advocacy groups (e.g., church-based organizations, civil rights groups, and non profit advocacy organizations) are also important elements in forging systemic school reform. These organizations typically employ such methods as preparing reports on educational problems, testifying before school board and other public bodies, calling media attention to issues and solutions, litigation, and lobbying. Systemic reform is likely to occur in urban school districts in which community-based organizations monitor the implementation of promised changes in school experiences. Viable community-based organizations can build a well-organized, committed constituency that is capable of mobilizing substantial political power.

⁹ Marion Orr, *Black Social Capital: The Politics of School Reform in Baltimore* (University Press of Kansas, 1999).

Foundations: Not enough attention has been paid to the role of foundations in city politics and particularly in urban school reform efforts. Chicago's reform efforts in the early and middle 1990s could not have happened without the support and encouragement of local foundations. Foundations can provide important start-up monies, encourage innovation, and generate analyses and reports on the schools. Marris and Rein's observation about the Ford Foundation's role in the 1960s can be said of foundations generally – "their vocation [is] reform."¹⁰

Civic Capacity and Urban School Reform

Many urban school districts have not been able to develop and sustain the level of civic capacity required to reform urban school districts. I conclude this briefing with some observations about factors that have inhibited the development of civic capacity around urban school reform.

Schools as large employers: In many urban districts, the school system is the community's largest employer. One cannot understand the politics of school reform without first understanding the important role that school systems play in the local political economy. As Wilbur Rich aptly put it: "The school pie feeds many families, and slicing it is a major event in the local economy."¹¹ For those interested in building a broad-based reform coalition that includes teachers it may be necessary to distinguish between reforms that raise apprehension on the part of teachers and administrators – management efficiency, cost-saving mechanisms, and rigorous testing of students, for example – and other kinds of reform. Professional educators are not likely to support reforms perceived either to threaten jobs or to radically change the favored way of doing things.

Demobilization of parents and community: Although parent and community groups are a constant force in some schools and neighborhoods and strong initiatives with a system-wide prospect occasionally emerge, the overall pattern of mobilization is sporadic, narrow, unpredictable, and ephemeral. Public leaders who want to see genuine change need a constituency if they are to tackle the difficult and politically risky job of providing leadership in the systemic reform effort. Parents should be essential components of this constituency; for the most part, they are not.

Race as a complicating factor: Race is a critical social and political variable that constrains both how internal education elites interact with each other and how they deal with external actors. Race is important within the African-American community itself. For example, in many communities, black leaders and average citizens are reluctant to publicly criticize educational leaders who are also African American. The high salience of race also imposes important constraints on white actors in local education. For instance, it is problematic for whites in majority-black cities or in school districts

¹⁰ P. Marris and M. Rein, *Dilemmas of Social Reform: Poverty and Community Action in the United States* (New York: Aldine, 1973), p.120.

¹¹ Black Mayors and School Reform, p.5

dominated by persons of color to assume a visible role in any educational reform effort. It is problematic in part because their participation makes it more likely that the reform initiative will be framed in racial terms. Building civic capacity for urban school reform is tough. Race, however, makes a tough job even tougher.