



Building a 21st Century U.S. Education System

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Changing the Dynamics of Educational Governance: Why Improving America's Schools Requires More than Changing Who's in Charge

Bob Sexton & Jacob Adams

The November 2006 elections traded Republican for Democratic control of Congress and resulted in net Democratic gains in governorships and statehouses. In 1994 election results went the other way as Republicans wrested control from Democrats. So it goes in federal, state, and local politics. But regardless of who holds political power, changing who's in charge doesn't predict improvements in America's schools.

We have observed and played various roles in educational reform from different vantage points – one of us is a college professor and the other an advocate. We thus come at this question from different perspectives yet we have reached the same conclusion. Elections can change players, values, and public commitments. What elections can't guarantee is results that matter for students. The problem is larger than the political power, or the skills and ambitions of individual political leaders; the problem lies in the dynamics of educational governance itself. We think this can be changed for the better.

By governance we mean the policymaking and public administration that define problems, articulate goals, adopt strategies and programs, raise and allocate resources, oversee the delivery of services, and shape accountability. In short, governance creates the conditions in which schools operate and students learn.

In this light, governance is the purview of elected officials and policy-level administrators at local, state, and federal levels. It also is the responsibility of the electorate who send these individuals to office, and it is the target of those who would influence their decisions. In education, good governance means sustained support for learning-centered policies that promote continuous improvement. Unfortunately, governing bodies frequently fail to achieve this standard. Why is this so hard?

The theories, institutions, and processes that shape governance in the U.S. generally—representative democracy, federalism, separation of powers—also define the governing field for America's schools. These arrangements are sources of strength and integrity, but they do have a cost. The dynamics they generate shape the context of schooling in ways that impede its success. Consider the following.

Structural dynamics. Governance is characterized by dispersed authority, fragmented structures, and large scale. Think: checks and balances, local-state-federal policy arenas, committee structures, executive agencies, school boards, and the like. This division of labor pulls the system in different directions, promulgates policies that seem incoherent from the vantage of schools, and applies standard solutions in non-standard circumstances. The result is uncertainty about who's in charge, policy incoherence, and a compliance mentality at the top and bottom alike.

Political dynamics. Governance also is characterized by conflicting interests, bargaining and coalition formation, and competition for resources. These political dynamics are the bread and butter of governmental decisionmaking, but they often lead to a squeaky-wheel selection of problems, shifting agendas, and under-funded services.

What's more, electoral politics trade responsiveness for interest group and voter support. That's okay as long as citizens know who is being responsive to whom and can track results. But things go awry when the private interests of adults in the system trump the public interest in student learning, and the way we do business clearly stacks the deck in favor of the adults. Likewise, continuity in reform policy is the victim of political campaigns, because candidates generally run against what the previous administrator did, right or wrong.

Political dynamics ensure action, but not results. The desire to be responsive sometimes produces ill-conceived policies based on poor information, bad theory, or incomplete design, none of which improves student performance.

Individual dynamics. Individual dynamics favor symbolic actions, short-term fixes, and limited change. Elected officials bring various goals and capacities to their work. They also calculate risks and rewards differently. These individual dynamics encourage officials to tackle problems and seek solutions but also to avoid major controversies. And when conflict heats up, substantial policy action becomes risky and the status quo prevails.

These dynamics have produced successive waves of educational reform in which policies and structures have changed while core patterns of schooling and student results persist. Governing schools this way has gotten us less than we'd hoped.

Is it time to despair? We don't think so. Watching the starts and stops of educational reform has taught us something about these dynamics. States and communities can get better results, but improvements require a greater commitment to learning-centered policies, continuity, and coherence – pushed by a more informed and engaged electorate. A few principles might be a guide for doing this:

- **Focus on results.** We must tie public confidence to student performance, the only results that matter. If governing bodies and citizens are serious about the goals and standards they've established, then their subsequent actions need to reflect those standards. Let us base public actions on credible information that measures performance against expectations.
- **Put learning first.** We must elevate the public interest in student learning above the private interests of adults. Public interest will trump private, if it can be widely recognized. Voters, critics, and the media can make this happen if they judge all education proposals by their contribution to continuous improvement and student success.
- **Develop civic capacity.** We must develop broader civic capacity to recognize, support, and engage promising reforms. Let's build on the close connection between schools and communities by mobilizing varied stakeholders, promoting dialog, and addressing skepticism or opposition.

• **Demand spin-free information.** We must reclaim public dialog from extremists and political spinners. Wedge issues, vilification of opponents, and unsubstantiated assertions that pander to narrow constituencies obfuscate important topics and demean public dialog. We cannot commit public resources on the basis of such dark arts and still expect the public interest to prevail. Results depend on a higher level of information and reasoned argument.

• **Coordinate reforms.** We must ensure that governmental actions move schools coherently toward better results for students. Local, state, and federal governments plus outside force like philanthropy support and make demands on public schools, but sometimes at cross purposes. Mixed signals stall progress. Coordinating reforms across levels of government would help.

• **Protect reforms.** We must protect promising reforms from regime change. Newly elected officials want to make their mark and claim credit for new solutions, but educational reform needs to be oriented around continuous improvement, not political careers. Meaningful change requires greater continuity across time, but the school change clock runs slower than the election cycle clock.

Citizen pressure can help. States and communities can accomplish such change by infusing the system with a larger dose of organized and informed citizen participation. We propose long-running, nonpartisan state or local coalitions of informed citizens that pressure elected regimes across time to focus on results, invest wisely, commit to continuity and effective implementation, and demand continuous improvement.

This idea fits with larger notions of representative democracy where the onus for effective government lies with citizens, not elected officials. These coalitions would augment governmental processes by watching closely, studying issues, disseminating information, engaging communities, and disciplining those in power.

Can this work? Yes, Kentucky's Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, for one, has been playing this public oversight role for 25 years, and its experience is instructive. And there is also evidence that in many states and districts with improved results that some "outside" organization has been important.

An independent, nonpartisan organization of Kentucky parents and citizens working to improve education in the Commonwealth, the group's primary contribution has been to sustain attention to educational needs and reforms and to stabilize educational governance enough to allow those reforms to develop over time. Kentucky's comprehensive reform has been among the most stable in the country, and the state's students continue to improve on state and national measures of achievement. That's particularly noteworthy because the state has struggled throughout its history to provide adequate schools for its citizens.

The Prichard Committee consciously set about changing the dynamics of governance by building outside pressure on political and governing channels. A few characteristics of its campaign stand out: The committee ignited and channeled public demand improved results for students, using policy analysis, public meetings, communication strategies, community organizing, and legal action.

Over the years, the committee expanded support for continuity in educational reform by modeling and encouraging community activism, maintaining bipartisan membership, and building citizen capacity to hold politicians accountable. It has mobilized and trained thousands of advocates, including 1,300 parents in its leadership program, 600 of whom now serve on school site councils and 40 on local boards of education.

By engaging key opinion leaders and citizens and by operating at the level of principle—demanding more resources but not pushing particular taxes, for instance—the committee fashioned common ground broad enough to keep interest group divisiveness or political transitions from blowing things apart.

The committee helped align goals across individuals and groups, and agencies and smoothed electoral transitions that otherwise might have stripped reforms of their coherence or derailed their progress. It did this by forcing attention to the big picture—reminding citizens why reform is necessary, that it takes time, and that citizen and business support is essential—and by communicating aggressively through public and behind-the-scenes channels, reaching policy and public audiences, pressuring politicians, and setting priorities for political candidates.

The committee promoted a culture of evidence and academic results for students. Getting legislators, educators, and the public focused on achievement data is the big spring that turns the gears of standards-based school improvement.

In short, the Prichard Committee organized citizens around a shared view of the public interest in education. Its presence dampened the dynamics that promote turbulence and incoherence in America's schools. There are other examples around the country.

Is the notion of widespread nonpartisan citizen coalitions naive? We think not. Some foundations leaders like Bruno Manno at Annie E. Casey don't either. He says "...department of education leaders come and go...we try to build nonprofits that will endure...and keep everybody's feet to the fire."

Pressure is the fundamental currency of politics. In effect, we're proposing coalitions large enough to override narrower interests. The Prichard Committee provides a proof point.

Moreover, this old-fashioned notion that voters have more responsibility than the people they elect can be supercharged by the standards movement and No Child Left Behind. As the Prichard Committee's experience attests, the key idea behind accountability-driven reform isn't just that educators will understand and respond to school achievement data, it's also that parents and citizens track results, too, and—here's the hard part—do something about what they see. When accountability applies to everyone, political responsibility is enlarged.

Improving results for America's students depends on our collective ability to change the effectiveness of educational governance. Organized citizen oversight can reach beyond the limitations of individual officials, political parties, or new electoral majorities. It can change the underlying dynamics that limit the promise of educational reform. It's time to apply these lessons more broadly.

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