



Putting the Punch in Parent Power

By Frederick M. Hess and Daniel K. Lautzenheiser

While US parents have historically played supporting roles in schooling, they are becoming increasingly involved in education advocacy and policy. Contemporary school reform requires political muscle to enact controversial changes, meaning entrenched interest groups such as teachers unions have traditionally enjoyed an outsized impact in the realm of school reform. Education reform advocacy organizations have recently emerged to help educate and mobilize parents in their policy efforts, and expanding parent involvement in reform debates could serve as a counterweight to teachers unions' organization and mobilization capability. However, for education reform advocacy groups to help parents deliver on their promise to reform, the groups must build capacity to combat vested interests, develop alliances on both the right and left, cultivate efforts from the top down and bottom up, and take heed of parents' primary goal to help their own child.

Contemporary school reform entails aggressive efforts to overhaul state and federal legislation, revamp longstanding collective bargaining provisions, and change the culture and routines of schools and districts. This requires the political muscle to push through controversial changes, making crucial the efforts of the competing sides to marshal the strength needed to advance or defeat them.

Consequently, one of the most noteworthy developments in recent years has been the emergence of education reform advocacy organizations that work to educate and mobilize parents. While parents have historically played a supporting role in schooling—supervising field trips, providing classroom supplies, and serving on parent-teacher associations—they have left policy up to others.

Today's education reform advocacy groups seek to reverse this dynamic by organizing parents to lobby policymakers, orchestrating rallies, and

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Key points in this Outlook:

- Having long played a supporting role in schooling, US parents are—with the help of new education reform advocacy groups—beginning to engage more actively in school reform debates and political advocacy on issues such as turning around low-performing schools or expanding school choice.
- Empowering parents in reform debates could counterbalance the actions of more entrenched interest groups such as teachers unions, whose extensive resources give them significant sway over local elections and national policymakers.
- Advocacy organizations seeking to leverage parental voice to successfully influence policy must grow significantly and move from intermittent activism to a more cohesive voting bloc that can elect reform-minded candidates and meaningfully influence policymakers.

otherwise engaging parents in bold reforms. Some are 501(c)(4) affiliates of education nonprofits, meaning they get a tax distinction that allows for more aggressive political advocacy. Others are charter school operators such as the New York City-based Democracy Prep and Success Academy networks, which are strategically thinking about using parents to help fuel expansion.

Not all of these groups emphasize parent mobilization—some, such as Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) or the fifty-state Campaign for Achievement Now (50CAN), tend to stress political action committee-like efforts geared toward changing policy by raising money and influencing legislators. As Joe Williams, executive director of DFER, explains: “There was recognition over time that good ideas alone weren’t enough and weren’t going to get us across the finish line in terms of systemic reform. There needed to be a significant investment of time and resources in advocating for political changes that would enable and protect reform.”¹

This makes it a propitious time to examine the efforts of these young outfits to see what might be learned from them and from accumulated knowledge about political advocacy and parental involvement. For the groups that have been doing this kind of work for a few years, what lessons have they learned about the challenges of empowering parents to reform schools? Which kinds of parents are more or less likely to become politically engaged, and how can we tell?

Public Schooling and Politics

A century ago, progressive reformers worried that public education—like much of American government—had been corrupted by partisan pols and grubby patronage politics. In response, they sought to insulate schooling from politics and bring it under the purview of trained experts. Progressives made school elections nonpartisan, moved them off-cycle, handed leadership over to “expert” superintendents and principals, and did what they could to bring order to schooling. Preaching a faith in science and technical expertise and disdainful of the messiness of politics, the Progressives sought to build orderly, apolitical, bureaucratic systems of management.

In other words, the Progressives worked hard to keep politicians and nonexperts *away* from the schoolhouse. In an age of patronage-driven politics, many of the Progressives’ reforms had something to recommend them, at least in that time and place. And yet, the depoliticization of schooling has helped produce low turnout elections

and remove schooling from the partisan discourse, making it a realm in which it is easy for organized, active interests to hold sway.

In particular, employee unions (especially teachers unions)—with their strong organization and intense interest in school board decisions and state education policy—have enjoyed an outsized impact. As Terry Moe of Stanford University has pointed out, local elections for school boards are heavily influenced by unions. In a set of elections Moe examined, union-endorsed incumbents were reelected 92 percent of the time, while incumbents who were not union-endorsed were only reelected at about half that rate (49 percent of the time).² Merely carrying the teacher union imprimatur, in other words, makes it a virtual certainty that a school board incumbent will be reelected, which is almost double the likelihood that incumbents who are not endorsed by a union will be reelected.

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While teachers unions enjoy this built-in organization and mobilization capacity, there has been no similarly invested or organized counterbalance. Today’s would-be reformers have run up against a formidable, entrenched status quo in which established interests defend longstanding routines and enjoy the political clout to influence elections. Parent groups aim to balance those scales.

Two Strains of Thought

School reformers are often compelled by a robust and innate moral urgency: a sense of social justice and a recognition that America’s future greatly depends on the quality of its schools. Too many reformers, despite their urgency and moral fervor, have often seemed unwilling or unable to consider the gritty practicalities of turning urgency into action, seemingly believing that forceful rhetoric and a few data points will be enough to ensure victory.

Take the disappointing history of the site-based management (SBM) reforms of the early 1990s. SBM sought to shift decision-making from central district offices to schools. Intended to involve parents in school governance, in practice, it often failed to live up to the hype, resulting in dysfunctional school councils that had little power and often managed in the same way they had before. One study observed that of forty-nine school districts at the turn of the century, SBM efforts were considered generally successful in just 14 percent.³ And while there may be an initial burst of parental enthusiasm, evidence demonstrates the difficulty of maintaining parental involvement over time.

Not only was SBM largely ineffective at changing school culture, but it is not even clear that parents were ready participants in a process designed for them. Indeed, in March 2012, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) was forced to extend the deadline for candidates to run for a local school council position. According to a CPS press release, the extension was to allow more time “to recruit parents and community members interested in strengthening their local schools.” With over 6,800 seats up for grabs, only 2,060 candidates had filed by the deadline.⁴

In other words, even in an election specifically geared toward increasing parental involvement in local schools, Chicago had trouble finding enough individuals up to the task. Savvy reformers are well-aware of such challenges. Ben Austin, executive director of Parent Revolution—the California-based group that was instrumental in forming the “parent trigger” law allowing a majority of parents at a failing school to petition for major changes—has admitted that his group is “quite humble about the implications” of parent trigger. He noted, “At the end of the day, parents aren’t interested in running schools . . . What parents want is a seat at the table.”⁵ What is needed but too often lacking is a gritty pragmatism about politics and how citizens can change policy and public institutions.

Political Science Has Something to Teach (For a Change)

When it comes to gritty pragmatism, researchers have learned a great deal over recent decades about how to inform, mobilize, and organize voters. To this end, the recent release of two analyses exploring parental empowerment—one by political scientist Patrick McGuinn and one by education policy researcher Andrew P. Kelly—can significantly inform our understanding. McGuinn’s paper zeros-in on a few of the larger education reform

advocacy organizations and their strategies for parental engagement. Kelly’s analysis draws on political science literature and a litany of author interviews with leaders of reform advocacy organizations to gauge whether their mobilization efforts lead parents to participate in broader education politics. Both studies offer practical insights regarding the realities of effective advocacy, organization, and political mobilization that would-be reformers would do well to heed.⁶ Four big organizing principles emerged from the analyses:

- **Time, money, and interest.** Perhaps unsurprisingly, people are politically active when they have the requisite time and money, basic civic skills (like knowing how to organize a meeting or write a letter), and sufficient political engagement (meaning they are concerned about political issues and believe their participation can actually influence policy).⁷ None of this is rocket science—people who believe their actions will matter and have the resources to act will do so—and yet it has important implications for reformers seeking to empower parents to fight for expanded charter school options or similar reforms.
- **Being connected matters.** Engagement in a larger network—such as a political party, volunteer organization, church, or civic club—leads to more political engagement because such organizations provide information on ways to get involved and the social incentives to do so. For example, a political party will tell members when to vote and make them feel as though they are part of a larger cause, which will incentivize actual voting. The same is true for education reform advocacy. A local chapter of Stand for Children can tell its members when a rally is occurring, explain why it is important, and tap into the feeling of belonging that comes with being part of a group to encourage its members to show up.

And yet, group affiliation is only part of the story, and there are limitations that reformers should be aware of. For example, while parents with children in a particular charter school comprise an easily identifiable network, experience shows that education reform advocacy groups have a hard time leveraging that identity to get parents to lobby for additional school reforms. As Marc Porter Magee of 50CAN noted, “It may be that

right now, if [a parent] is working two or three jobs . . . coming out for a rally on another issue may just be one too many asks.”⁸

- **Self-interest is paramount.** Ultimately, parents are most likely to fight for things that will directly affect the quality of their child’s education. First and foremost, this entails getting their child into a good school. Would-be reformers, however, should be aware that this motivation does not always easily translate to parents advocating for reform more broadly. For example, while a parent may work tirelessly to get his or her own child into a high-performing charter school or taught by a good teacher, he or she may not see the benefit of doing the same for mayoral control or teacher quality.

Parents are also more easily mobilized when there is an imminent threat to their child’s school or program, such as a bill that would end a voucher program. Some advocacy organizations have done a particularly good job of tapping into this sentiment. One observer noted that Eva Moskowitz’s Success Academy in New York City “makes education reform feel dangerous,” as if Success Academy parents were part of a perilous, constant battle to keep their child’s school from being shut down.⁹ While this is political science 101, it helps explain why reformers are far more likely to mobilize parents to rally in support of their own child’s charter school than to fight for school reform issues more broadly defined.

- **Exit versus voice.** When parents become dissatisfied with their child’s current school system, they can react in a couple of ways. They could leave the school by choosing another one, or they could remain with the school but signal dissatisfaction in hopes that the system will change. This tension between “exit” and “voice,” in the phrasing of Albert Hirschman, is a crucial one.¹⁰ On the one hand, a parent who sends his or her child to a charter school—and thus “exits” the traditional school system—has made a powerful statement for reform. Arguably, if the parent is convinced by the benefits of school choice, he or she will be more likely to engage in subsequent school reform debates. Alternatively, leaving the traditional school system might diminish that parent’s commitment to using “voice,” (for example, agitating for change) since he or she

has already acted to address his or her immediate concern and improve his or her child’s situation.

Implications for School Choice

Education advocates have a close relationship with the school choice movement. In part, this is because charter school operators ultimately realized that considering the legal restrictions on how they ran their schools, the kinds of teachers they hired, and how fast they could expand, the schools would have to enter the political sphere in order to retain autonomy and grow. In addition, parents whose children attend choice schools are a particularly accessible demographic for mobilization, having seen the benefits of choice firsthand.

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Having not thought very deeply about the implications of exit and voice, school choice advocates have long presumed that one of the benefits of choice systems is that choice parents will get more engaged in school selection, and then, almost inexorably, in reforming policy and school systems. On the one hand, Kelly observed, “Many interviewees identified charter school parents in particular as the ‘low-hanging fruit’ of the organizing game. . . . Charter parents are contained in one place, charter leaders are often sympathetic to reform agendas, and charter parents often have more social capital from the start.”¹¹

As Hirschman’s explanation of exit and voice demonstrates, though, choice can actually lessen engagement. Kelly continued: “Choice parents are typically satisfied with their schools, muting the incentive to participate . . . [and] many of the issues on the reform agenda are far removed from the day-to-day education in charter or voucher schools.” There are two issues at play here. First, many issues education reform advocacy groups are trying to push are simply too remote for parents, who are unlikely to see how mayoral control,

teacher tenure reform, or even removing caps on charter schools are directly relevant to their child. Second, parents who are satisfied with their child's education are likely harder to mobilize. Explained David Pickens, executive director of DC School Reform Now: "When parents are successful and their kids are being taken care of, it's really difficult to get them angry."¹²

This is a classic illustration of the exit-voice dynamic, McGuinn emphasized: "One of the ironies of the school choice movement is that increasing the ability of parents to exit failing schools may make it less likely that such schools will ever improve by removing the most attentive, vocal, and perhaps able parents."¹³ Would-be reformers hoping to mobilize choice parents would do well to heed this caution and find ways to present other reforms in a way that would ensure parents get behind them. According to Derrell Bradford, executive director of the New Jersey-based Better Education for Kids:

If you understand that [school] choice is one part of a continuum that includes better teachers, better training, better access, better facilities, better technology, [and] a whole bunch of other things, you can make a more comprehensive pitch about why people should be engaged in reform broadly.¹⁴

So where does this leave school choice? By causing parents to exit the traditional school system, does school choice silence a potentially powerful voice for change? Or is it actually a megaphone that amplifies parents' voices by alerting a recalcitrant system that motivated parents have other options? The answers are not clearly defined, but depend on the expertise, resources, and know-how of the parents in question.

Choice schools create communities of the willing, places where parents have a personal investment and where all families have certain goals in common. In contrast, district schools are traditionally comprised of just the families who happen to live in an attendance zone. While a shared sense of purpose can make it easier to organize parents, it is likely easiest to organize them around causes that are specific to that school community—say, to protect the school in question—but it is much harder to rally them for broad policy concerns.

Indeed, one of the lessons from site-based management is that parents, especially those in low-performing schools, often lack the time, expertise, or experience to tackle something like school governance. So while exit can undermine voice, it can also ensure that voice is

finally taken seriously. The act of choosing brings together parents who are dissatisfied, allows them to find a common school, and makes them easier to identify and organize, even as it alleviates their concerns about quality. Of course, once successful, the key challenge is whether those families will have the expertise and resources they need to make good decisions. One potential lesson for education reform advocacy groups is that to be successful, they will likely need to recruit community organizers who have the expertise, time, and ability to help support and cultivate community efforts.

Looking Forward

So, this all gets really interesting, really quickly:

- On the one hand, choice parents might be the most motivated to do something about lousy schools. On the other hand, as soon as parents have done right by their own child, they may have far less reason to be discontented.
- On the one hand, parents who are denied a spot in a charter school and are placed on a waitlist might represent a fertile group for reform advocates seeking to mobilize their frustration into a movement for change. On the other hand, by being effectively shut out of a charter school, these same parents might as easily blame the school itself as the source of their problems.
- On the one hand, being connected to a charter school network might be reason enough for parents to lobby policymakers for changes to teacher tenure, teacher evaluation, and the like. On the other hand, these issues might be too far removed from the day-to-day humdrum of life to cause a busy parent too much concern.

Again, things get very interesting, very quickly. These are issues that funders, advocates, would-be reformers, and sympathetic supporters will need to wrestle with and figure out in the years to come.

Looking ahead, there are at least four potential solutions for advocacy organizations if parental mobilization is to deliver on its promise:

- **Build capacity to combat vested interests.** Education reform advocacy groups are a relatively new

phenomenon, and questions abound as to whether these organizations can build capacity, move into new regions, and coordinate their efforts with like-minded groups. To serve as a successful counter to entrenched interests, these groups will need to make the transition from intermittent activism (occasionally lobbying policymakers, writing letters, or signing petitions) to becoming a more coherent voting bloc that, by virtue of being able to marshal enough votes to elect reform-minded candidates, is able to influence policymakers in meaningful ways.

One group accomplishing this now is Democracy Builders, a 501(c)(4) created by Seth Andrew, the founder and superintendent of Democracy Prep charter school in New York City. “Nothing is going to sway an assemblyman like votes,” Andrew quipped. As a 501(c)(4), Democracy Builders can lobby parents to support candidates, register voters, and campaign for certain positions in a way Democracy Prep, as a charter school network, could not.

- **Develop alliances on both the left and the right.** Most of today’s reform advocacy groups are left-leaning (for example, Ben Austin of Parent Revolution served in the Clinton White House; 50CAN’s Marc Porter Magee worked at the Democratic Leadership Council’s Progressive Policy Institute; Democrats for Education Reform is, not surprisingly, proudly democratic). Thus far, these groups are happily engaged with policymakers on both sides of the aisle regarding common interests. But as the education reform groups continue to grow, and as schisms on the political right (such as the evolution of Tea Party conservatives) become more pronounced, it will be critical that reformers are able to maintain requisite support on both sides of the spectrum.
- **Cultivate both grass-roots and grass-tops.** Currently, education reform advocacy groups differ in their tactics. One of the biggest distinctions is between grass-roots and grass-tops mobilizing. Grass-roots tactics, which tap into the culture of community organizing, focus on marshaling parents to directly lobby for change. Stand for Children is perhaps the most well-known practitioner of this approach. Grass-tops advocacy, on the

other hand, aims to influence policy at the top, focusing on political campaigns, advertising, and fundraising for candidates. Kenya Bradshaw, executive director of Stand in Tennessee, has emphasized that true advocacy efforts need to emerge from the community to be perceived as “authentic” and thereby ensure longevity.¹⁵ On the other hand, there is a crucial role for political strategists, big-dollar contributors, and the kind of muscle that can back up grass-roots advocacy.

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- **Pay attention to self-interest.** Finally, education reform advocacy outfits need to be keenly aware of the difference between a parent fighting to get his or her child into a better school versus a parent who will attend a school board meeting or lobby to change teacher tenure policies. The former case involves a parent doing what almost any parent across the country would do for his or her child: fight for the best school possible. The latter case is a much greater, and much more distant, leap. Reformers should be wary to assume that one translates to the other. Moreover, they should recognize how much more difficult it may be to harness even motivated choice parents to fight for more ethereal or distant reforms, and they must plan, educate, and organize accordingly.

Kelly and McGuinn’s research has shown the value of reassessing unduly optimistic assumptions about prospects for advocacy and mobilization, and of taking the necessary steps to help ensure that desired outcomes actually come to pass. Let us treat this research with the seriousness it deserves, and see it as a step forward in guiding an emerging effort.

Notes

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2. Terry M. Moe, *Special Interest: Teachers Unions and America's Public Schools* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), 140.

3. Frederick M. Hess, *Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 121–22.

4. Chicago Public Schools, “CPS Extends Candidate Filing Deadline for Parents /Community Members to Run in Upcoming Local School Council Elections,” press release, March 7, 2012, www.cps.edu/News/Press_releases/Pages/03_07_12_PR1.aspx (accessed August 24, 2012). Cited in Andrew P. Kelly, “A Takeover Tale: Is the Parent Trigger Ready for Its Close-Up?” (*Education Next*, forthcoming Winter 2013).

5. Ben Austin, “Parent Power: Grass-Roots Activism and K–12 Education Reform” (public event, AEI, Washington, DC, July 31, 2012).

6. See Andrew P. Kelly and Patrick J. McGuinn, *Parent Power: Grass-Roots Activism and K–12 Education Reform* (Washington, DC: AEI, July 31, 2012).

7. Sidney Verba, Henry Brady, and Kay Lehman Schlozman, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

8. Andrew P. Kelly, “Parent Voice, School Choice, and the New Politics of Education Reform,” in *Parent Power: Grass-Roots Activism and K–12 Education Reform* (Washington, DC: AEI, August 31, 2012), 37.

9. Kelly, “Parent Voice . . .” 39.

10. Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

11. Kelly, “Parent Voice . . .” 34.

12. *Ibid.*, 36.

13. Patrick J. McGuinn, “Mobilizing Mom and Dad: Engaging Parents behind Systemic School Reform,” in *Parent Power: Grass-Roots Activism and K–12 Education Reform* (Washington, DC: AEI, August 31, 2012), 18.

14. Derrell Bradford, “Parent Power: Grass-Roots Activism and K–12 Education Reform” (public event, AEI, Washington, DC, July 31, 2012).

15. Kenya Bradshaw, “Parent Power . . .”