



Turning the Tides: President Obama and Education Reform

By Michael Q. McShane

The fact that president Barack Obama is an African American Democrat with a background working with poor communities has equipped him to confront teachers unions and other special interest groups in a way most other leaders have not been able to. A nearly insurmountable subgovernment in public education—labeled an “iron triangle” by political scientists—has historically resisted reform and increased school costs, failing to improve school performance. President Obama has successfully challenged this gridlock, namely through the Race to the Top initiative and his blueprint for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Although there are limitations to Obama’s education agenda, most notably embodied in his unrestricted stimulus dollars to states and districts, he has signaled that a popular Democratic president does not have to do what is most favorable to teachers unions to secure their votes. Regardless of whether President Obama’s reforms live up to their hype, his challenging of common assumptions about reformers and what they strive to accomplish will have long-term positive effects on the US education debate.

When President Nixon visited China in 1972, a popular political metaphor was born: a “Nixon goes to China” moment describes a leader who is staunchly supported by a particular interest group and who takes on that interest in a way that only he or she could. Only Nixon could go to China because no one would have imagined that such a visit would signal him softening his robust foreign policy.

Reforming the American education system is President Obama’s Nixon goes to China issue.¹ As an African American Democrat hailing from a large urban center with a history working in poor communities, his criticisms and solutions carry more credibility than those of many of his white, suburban, or rural Republican counterparts. Just as Nixon could approach Mao Zedong after years of tension between the United States and China, or

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Key points in this Outlook:

- President Obama’s unique status as an African American Democrat hailing from a large urban center with a history in community organizing has allowed him to tackle education reform in a way that others before him could not.
- By promoting reforms involving school choice, teacher performance data, teacher evaluation, and a widening teacher pipeline, President Obama has fundamentally challenged entrenched special interest groups such as teachers unions, which have had a historically outsized influence on education policymaking.
- Obama’s education initiatives mark a significant pivot in the Democratic Party’s position on education that will have lasting impact on the landscape of education politics.

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For decades, interest groups, school boards, and state-level House of Representatives committees overseeing education as well as state and local education agencies have formed what political scientists label an “iron triangle”—a nearly impenetrable subgovernment in public education that has resisted reform while increasing school costs and failing to improve performance. The largest interest group—teachers unions—makes up one corner of this triangle. They have long been an important power base of the Democratic Party. In fact, at the 2008 Democratic National Convention, around one tenth of the 4,400 delegates were members of a teachers union.² In the past five years, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) have spent over \$330 million to influence elections, overwhelmingly to support Democrats.³ If these two groups were combined, they would represent the single largest donor to American political campaigns.⁴

By advocating for more school choice, better data on teacher performance, and an expanded pipeline of teachers, Obama has embraced improvements long favored by education “reformers” and opposed by teachers unions. Rhetorically and through major education policy initiatives—namely through Race to the Top (RTT) and his blueprint for reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—Obama has challenged the status quo, marking a significant change in the Democratic position on education reform. By challenging the interests of this entrenched group, President Obama joins a short list of reform-minded Democrats and has opened the door for other actors not traditionally a part of the conversation to join in shaping the American education system. In doing so, he has upset the apple cart of education politics for the better, something that will likely last well beyond any of the substance of his administration’s reforms.

The Iron Triangle of Education

Teachers unions have historically been successful in resisting reform because they comprise one point of the education iron triangle—a subgovernmental structure that exploits the collusion between an interest group, the segment of the legislative branch that is tasked with overseeing it, and the bureaucracy charged with its management.

Iron triangles are neither new nor exclusive to education. First coined by Ralph Pulitzer in 1919 to describe the relationship between the parties at the Paris Peace Conference, the most notable example of an iron triangle is the military industrial complex. In this network, defense contractors (the interest group), the US Department of Defense (the bureaucracy), and the US House and Senate Arms Services committees (the legislative branch) colluded to consolidate and increase the power of military interests in American politics.

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In this case, as with all iron triangles, the bureaucracy derives its power from its constituencies, not its consumers.⁵ This insulated arrangement leads to principal-agent problems, where lower-level workers are able to water-down, coopt, or outright avoid having to do what they are asked to do by their superiors because there is no check by other points of the triangle. It also leads to a large amount of rent-seeking by outside forces with material interests in government funding, since the other points of the triangle fail to provide their normal oversight.

In the case of education, teachers unions (and other organizations that have an interest in maintaining power and privilege) are able to exert an enormous amount of influence on state- and district-level elections, putting legislators and school board members into office who then hire bureaucrats (state education agency officials, district superintendents, and local education agency workers) to oversee teachers.⁶

The symbiotic relationship between these three groups has created a continuing cycle of increased appropriations and friendly regulation that has led to a three-fold increase in K–12 education spending since the early 1970s, with no appreciable increase in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores.⁷ Since

1955, there have been nine US recessions that brought contraction to the private sector labor market, but only twice in the early 1980s and again just recently have there been any pauses in the growth of employment of public school employees.⁸ There has never (again, until recently) been a significant decline in per-pupil spending.⁹

And, although the average staff-to-student ratio has fallen from 14:1 in 1970 to 8:1 in 2012, seventeen-year-olds' NAEP scores in reading have only increased by a single point (from a 285 to a 286). The story is similar in math. In 1973, seventeen-year-olds averaged a 304, and, by 2008, the score had only increased by two points.¹⁰ This trend is not only found in test scores, but also in other important indicators of the success of America's education system, such as the national high school graduation rate. In 1970, 77.1 percent of US students graduated from high school, whereas by 2007, the rate had dropped to 68.8 percent.¹¹ Years of stagnation of production at ever-increasing costs are a textbook indicator of the effects of an iron triangle.

There is ample potential for a particularly insidious education iron triangle in the United States because, as eminent political scientist James Q. Wilson argued, education holds a "privileged place" in American society.¹² Indeed, the American people have a generally favorable view of teachers. The 2010, 2011, and 2012 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Polls found that 71 percent of respondents had "trust and confidence in the men and women who are teaching children in the public schools."¹³

For many years, Americans also had favorable impressions of the unions that represented teachers. In the 1976 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, 22 percent of respondents agreed that unionization has helped public schools, and only 38 percent believed it had harmed schools. This has changed, however. In the 2011 administration of the survey, 26 percent of respondents argued that unionization has helped schooling, and 47 percent argued that it has hurt the quality of public education.

School board elections—the primary democratic check on the education bureaucracy—are ripe for coopting by interest groups. As Terry Moe of Stanford University points out in his book *Special Interest: Teachers Unions and America's Public Schools*, most school board elections are off-cycle and nonpartisan, resulting in an extremely low turnout and voters without easy cues to separate the candidates. This would allow organized interest groups to seize control of elections and elect candidates more friendly to their agenda. Not surprisingly, Moe's empirical analysis found that teachers unions are more likely to

win higher salaries in elections held off-cycle than in elections held on-cycle.¹⁴

In these off-cycle elections, and in the larger elections of state-level legislators, teachers unions are most often the largest spenders on campaign contributions. In the recall attempt of Scott Walker, teachers unions contributed over \$1 million.¹⁵ Similarly, when attempting to oust Michelle Rhee, teachers unions spent \$1 million in the Washington, DC, mayor's election, and those figures only count direct contribution to campaigns, not lobbyists, independent radio or television commercials, flyers, phone banks, teams to knock on doors, or any number of other ways that unions can contribute to elections "in kind."¹⁶

Teachers unions have ideological allies shoring up the iron triangle as well, most often ensconced in traditional schools of education. Arizona State Professor Gene Glass authored a book popular in schools of education, entitled *Fertilizers, Pills and Magnetic Strips*, which states that it is "poverty and discrimination that threaten American education; not bureaucracy and teachers unions."¹⁷ He argues that the methods of reform advanced by economists "are the free trade measures enacted by the neo-conservatives and extended by the neoliberals and [those] that are contributing to the eradication of the middle class and to the transformation of today's public institutions for the worse."¹⁸

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Interestingly, this book was blurbed by the president of the American Educational Research Association, the nation's largest organization of education researchers, who called it "the first credible book of the 21st century to anticipate the future of public education." This is not a fringe work. It is, however, emblematic of the thinking of many of those training America's next generation of educators, who believe education reform is the work of racist reactionaries who want to defund public schools to save themselves tax dollars and keep their children segregated from poor and minority students.

Researchers David Steiner and Susan Rozen found that Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* was tied with Anita Woolfolk's *Educational Psychology* as the most assigned text

in the schools of education they studied.¹⁹ According to Marcus Winters of the University of Colorado—Colorado Springs, Kozol’s text argues that “minority children are unsuccessful because rich, white Americans have little interest in using their vast resources to help them.”²⁰ The fact that Kozol’s book is assigned as much as the authoritative text on educational psychology shows the level to which this ideology has permeated these programs.

Iron Triangles tend to remain dominant—causing decreased or stagnant results and ever-increasing costs—until some sort of external shock breaks them. For the military industrial complex, the shock was the end of the Cold War. While still powerful, the military industrial complex was no longer dominant (military interests now have to compete with other claims on limited taxpayer dollars).

The “educational industrial complex” that rose to dominance after the initial ESEA reauthorization and the enormous amount of federal tax dollars that traveled into state and local education agencies maintained supremacy for decades. Similar to the bureaucratic torpor that made schools less efficient over time, a kind of ideological torpor stifled new ideas in education. In response to teachers unions and their ideological allies, for years, the reform-side party line has deemed Democrats a lost cause, suggesting that the only way to reform the education system is to elect Republicans. This myopic way of thinking has disregarded the opportunity for a Nixon goes to China Democrat to take on teachers unions and push for real reform. With some important limits, Barack Obama is that reformer.

Challenging the Iron Triangle: Barack Obama’s Reforms

The Obama administration’s reforms have clearly shocked the iron triangle. One must look no further than teachers unions’ responses to President Obama’s signature education initiative to confirm this reality. AFT president Randi Weingarten said of RTT: “It looks like the only strategies they have are charter schools and measurement. That’s Bush Three.”²¹ Leaders of both the NEA and the AFT said they were “disappointed” with Obama’s ESEA Blueprint, with Weingarten going so far as to say: “from everything that we’ve seen, this blueprint places 100 percent of the responsibility on teachers and gives them zero percent of the authority.”²²

Why would President Obama shock this iron triangle? One argument, based in his own earlier writings, is

that he understands first-hand the need for change in public education. In his 1995 memoir *Dreams from My Father*, Obama lamented the dire conditions of the Chicago public schools during his time as a community organizer there, but more notably stated:

the biggest source of resistance was rarely talked about, though—namely, the uncomfortable fact that every one of our churches was filled with teachers, principals, and district superintendents. Few of these educators sent their own children to public schools; they knew too much for that. But they would defend the status quo with the same skill and vigor as their white counterparts of two decades before.²³

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President Obama has firsthand experience with the frustratingly intransigent American education system, and when he became president, he tried to do something about it. He also used his experience in the communities most adversely affected by low-quality schools to identify that there were people working in these areas who wanted to reform schools. As US secretary of education Arne Duncan argued, referencing the RTT program:

We didn’t create all of this movement, we simply unleashed it. There was all this pent-up demand. People in their hearts knew that what was going on in our schools was bad. Wrong. Immoral. We ended up with almost as much change in the states that didn’t win the money—sometimes even more—than states that did win the money. It wasn’t about the money. It was about creating a climate that gave states and districts and politicians permission to do what was right.²⁴

This speaks to the Nixon goes to China dynamic. President Obama was able to pursue these relatively radical measures because he was less likely to be critiqued for doing so. A Democratic reformer’s ideas do not resemble the

“assault on public schools” label that has been given to similar reforms advanced by Republican presidents and governors in the past. Because it is assumed that Republicans will support these measures, holding all other things equal, a Democrat’s support of these reforms holds more weight.

In the eyes of those who accuse reformers of being racist, Barack Obama clearly breaks the mold. In regards to education, Obama does not shy away from racial issues, “going to China” through his discussion of the plight of African American youth. In a 2010 address to the Urban League, he directly addressed African American students by saying:

At certain points in our lives, young black men and women may feel the sting of discrimination. They may feel trapped in a community where drugs, violence, and unemployment are pervasive, where they are forced to wrestle with things no child should have to face. There are all kinds of reasons for our children to say, “No, I can’t.” But it is our job to say to them, “Yes, you can.” Yes you can overcome. Yes you can persevere. Yes you can make of your lives what you will.²⁵

It is hard to imagine that anyone from the traditional education establishment would characterize the president as working against the best interests of minority students. Fundamentally, Obama-era reforms have helped like-minded education leaders enact plans that they lacked the wherewithal to push earlier. As former Louisiana State superintendent Paul Pastorek said about RTT:

Creating a competitive fund of money for people who want to do the right thing has already proven to be effective. People have changed their laws and changed their mindsets. While we were working on passing a value-added law prior to RTT, the competitive grant incentivized us to accelerate our push.²⁶

Limitations to Obama-Era Reforms

This is not to say that Obama’s agenda has met with success across the board. Eight of the twelve governors or mayors leading states or districts that won one of the two rounds of RTT were replaced in the 2010 mid-term election, making implementation of the reforms suffer. Similarly, some applications included “memoranda of understanding” between state leaders and teachers

unions that—for all intents and purposes—invalidated major portions of the reforms proposed in RTT applications. Those charged with scoring the applications missed these memoranda and rewarded some states for reforms they had no intention of implementing. This was a mistake.

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The stimulus also prevented austerity that might have driven more reforms. It is important to note that the \$4.35 billion that were earmarked for RTT were part of the \$100 billion stimulus package that went to states and districts to stave off massive teacher and administrator layoffs. Those layoffs provided an opportunity for meaningful conversations about teacher quality and could have been a strong impetus to develop many of the reforms that RTT pushed—without spending any money. If (in what Secretary Duncan referred to as the “new normal”) teachers were going to be laid off, it would be in most states and districts’ interests to try and make sure those teachers were the lowest quality, so that perhaps last-in first-out provisions and overgenerous tenure protections would have been eliminated on their own.²⁷

This is not to say that President Obama has embraced all changes favored by reform-minded parties. Obama does not support private school vouchers, even though there is a preponderance of evidence that school vouchers increase achievement for students that use them and for those that remain in public schools.²⁸ He did not support them when he debated civil rights leader and voucher advocate Howard Fuller in Chicago in 1998, and he does not support vouchers when the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program asks for more financing every year—even when the government-sponsored evaluation finds large positive results in graduation rates for students that participated in the program.²⁹

This is also not to say that the days of referring to reformers as racists are over. One must look no further than the comments sections of an article written by someone arguing for school choice or teacher tenure reform to see that that particular brand of vitriol is alive

and well. However, with President Obama taking visible positions supporting education reform, such charges look less like serious challenges and more like the dying gasps of an interest group that has lost the war of ideas. The tide has turned.

Conclusion

When Nixon went to China, he fundamentally changed the way the United States engaged with the world. His trip signaled that diplomacy and robust foreign policy were not mutually exclusive, and that there was a time and place for both. Barack Obama's challenging of teachers unions sends that same message. There is a time for collaboration, but it has its limits. If interest groups will still oppose necessary change, elected leaders—Democrats and Republicans—need to act to advance their agenda.

By promoting choice, data, evaluation, and new pipelines of teachers, President Obama has signaled that reform is no longer strictly the purview of Republicans, and that Democrats can stand up to teachers unions and survive. In fact, both the NEA and the AFT have already endorsed his reelection bid, showing that a popular Democratic politician does not always have to do what is most favorable to the unions in order to get their vote.

By taking these stands, the president has moved the left flank of the education debate toward embracing more dramatic reform of the American education system and has challenged common assumptions about reformers and what they hope to accomplish. Even if the substance of his reforms fails to live up to their hype, the resulting change in the politics of education will have positive effects on the education debate for the foreseeable future.

Notes

1. I am by no means the first person to refer to President Obama as a "Nixon goes to China" thinker on education issues. Democrats for Education Reform supporter David Einhorn notably referred to him as such in Steven Brill's book *Class Warfare*.

2. Dana Goldstein, "The Democratic Education Divide," *The American Prospect*, August 25, 2008, <http://prospect.org/article/democratic-education-divide> (accessed September 4, 2012).

3. Alicia Mundy, "Teachers Unions Give Broadly," *Wall Street Journal*, July 12, 2012.

4. Open Secrets, "Top All-Time Donors, 1989–2012," August 6, 2012, www.opensecrets.org/orgs/list.php?order=A (accessed August 29, 2012).

5. Gordon Adams, *The Politics of Defense Contracting: The Iron Triangle* (Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 1981).

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

7. National Center for Education Statistics, "Total Revenues per Pupil, in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools: 1969–70 to 2008–09," http://nces.ed.gov/edfin/graph_topic.asp?INDEX=12 (accessed August 29, 2012).

8. James Guthrie, "Public Schools and Money" *Education Next* 12, no. 4 (Fall 2012), <http://educationnext.org/public-schools-and-money/> (accessed September 4, 2012).

9. Ibid.

10. National Center for Education Statistics, "The Nation's Report Card: Trends in Academic Progress in Reading and Mathematics 2008," <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/main2008/2009479.asp> (accessed August 29, 2012).

11. *Education Week*, "The Nation's Long and Winding Path to Graduation," www.edweek.org/media/34gradrate-c1.pdf (accessed August 29, 2012).

12. Jay P. Greene, *Education Myths* (New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2005), ix-xii.

13. Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup, "What Americans Said about the Public Schools," www.pdkintl.org/poll/docs/pdkpoll43_2011.pdf (accessed August 29, 2012).

14. Moe, *Special Interest*.

15. Sarah Butrymowicz, "Following the Money: Where Are Teachers' Unions Spending the Most?," *The Hechinger Report*, http://hechingerreport.org/content/following-the-money-where-are-teachers-unions-spending-the-most_8943/ (accessed August 29, 2012).

16. Ben Smith, "Teachers Union Helped Unseat Fenty," *Politico*, www.politico.com/blogs/bensmith/0910/Teachers_union_helped_unseat_Fenty.html (accessed August 29, 2012).

17. Gene V. Glass, *Fertilizers, Pills, and Magnetic Strips* (Charlotte: Information Age, 2008), 48.

18. Ibid., 42.

19. David Steiner and Susan D. Rozen, "Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers: An Analysis of Syllabi from a Sample of American's Schools of Education," in *A Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom?*, eds. Fredrick M. Hess, Andrew J. Rothham, and Kate Walsh (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2004).

20. Marcus Winters, "Savage Exaggerations," *Education Next* 6, no. 2 (2006), <http://educationnext.org/savage-exaggerations/> (accessed September 4, 2012).

21. Stephen Brill, *Class Warfare* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011).

22. Sam Dillon, "Obama Calls for Major Change in Education Law," *New York Times*, March 13, 2010.

23. Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Broadway, 1995).

24. Brill, *Class Warfare*, 418.

25. White House, "Remarks by the President on Education Reform at the National Urban League Centennial Conference," press release, July 29, 2012, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-education-reform-national-urban-league-centennial-conference (accessed August 29, 2012).

26. Frederick M. Hess, "Straight Up Conversation: Louisiana Schools Chief Paul Pastorek Reflects on RTT," Rick Hess Straight Up, http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rick_hess_straight_up/2010/08/straight_up_conversation_louisiana_schools_chief_paul_pastorek_reflects_on_rtt.html (accessed August 29, 2012).

27. Arne Duncan, "The New Normal: Doing More with Less" (remarks, AEI, Washington, DC, November 17, 2010).

28. Greg Forster, *A Win-Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on School Vouchers* (Indianapolis: The Foundation for Educational Choice, 2011).

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