

Learning from the Past, Looking toward the Future: The Next Four Years of Federal Education Policy

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The standards-based, market-driven reforms favored over the last four years by federal education policy address important needs – but to achieve meaningful reform at scale, a broader, more equitable approach is needed.

January 2013, as this issue of *VUE* goes to press, marks the beginning of a new presidential term – a good opportunity to gather ideas, reflect on what’s working and what needs improvement, and rethink policies. The year 2013 also marks the Annenberg Institute’s twentieth anniversary of research and capacity building in support of equity and excellence in urban public education, working side by side with a broad range of partners across the nation. We have learned a great deal in those two decades – both from our successes and from our disappointments. Informed by those experiences, my AISR colleagues and I present the thirty-sixth issue of *VUE* – featuring, for the first time, AISR authors for all the articles – to share our recommendations for the next four years of federal education policy.

PRESIDENT OBAMA’S FIRST TERM: STANDARDS-BASED, MARKET-DRIVEN EDUCATION REFORM

When President Barack Obama was first elected in 2008, the policies that were instituted during the education transition process mainly reflected views held by proponents of two approaches to school improvement: standards-based and market-based reforms. In the early days of the administration, major funders committed not only funding but also staff support for policy development and implementation efforts (e.g., Race to the Top and the development of the Common Core State Standards). The proponents of these theories also supported state efforts to develop proposals in response to the administration’s signature initiatives.

Many of the elements of standards- and market-based reforms address important gaps in public education, such as the need for human resource systems focused on teaching and learning and aligned with national standards, as well as the need for schools with more flexibility to array their curricular and human resources in ways that suit the needs and aspirations of the students and communities they serve.

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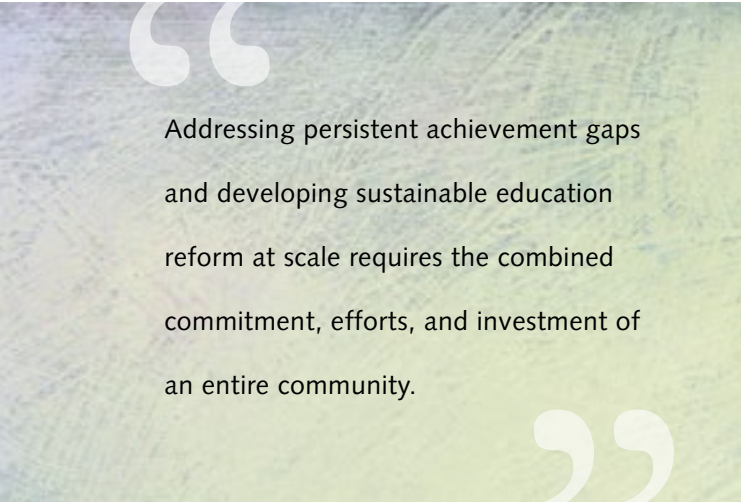
These needs must be addressed.

But the successful transformation of public schools – especially in urban communities – requires a more robust and comprehensive approach to reform that attends to equity as well as excellence; that is grounded in the needs and aspirations of communities and families, as well as the economy; and that doesn't leave behind the great majority of students, families, schools, and districts. The nation is unlikely to achieve this more robust and comprehensive approach if the policy choices are limited to purely technical and structural solutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SECOND TERM: A BROADER VISION

In his second inaugural address, President Barack Obama forcefully stressed the need for collective action to meet the many challenges our nation faces. He also stressed that “our country cannot succeed when a shrinking few do well and a growing many barely make it.” But as Arthur Camins (2013) pointed out in a recent *Washington Post* article, current federal education policy forces individual stakeholders to act on their own and compete against each other for scarce resources. Policies based on market-driven philosophies virtually guarantee that at every level – families, teachers, schools, districts, and states – there will be a few winners who will be supported in their efforts to do well, and a great many losers who are barely making it but must fend for themselves.

Over our years of work with districts and communities on educational improvement, the Annenberg Institute has seen that addressing persistent achievement gaps and developing sustainable education reform at scale requires the combined commitment, efforts, and investment of an entire community.



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While no community has yet achieved a fully functioning SES, around the country forward-thinking sites are working toward this vision; some of these sites and programs are described in this issue of *VUE*. Out

of necessity and with a spirit of innovation and collaboration, people in cities such as Boston, Cincinnati, Providence, and Nashville are moving much faster toward building smart education systems than some partners that operate at the state and national levels. Although the Twenty-First Century Schools and Community Schools initiatives recognize how schools must work with multiple partners to ensure broader success, these approaches pay less attention to developing platforms that redefine the work of larger school systems, and these initiatives don't fully address the systemic through-line that has to be developed at the state and federal

levels to sustain effective school-centered collaboration and take it to scale. Simply saying “pre-K to 16” doesn’t create a system across layers of institutions, organizations, and agencies sharing responsibility for the learning and development of all of our nation’s children and youth.

AISR proposes the following principles to guide education policy, based on the same core values – equity, results, community, and learning – that inform our own work (see sidebar).

- Education reform must be viewed as part of the *larger revitalization of communities* that enables entire neighborhoods to support the academic, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being of children and youth.

AISR'S CORE VALUES

A sustained commitment to the following core values drives how we partner with school districts, communities, policymakers, and other change agents who share our mission, goals, and values.

Equity – and a belief in all students – matters.

Nearly sixty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, large disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes exist, especially in low-income communities and for children of color. Remedying this requires an unflinching commitment to reducing inequities in learning opportunities and results and to cultivating and rekindling educators’ and communities’ belief in the capacity of all students – with the proper resources – to excel.

Results (and good measures) matter.

Schools must support students in becoming critical thinkers, compassionate citizens, and full participants in our nation’s democratic process, as well as preparing them to succeed in their postsecondary pursuits. The metrics we use to measure success must be comprehensive enough to help us know to what degree we are supporting students to develop their full capabilities and where we need to strengthen our efforts.

Community matters.

To catalyze and sustain effective school reform efforts, communities must build expertise about how schools and school systems work, as well as the collective power to bring about needed reform. School districts should also work to foster the investment, ownership, and authentic participation of communities. Parents and students have vital knowledge about what is needed to improve public education, and their energy, leadership, and insights are essential in school reform efforts.

Adult learning and supports matter.

Education is, of course, about learning, and adults as well as children need to learn continually. Student achievement increases when educators participate in ongoing, significant, high-quality professional learning. Teachers, school and district leaders, and community leaders committing to their own lifelong learning, evidence-based reflection and practice, and collaborative working relationships are essential to build supportive and effective school systems.

For more on AISR’s core values, see <http://annenberginstitute.org/mission-and-core-principles>.

- School systems must *distribute resources equitably and adequately* (funding, materials, educators, and other supports) to schools, based on the collective needs of students and families and in amounts sufficient to support their collective aspirations.
- School systems must have a *coherent long-term strategy* based on a strong theory of change and commit to building system capacity based on *well-balanced qualitative and quantitative data*.
- *Curriculum and teaching strategies should be research based, developmentally appropriate, and culturally relevant and develop twenty-first-century skills* such as critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity to ensure that all students graduate high school ready for college and careers.
- Fundamental issues of *power, race, class, and diversity must be systematically addressed* in developing strategies to transform local schools and systems. Community, culture, and diversity are assets to student and adult learning and should be interwoven throughout planning, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and evaluation.
- For students to learn to their full capacity, *schools must be places where students and adults feel safe, valued, respected, and nurtured*.
- *Communities, parents, and youth are essential partners* in school improvement. Schools and communities must invest in the development of parents and youth (particularly those most affected by the system) to become effective leaders of organizing groups, powerful public spokespeople, and strategic collaborators on school system functioning and improvement efforts.
- Smart education systems build *broad-based education alliances* made up of parents, teachers unions, civil rights organizations, municipal agencies, youth leaders, community-based organizations, research institutes, and higher education.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE OF *VUE*

In this issue of *VUE*, AISR staff from all our strands of work – district redesign and leadership, community organizing and engagement, and research and policy – draw on our work at the national, regional, and local levels to present recommendations for federal policy. We examine the intersection of key partners in education reform – community, districts, and teachers and teachers unions – and argue that no education reform is likely to succeed without the full engagement of all of these partners. We look more closely at three areas, in particular, that have garnered attention across reform sectors, from districts to communities to policymakers: making sure all students graduate high school ready for college; turning around struggling schools; and expanding learning time beyond the limited time of our traditional school day and year. We see these three crucial, highly visible issues as drivers of education reform today – what we refer to as our *lines of inquiry*. The three are interrelated. Low-performing schools must be transformed – with the goal of making sure all students are ready for college and citizenship. The only way to achieve this is through expanded learning opportunities, which aim to provide all students with the same access to academic and social supports that affluent parents provide their children.

We open with articles on each of our three lines of inquiry, grounded in our work in these areas. First, an analysis by AISR district redesign staff – associate director Ellen

Foley, associate Jacob Mishook, and analyst Jaemin Lee – of what our work with districts and their partners has shown us about college readiness and how federal policy could support these efforts. Then we move to excerpts from a paper co-authored by Tina Trujillo of the University of California Berkeley and AISR researcher Michelle Renée with recommendations for how federal school turnaround policy could better support equity and strengthen democracy. Third, we turn to the theme of expanded learning time (ELT) with an article by AISR researchers Jaime Del Razo and Michelle Renée. Drawing on their work on the Ford Foundation’s More and Better Learning Time initiative, they discuss the development of a set of indicators – beyond test scores and beyond individual students and schools to include system-level supports – to measure the effectiveness of ELT programs.

The final three articles address two other crucial components of smart education systems: the meaningful engagement of family and community and the consolidation of partnerships among all stakeholders in public education, including teachers and their unions. AISR researcher Sara McAlister reviews the research supporting involvement of families and the community in decision making about improving their neighborhood schools. Richard Gray, AISR’s national director of community organizing and engagement work, further develops the significance of community involvement and answers four key questions about how to translate what we know into federal policy. Closing the issue, AISR community organizing and engagement researcher Keith Catione challenges the prevailing national education reform discourse that sees teachers unions as obstacles to reform. Building on lessons from the recent teachers’ strike in Chicago, he argues that organized parents and teachers unions are a powerful force for improvement when they work together.

LOOKING AHEAD

An increasing number of education stakeholders hold views that resonate with ours. AISR is now working with a group of colleagues – scholars, advocates, and practitioners committed to equity, culture, community, and excellence – to develop a richer, more comprehensive, and, ultimately, more effective education reform agenda. Over the next few months, we aim to share our perspectives broadly on what’s working in federal policy and what’s missing. We are committed to foregoing our differences and focusing on our shared beliefs, values, and evidence-based strategies.

Much of what the Obama administration’s education policy has sought to do is commendable, such as its emphasis on providing extra resources and support for the lowest-performing schools and its commitment – in principle – to family engagement. But for reform to be sustainable at scale, these goals should not be pursued solely through market-driven, standards-based reforms. And while the immediate goal is to close intractable achievement gaps between White, affluent students and their low-income peers of color, ultimately, this broader approach to student, school, and community success will create a public education system that serves *all* students well – and one that is worthy of our great democratic values.

REFERENCE

Camins, A. H. 2013. “Where’s the ‘Collective Action’ in Obama Education Policy?” *Washington Post* (January 22), www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/01/22/wheres-the-collective-action-in-obama-education-policy/?wprss=rss_answer-sheet.