

# Education Policy

## THE PROBLEM

Our nation's public school system is characterized by dramatic inequities along racial, ethnic and socioeconomic lines. Poor children and children of color are more likely to live in communities where decades of disinvestment have led to high rates of poverty, pervasive unemployment, and a range of threats to health. These structural challenges limit the ability of communities to generate the property tax revenues necessary to support a quality curriculum, provide strong instruction and meet the full set of student needs. They also impact educational outcomes. Among African-American and Latino students, less than two thirds receive a high school diploma within four years.<sup>1</sup> Among students who have spent more than half of their childhoods in poverty, 32% do not graduate at all.<sup>2</sup>

The situation is unsustainable. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that by 2042 the majority of Americans will be people of color.<sup>3</sup> The future of democracy and the health of our economy both depend on our ability to provide a high-quality education for all the nation's children. In recent years, Congress and the Obama administration have invested billions in education reform. As part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, \$3 billion was directed to the School Improvement Grant program. The dollars, which would be distributed to the states and subsequently to local educational agencies, were intended to support dramatic improvements in the lowest performing of schools.<sup>4</sup> Another \$4 billion was set aside for the Race to the Top program to incentivize states to adopt improved academic standards, build more effective data systems, recruit and retain effective teachers and transform struggling schools.<sup>5</sup>

The administration's policies have led to far-reaching reforms in state education policy.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, "parent trigger" policies that purport to provide parents with children in struggling schools with meaningful opportunities to drive reform have been adopted in states like California, Mississippi, Texas and Louisiana.<sup>7</sup> Both the federal and state approaches promote turnaround models for which there is



*"The evidence is clear: individualized reform plans that address school and community needs and are implemented by teachers, parents and school districts together turn around schools. These strategies are not quick [or easy], but they are more successful than those implemented under duress."*

— Melissa J. Erickson, Parent and Principal in Fund Education Now

questionable evidence of success.<sup>8</sup> And where they support the proliferation of charters, they disregard the absence of evidence that these institutions outperform traditional public schools.<sup>9</sup> In doing so, they advance a larger agenda of privatization that threatens to undermine hard-won victories in the areas of civil rights, workers' rights, and good government.

## SOLUTION

There is a need for policies that give parents, teachers, and members of the broader community real power to improve struggling schools. There is also need for laws that require schools, districts, and states to provide meaningful information about how well we are preparing children to participate in our economy and – more importantly – our democracy.

The best way to do this is to create structures for ongoing parent and community involvement in school improvement efforts. Earlier this year in Connecticut, the state legislature enacted reforms that will establish School Governance Councils – composed of parents, community members, teachers and administrators – in the state's lowest-performing schools.<sup>10</sup> And in Chicago, elected Local School Councils are empowered to approve the allocation of funding, implementation of school improvement plans and the hiring and evaluation of principals.<sup>11</sup>

## POLICY ISSUES

The following are important issues to consider in designing local policies to improve education through meaningful parent involvement. Legislators can tailor their proposals to the political realities of their communities.

**LOCAL LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY:** While policies vary from state to state, it is likely that both state and local law place some limitations on local legislative efforts at school reform. Analysis of your locality's charter, state constitution and home rule law will help to clarify local legislative authority.

**SCHOOL ELIGIBILITY:** One key question concerns the universe of schools that will be eligible for the parent-driven reform program. While there are strong arguments for focusing limited resources on the lowest-performing of schools, there may also be reasons to expand eligibility to schools that are performing at higher levels as well as to institutions other than traditional public schools.

**PUBLIC NOTIFICATION AND ENGAGEMENT MECHANISMS:** Policies on parent-driven reform must include public notification and engagement requirements that allow parents to be fully informed about the reform process and options. These notification and engagement systems should be accessible for limited English proficient parents and parents with disabilities, among others.

**PARENT & COMMUNITY DRIVEN ASSESSMENT OF SCHOOL INPUTS AND OUTCOMES:** Reform choices should be driven by a thoughtful analysis of both the resources available to the school to provide high-quality education, the manner in which such resources have been deployed and the needs of students. Parents, teachers and other community members who engage in these processes should receive training and professional development to help them conduct such analyses.

**PLAN DEVELOPMENT:** Based on this analysis, parents and community members must be empowered to develop plans for school improvement that include proven reform

strategies. They should also be empowered to identify new options that are responsive to the particular needs of their school communities.

**ONGOING EVALUATION & REPORTING:** Parent driven reform policies should include provisions for multiyear, independent evaluation of policy implementation.

## LANDSCAPE AND RESOURCES

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University is a national policy research and reform support organization that promotes quality education for all children, especially in urban communities. Its website includes a wide range of resources on progressive education reforms. In addition, the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association, the Leadership Center for the Common Good, and the Alliance for Quality Education are leading the fight for better public schools.

## NOTES

1. See Children's Defense Fund, *The State of America's Children Handbook 36* (2012) available at <http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/soac-2012-handbook.pdf>.
2. See id.
3. See Press Release, U.S. Census Bureau, *An Older and More Diverse Nation by Midcentury* (2008) available at <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/population/cbo8-123.html>
4. See U.S. Department of Education, "School Improvement Grants" available at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/index.html>.
5. See U.S. Department of Education, "Race to the Top Fund" available at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html>.
6. See Suzanne Weiss, *The Race to Change*, State Legislatures, Dec. 1, 2010.
7. See National Conference of State Legislatures, "Parent Trigger" available at <http://www.ncsl.org/issues-research/educ/state-parent-trigger-laws.aspx>.
8. See Tina Trujillo & Michelle Reneé, National Education Policy Center, *Democratic School Turnarounds: Pursuing Equity and Learning from Evidence 5-12* (2012) available at [http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/pb-turnarounds\\_equity\\_0.pdf](http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/pb-turnarounds_equity_0.pdf).
9. See CREDO, *Multiple Choice: Charter Performance in 16 States 2-4* (2009) available at [http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE\\_CHOICE\\_CREDO.pdf](http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf).
10. See Conn. Gen. Stat. Ann. § 10-223(3) (2012).
11. -See 105 Ill. Comp. Stat. Ann. 5/34-2.3 (2010).

**Local Progress** is a national municipal policy network of local elected officials and partners who want to create more just and equitable cities. Our purpose is to build a broad network to support and learn from each other, share best practices and policies, and develop strategies for advancing shared goals.

The **Center for Popular Democracy** promotes equity, opportunity, and a dynamic democracy in partnership with innovative community-based organizations, elected officials, local and state networks, and progressive unions across the country. We work with our allies to design, pass, and implement cutting-edge state and local policies that deliver tangible benefits for working families.