

Strengthening Public Schools

THE PROBLEM

Great public schools that prepare young people for long-term success and active citizenship are at the heart of our democracy. But historical underinvestment, attacks on teaching professionals, high-stakes testing, and a movement towards privatization all threaten the ability of schools to achieve these goals. As a result, we are missing valuable opportunities to prepare the next generation of Americans—particularly low-income students and students of color—for adulthood.

This situation is unjust and untenable. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that by 2042 the majority of Americans will be people of color. The future of our 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, state and local policies facilitating charter schools, virtual education, tax credit scholarships, and so-called “parent trigger” initiatives have been enacted in numerous states. These policies shift a critically important function—the education of our children—from the public to the private sphere, often pitting equity against profits in the process. Such measures also contribute to diminished transparency and accountability, limiting the ability of parents to actively engage in their children's education. By facilitating the privatization of public education, these policies also threaten 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. Such policies are already emerging. In



“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

Arkansas, the state legislature has enacted a law allowing school districts to partner with teachers, support staff, administrators, parents, and community members in school improvement efforts. In **Connecticut**, the state legislature enacted reforms establishing School Governance Councils – composed of parents, community members, teachers, and administrators – in the state's lowest-performing schools.¹ 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.²

POLICY ISSUES

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

LOCAL LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY: While policies vary from state to state, in most places 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 parents with limited English proficiency and parents with disabilities, among others.

PARENT & COMMUNITY DRIVEN ASSESSMENT OF SCHOOL INPUTS AND OUTCOMES: School improvement plans should be driven by a thoughtful analysis of the resources available to the school to provide high-quality education, the manner in which such resources have been deployed and could be redeployed, and the needs of students. Parents, teachers and other community members who engage in these processes should receive funding, 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.

TRANSPARENCY & ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES: In addition to supporting community-driven school improvement initiatives, local leaders must also challenge broader efforts to limit public monitoring and input. Where authority exists, local leaders may leverage funding or oversight powers for this purpose. Local elected officials may also use their offices as platforms for elevating these issues.

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 Conn. Gen. Stat. Ann. § 10-223(3) (2012).
2. 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.