



REVIEW OF *PARENT POWER: GRASS-ROOTS ACTIVISM AND K–12 EDUCATION REFORM*

Reviewed By

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Summary of Review

The authors of this American Enterprise Institute report interviewed 28 leaders and practitioners of four national educational reform organizations to catalogue opportunities for and barriers to “parent power.” The report unevenly reflects the competing conceptions of “parent power” underlying the national debate on education reform. One conception, embraced uncritically by the authors and the new wave of well-funded national advocacy organizations, sees parents primarily as “consumers” of educational services who seek better choices in a more privatized education marketplace. An alternative, dismissed and overlooked by the authors but embraced by a long tradition of community organizers and public education advocates, views parents as the citizen owners-managers of a public education system that is a central institution of democratic civic life. These competing visions arise from sharply different histories and politics and give rise to dramatically different prescriptions for reform. The report suffers from an inadequate and slanted literature review; highly selective sampling; a serious lack of objectivity; disturbing characterizations of urban parents as “ignorant,” under-engaged and resistant to change; and a failure to contend with empirical evidence that challenges their views on “what parents want.” Its failure to adequately examine and document the full range of “grass-roots activism,” organizing, and history reflects both its blinders and its narrow political objective: to provide a briefing paper for the side it has chosen in what it calls “the fight.”

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I. Introduction

Parent Power: Grass-Roots Activism and K–12 Education Reform by Patrick McGuinn & Andrew Kelly¹ examines the impact of efforts by Education Reform Advocacy Organizations (ERAOs) “to empower parents to advocate for greater school choice, teacher accountability and similar reforms” (p. 1). The authors “assess the circumstances necessary for empowerment campaigns to succeed and the factors that may hinder engagement” (p. 8). Published by the American Enterprise Institute, the papers describe the efforts of four national ERAOs (Stand for Children, Democrats for Education Reform, Students First and 50CAN) to mobilize parents in support of a policy agenda defined by now-familiar catch phrases: accountability, turnarounds, teacher quality and choice. Notwithstanding the report’s title, it gives only brief mention to actual grassroots organizations, focusing instead on these four ERAOs.

The study comes amid growing debate over the role of ERAOs and increasing attention to the role of parents in promoting school reform, including release of a Hollywood movie entitled *Won’t Back Down* that champions the use of so-called “[parent trigger](#)” laws to promote school turnarounds.²

As discussed below, this new report is neither a credible research study nor a primer on parent power. Rather, it offers political strategy for a well-funded education reform campaign that is now seeking to build a mass constituency of parents. This larger campaign is running into numerous obstacles, and this report is best understood as an attempt to explain those difficulties.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The researchers draw insights from the field of political science and from 28 interviews with leaders and practitioners of four national reform organizations, noted above. These organizations aim to mobilize parents who are “system refiners, who advocate for reforms

(such as standards and testing) to improve district schools, and system disrupters, who advocate for the expansion of choice to provide alternatives to them” (p. 7).

In the first of the two essays comprising this report, Patrick McGuinn describes the ERAO movement as “relatively decentralized and fragmented” (p. 3). After laying out the landscape of ERAOs, he articulates significant issues and challenges facing these organizations:

- In describing a continuum of engagement, McGuinn is concerned about what he calls “astro-turf” organizing (contrasted with truly grassroots organizing), which fails to cultivate sustained parent mobilization for school reform;
- In acknowledging the significance of data for the success of the reform movement, McGuinn highlights the difficulty of disseminating data that simultaneously reveal system failure and the possibility of success;
- With varied examples, McGuinn reports that many ERAOs are encountering contentious race and class dynamics in local communities;
- Concerned about the fragmentation of the ERAO movement, McGuinn recommends increased coordination among organizations;
- Recognizing the power of numbers, McGuinn argues that ERAOs need to develop metrics to assess the process and outcomes of parent mobilization as a strategy for policy change, and then initiate cross-organization dialogue about the relative merits and costs of bottom up vs. top down reform; and
- McGuinn discusses at length the difficulties of building deep local capacity and what he calls authentic parent mobilizations in communities, while also scaling up a national reform agenda.

In the second half of the report, Andrew Kelly’s essay catalogues the obstacles to recruiting, mobilizing and sustaining parent constituencies for “school choice” in the current reform era. In his introduction he reviews hurdles to political engagement in low-income communities, including lack of resources, diminished sense of efficacy and low trust in government. From the interviews he finds that:

- Choice does not automatically create activist parents;
- Charter parents are easier to reach and organize, and they have more social capital as compared to similarly situated parents whose children attend traditional schools;
- Targeting wait listed parents or lottery hopefuls is a promising strategy but the “politics of disappointment and resentment” can also derail such efforts (p. 33); and
- “Imminent threats to schools or choice programs” are “the most powerful motivator of parental engagement” (p. 39).

Kelly joins McGuinn in posing a range of strategy questions to ERAOs:

- Under what conditions can parental self-interest be mobilized into collective action for educational reform?
- To what extent does promoting “exit” from the public system encourage political disengagement of those who leave, and can these parents then be relied upon as political advocates?
- Might it be possible that the expansion of choice could diffuse, rather than ignite, parental activism, especially if parents experience uneven quality among charter offerings?
- What is the likelihood that grass roots organizing can effectively drive policy change for systemic reform?

In combination, these two essays explore how four ERAOs have tried to mobilize parents across a number of major cities in the U.S. While these mobilization strategies differ dramatically from traditional and contemporary grassroots organizing, which builds power from and with the ideas and voices of parents and community members, the authors, nevertheless, consider parents to be an essential constituency for the national ERAO agenda. The papers lay out a comprehensive list of dilemmas the ERAOs are confronting and offer recommendations for individual reform organizations and networks as they advance and accelerate their parent organizing agenda.

III. Methods

This report provides no methodological detail; as such, it cannot be considered research in any standard use of the term. Neither author describes sampling strategy, refusal rates, interview protocols, framework for analysis of the data, or a contextual analysis of the local communities that the ERAOs target. The American Enterprise Institute’s (AEI) press conference materials stated that the Walton Foundation—which funded the report—provided access to some of the interviewees, although neither the report nor the press materials state how many were recruited through this mechanism.³

IV. Validity of the Argument

While it is meaningless to judge the scientific quality of the report given these methodological limitations, three substantive gaps undermine the papers’ credibility, validity and generalizability:

- The literature gap: the papers’ discussion of past parent organizing efforts and literatures is limited and highly selective;

- The vision gap: the researchers uncritically adopt the national ERAO framework for reform and ignore the countervailing history and politics of parents struggling for educational justice rooted in their communities; and
- The policy gap: the report represents a politically impoverished view of urban parents as ill-informed, under-engaged and difficult to mobilize by the ERAOs, failing to acknowledge evidence of parents' strong policy preferences for educational equity and their active opposition to much of the ERAOs' reform agenda.

The literature gap

The report focuses on a narrow, market-driven set of reform organizations and fails to reference the scholarly and popular materials on parent organizing for educational equity, participation and democracy.⁴ The writers do not acknowledge the range of protests and coalitions mobilizing across the country against school closings, against zero tolerance discipline policies, against high stakes testing, and for equitable school funding, quality schools for all, and reduced class size. Indeed the report's exclusive focus on the agenda set by ERAOs neglects the full range of campaigns represented in, for example, Rogers and Orr's landmark volume on public engagement for education reform, in which they detail a series of campaigns and coalitions, from across the country, where "members of the public . . . come together to *equalize schools* and *equalize voice* . . . through collective action manifested in coalitions, alliances, public deliberation, and other forms of community collaboration . . . of parents, community members, youth, and organized civic groups."⁵

One of many such groups is [Communities for Public Education Reform \(CPER\)](#), which has attempted to create "a community-based infrastructure" to mobilize parents in support of systemic "educational improvement" across districts and states.⁶ The [Annenberg Institute for School Reform \(AISR\)](#) and newer networks like [Parents Across America \(PAA\)](#) also advocate locally for reforms, including smaller class size, less testing and authentic parent participation, while challenging many of the policies advocated by the ERAOs. These groups face some of the same dilemmas as those raised by McGuinn and Kelly, but their reform agenda is very different, as they seek system-wide improvement for all, not exit for a few.

The vision gap: Researchers and the politics of education reform

There is an important distinction between the reform agenda of organizations that set their sights on communities in need, and the reform agenda of the communities themselves, including the individuals and families who carry a community's history, memory and hopes for the future. It is the responsibility of researchers to investigate, not ignore, this distinction. Unfortunately, McGuinn and Kelly dismiss the visions of

community members and represent them as if they were, or should be, compatible with those of the ERAOs.

McGuinn and Kelly uncritically accept and reproduce the polarized caricatures of unions, teachers, advocates, parents and communities of color promoted by the interviewees,

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neatly divided into pro- and anti-reform. The only people who qualify as reformers are those who “advocate for more fundamental changes in education policy,” like charters, vouchers, test-based accountability and turnarounds. They are the ones who are “reshaping the politics of school reform in the United States in important ways” (p. 8).

In contrast, parents who advocate for “disabled children,” “ethnic studies,” and increased school funding are dismissed in the report as narrow and traditional defenders of the status quo (p. 8). Those who challenge “the effectiveness of the proposed reforms” are categorized as “antireform groups” (p. 10) who are “spreading the traditional education message from the union’s perspective” (p. 19). The report describes “a serious counter-mobilization effort” by “groups that oppose the ERAO reform agenda . . .” (p. 19) and adds, “Currently, most ERAOs remain quite understaffed and under-resourced, particularly compared to groups like the teachers unions that are working to mobilize parents” (p. 25).

Readily accessible facts about the funding of ERAOs contradict the report’s characterization of these groups as under-resourced. As noted, some of the wealthiest foundations in the nation are backing these efforts. Interviewee Derrell Bradford reports in an AEI video that his organization, *Better Education for Kids*, “has no budget” because they rely on the resources of “committed” billionaire David Tepper, a hedge fund manager who is #60 on Forbes list of the richest Americans. The executive director of the *Foundation for Newark’s Future*, set up to manage Facebook billionaire Mark Zuckerberg’s \$100 million donation, earns \$382,000 a year. FNF’s board includes the head of private equity for Goldman Sachs and hedge fund superstar Whitney Tilson, who also co-founded Democrats for Education Reform.

The political and financial power of these organizations is grossly misrepresented in the report. At an AEI panel discussion on July 31, 2012, Bradford explained, “When you start showing up and say, listen, we’re gonna drop \$100,000 on your head [i.e., fund your opponent] if you don’t get behind his thing . . . it’s a very different conversation about reform at the legislative level.”⁷

In short, the report radically distorts the financial and political power of ERAOs, portrays parents as naïve, dismisses public school advocates as anti-reform and paints ERAOs as the only authentic crusaders for educational justice.

That ERAOs would present the “fight” in these terms makes sense; that’s their political agenda. Researchers of parent power and grassroots activism, however, have a responsibility to unpack and challenge these assumptions, to place history and economic data next to the narratives offered, to consider seriously the educational desires and demands of parents who are being used by these organizations, and to examine critically the rhetoric of ERAO spokespeople. If research simply reproduces the claims and political framing of these organizations, it’s not research. It’s merely well-funded spin.

The policy gap: Urban parents’ policy preferences differ from the ERAOs

Parent Power presents urban parents as ill informed, politically disengaged and resistant to change. Parents are described as “ignorant about the performance of their child’s school [. . . ;] much of what they think they know is incorrect.” McGuinn speculates that “When parents are reluctant to accept that their school or child is failing, a kind of cognitive dissonance is created that can make it harder for parents to be mobilized...” (p. 5). He adds that “Even those parents who are aware of and concerned about the poor performance of the public schools will often resist change, particularly when major changes are being pushed rapidly” (p. 12).

Empirical evidence tells a different, more complex story about public school parents’ attitudes toward education. In the 2012 PDK/Gallup poll, 71% of respondents report “trust and confidence” in those who teach children. While 48% of respondents rate “public schools in your community” as A or B, a full 77% of public school parents rate the school of their oldest child with an A or B (up from 67% in 2007).

Turning to problems in schools, “Lack of financial spending for public education” is ranked as the greatest challenge to public education in the 2012 poll, with 62% of respondents indicating a willingness to pay more taxes to improve the quality of education.⁸

While finance equity is a top priority for respondents, and particularly for parents, *Parent Power* is mostly silent on issues of school funding. Indeed, both nationally and at the state level, ERAOs have typically been unhelpful in the fight for increased or more equitable funding. In New Jersey, which many of the study’s interviewees reference, a network of civil rights and education advocacy groups called *Our Children/Our Schools* put together a coalition of sixty groups last spring to protect the school funding formula from permanent cuts proposed by the Christie Administration.⁹ **None** of the ERAO groups signed on.

Discussing New Jersey, McGuinn and Kelly ignore the state’s forty year experience with funding equity as a driver of reform. They fail to mention the litigation and political struggle around the *Abbott v. Burke* case, which the *New York Times* called “the most important equal education ruling since *Brown v. Board of Education*.”¹⁰ The *Abbott* decisions produced the highest funding levels in the country for poor urban districts for about a decade (roughly 1997-2008).¹¹

This funding helped lay the basis for statewide educational progress described by Linda Darling Hammond in [*The Flat World and Education*](#).¹² By 2007 New Jersey:

- Ranked in the top 5 states in every grade and subject tested by the National Assessment of Educational Progress;
- Was one of the few states that significantly reduced achievement gaps as measured by test scores;
- Saw African-American and Hispanic students outscore the average student in California;
- Had the highest overall graduation rate in the country;
- Had the #1 high school graduation rate for Hispanic students and the #2 rate for African-American students;
- Accomplished all this in a strong teacher union state where 45% of the public school population is comprised of students of color.

Such progress undercuts the narrative of failure that is central to ERAO efforts to recruit parents. It also exposes their lack of sustained interest in fiscal reform as a critical pathway to reform. In recent years, the equity mandates that formed the basis for this progress have been steadily eroded. Yet none of the national or state ERAOs (or the big three foundations supporting these ERAOs) have devoted significant resources or political support to defending the New Jersey program. This is true even of the New Jersey reforms designed to strengthen direct parent power such as requirements for district parent councils, parent representation on school-based site-councils, and paid staff parent liaison positions in every school.

It is instructive to examine which parent demands ERAOs ignore, which they undermine, and which they embrace when the ERAOs suddenly become champions of parent engagement. For example, despite repeated references to ERAO efforts in Newark, the new AEI report fails to mention that for 17 years Newark schools have been under state takeover, run from Trenton by a state-appointed Superintendent responsible to the Commissioner of Education, not the community. Originally designed to create the capacity for effective local governance where the state had determined it was lacking, the takeover has morphed into a semi-permanent, and highly segregated, “laboratory” for reform experimentation by ERAOs, private foundations, market reformers, and their political allies. In fact, local school advocates have referred to the latest wave of reform as “Takeover 2.”

When Mark Zuckerberg announced, from the stage of the Oprah Winfrey TV studio in Chicago, that he was donating \$100 million to support a “takeover” of Newark public schools by Mayor Corey Booker, the Newark community responded with considerable misgivings and resentment. Within a few months, a high-powered public relations campaign launched to “engage the community” around plans for the Zuckerberg funds was rocked when a “secret plan” to close several Newark public schools and expand charters was leaked to the press.¹³

The local Advisory Board has little authority and repeated efforts to restore local control to an elected school board have been blocked by the state. Newark's overwhelmingly Black and Hispanic community has long chafed under this disenfranchisement by a largely White, suburban legislature and recent state-directed reform efforts and the changes imposed by outside interests have only sharpened this tension. The report's silence on the struggle for local control, particularly in a study that purports to address "the skepticism of 'outsiders' and the importance of 'authentic' leadership in urban communities," (p. 15) is striking and significantly undermines its objectivity and accuracy.

Just as urban parents and ERAOs disagree on the need for state funded finance equity, a similar policy gap exists between what parents want, and what ERAOs advocate, when we consider solutions for failing schools. In the 2010 PDK/Gallup poll, respondents were asked what should be done with a "persistently low performing school in your community." By a 3:1 ratio, most opted to "keep the school open with existing teachers and principal and provide comprehensive outside support" (54%) compared to "close the school" and re-open with new principal (17%) or reopen as a charter (13%).¹⁴ In 2012 the question shifted markedly to, "Some states are considering laws that allow parents to petition to remove leadership and staff of a failing school. Do you favor or oppose?" and 70% favor.¹⁵ But agreeing that parents should be able to sign a petition is not the same as supporting school closings. Best we can read scholarly and advocacy evidence, parents and communities seem to want to support public schools with equitable funding *and* transform even failing schools with comprehensive support.

Rather than acknowledging the policy gap between parents and ERAOs, McGuinn and Kelly seem puzzled by the antagonism many in New Jersey's urban communities have for the ERAOs' project. McGuinn notes, "ERAO leaders . . . are often young, elite schooled and white and as such are often viewed skeptically by people of color." (p. 19) He continues, "Newark Public Schools observers, in particular, noted that there is tremendous suspicion of many of the individuals and organizations advocating for reforms in the city," adding that "tensions around race and class further exacerbate this challenge" (p. 20).

In this context it is easy to understand why Newark school board member Shavar Jeffries, who supports many of the ERAOs' proposals, would nevertheless address a public forum in Newark by stating: "If we don't figure out a way to empower local communities, and this looks like a colonial sort of thing, where there's a regime of folks who drop out of the sky with this self-righteous belief that they know what is better for these kids than their own communities, then we'll fail" (p. 15). Empowering local communities is very different from lining them up behind a pre-determined agenda.

V. Usefulness of the report for guidance of policy and practice

In short, this highly politicized report is neither a reliable research study nor a balanced primer on parent power. Rather, it is a strategy paper for a well-funded education policy campaign in search of a mass constituency. Those promoting business models and market

reforms have made large strides in attaching an agenda of testing, charters, turnarounds and hostility to unions to the urgent needs of poor communities that have often been badly served by the current system. This has helped to produce a sharply polarized education policy debate, but it has also undermined the common ground that a universal system of public education needs in order to survive in a democratic society. This AEI policy brief applies those same polarizing politics to a one-sided survey of “(ap)parent power.” Like the “parent trigger” movie that the study seems designed to promote, the report is based more on fiction than on fact.

Notes and References

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All four ERAOs receive considerable funding from foundations (such as Broad, Walton and Gates) that have broadly supported an educational reform agenda aligned with those ERAOs.

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6 The CPER 2012 National Convening. (2012). Retrieved Aug. 28, 2012, from http://www.communitiesforpubliceducationreform.org/sites/cper/files/imce/CPER_2012_Convening_Report.pdf.

7 The video is available at Lautzenheiser, D. (2012). *Parent power: Grass-roots activism and the new politics of K-12 education reform*. Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute. Retrieved Aug. 22, 2012, from <http://www.aei.org/events/2012/07/31/parent-power-grassroots-activism-and-the-new-politics-of-k-12-education-reform/>.

8 Bushaw, W.J. & Lopez, S. *Public Education in the United States: A Nation Divided*. The 44th annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools. Retrieved Aug. 22, 2012 from <http://www.pdkintl.org/poll/docs/2012-Gallup-poll-full-report.pdf>.

9 This network was supported by the Education Law Center, which employs one of this review's authors.

10 A Visionary School Plan in Maryland. (April 30, 2002). *The New York Times*. Retrieved Aug. 22, 2012, from http://www.nytimes.com/2002/04/30/opinion/_30TUE3.html.

11 Under the Abbott decisions, some 31 districts with about 350,000 schoolchildren received per-pupil parity with the richest districts in the state, plus extra funding for supplemental programs including full-day, high-quality pre-school for 3- and 4-year olds, reduced class size, extended school days and years, concentrated early literacy programs, a multi-billion program of school construction, and an unprecedented set of health and social service supports. For more on Abbott see, <http://www.edlawcenter.org/cases/abbott-v-burke.html>.

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13 The "secret plan" was funded by the Broad Foundation and drafted by an education consulting company co-founded by Gov. Christie's Education Commissioner Chris Cerf, the former head of Edison, Inc., the nation's largest for-profit education management organization. See:

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