

American School Reform

What Works, What Fails, and Why

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Introduction

To answer the three questions in its title—what works in school reform, what fails, and why—this book raises other questions meant for readers. What do you think about when you think about school reform? Are you hopeful about it or skeptical? What do you think is at stake for you? And what arguments would you make—whether to educators, policymakers, funders, or others—about how to pursue positive outcomes? These questions are not meant to lead toward answers we authors have worked out in advance. This is not that kind of book. These questions simply invite readers to enter the territory we’ve staked out with certain perceptions heightened.

The territory has both a landscape and a timescape. It features major school reform efforts in four places—Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and the Bay Area—over two decades. Our own studies of these efforts form the basis of our accounts, supplemented by the work of the other researchers and journalists we cite. Our learning from each other over two decades informs the accounts too. Since the mid-1990s, the authors have participated in a learning community that we call the Cities and Schools Research Group. Its purpose has been to pool our understanding of large-scale school reform and make it available for others to use. The group’s name reveals an original intention, later modified. This was to add substantially to what is known about big-city school reform, as if big-city school reform were distinctly different from school reform in other places. Today, we think this difference is often overplayed. Although we continue to respect the role that context plays in school reform, we think that some reform dynamics stay constant across contexts, and we focus here on these dynamics. The inclusion of the Bay Area among our research sites—with its three big cities and numerous small

ones, as well as vast suburban and rural swaths—helped us understand this. One might say that it disrupted our intention nearly from the start, and this book is partly about the ways in which disrupted intention can be plumbed for creative advantage. Moreover, we noticed over time that our other three sites influenced school reform policy nearly everywhere, not just in other cities.

Our research and writing partnership was created at the invitation of the Annenberg Foundation and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. It was led originally by Donald A. Schön of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, until his death in 1997. And it remains inspired by his perspectives—for example, on the value of pooled understanding in matters of great civic importance, and on the need for grounding reform in rigorously honed theories of action. Since 1997, the group has been led by Joseph McDonald, who is also the principal author of this book, the one charged by the group with figuring out a way to pool understanding and to make the result lively and accessible. Thus the book is not a compilation of separate chapters prepared by separate authors, with an introduction and conclusion meant to tie them together. Nor is it written, as some research reports are, in a corporate voice. The book has a single distinctive voice throughout—one that is, as we suggest below, an indispensable element of its message. Still, the book draws substantially on and cites the original research, writing, and thinking of all the other authors. Thus Jolley Bruce Christman's and Tom Corcoran's research is at the heart of our Philadelphia stories, as Mark Smylie's is for Chicago. Our Bay Area account rests on Milbrey McLaughlin's and Joan Talbert's research there, and our New York accounts on that of Norm Fruchter, Gordon Pradl, and Gabriel Reich. Yet their individual contributions have been refracted by years of conversation, drafting, and rhetorical experimentation.

The Research Base

Our partnership took root when we tried to devise a cross-project evaluation of eighteen diverse school reform efforts funded by the Annenberg Foundation and collectively known as the Annenberg Challenge (Annenberg Foundation, n.d.). The Challenge was announced at the White House in late 1993 by media magnate, philanthropist, and former US ambassador to Great Britain Walter H. Annenberg and his wife Lenore

in the company of President Bill Clinton. At the time, the Annenbergs' \$500 million gift was the largest philanthropic investment ever in K–12 public education. The places we write about here—Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and the Bay Area—were early beneficiaries of the gift, using the funds to launch major projects. Other cities and metropolitan areas benefited too, including Los Angeles, Detroit, Houston, South Florida, Atlanta, Chattanooga/Hamilton County, and Boston. There was also a Rural Challenge.

Our conception of a cross-project evaluation design for this massive effort included summative and formative studies of the locally designed projects, to be done using locally available evaluation experts. The summative component would employ a set of common measures keyed to what we called an impact map. The latter was the first iteration of the *theory of action space* that we sketch out in this book. The formative component involved a plan, first, to help project leaders clarify the theories of action underlying their unique projects and, second, to align these theories across multiple levels of design and action. The underlying idea is captured by the title of a monograph by Schön and McDonald, published by the Annenberg Institute in 1998: *Doing What You Mean to Do in School Reform: Theory of Action in the Annenberg Challenge*. The monograph suggests that alignment between meaning and doing is intermittent at best in projects that initiate complex change, yet crucial to the projects' development and impact; and it holds that external perspectives (such as those evaluators may supply) are invaluable aids toward continual realignment.

Both our formative and summative plans depended on the creation and persistence of a strong cross-project community of researchers and practitioners who would review each other's work in the manner of critical friends. Our hope was that the combination of common measures, a different kind of formative evaluation, and the involvement of researchers and reform practitioners across multiple contexts would sharpen the effectiveness of the Annenberg reforms, and prove influential as an evaluation design.

However, our efforts failed. In fact, no common approach to formative evaluation was implemented across all of the Challenge projects, and no common summative measures were adopted. Thus the opportunity to affect the direction of a giant natural experiment in school reform, and to track its impact, mostly vanished. Several factors account for the failure. They include the sheer complexity of the Challenge itself; the high cost of evaluating it as we proposed; the hesitation of some

fundings and some reform projects to undergo such thorough evaluation; the diversity of research expertise and research perspectives among the local evaluators; and the fact that, in the mid-1990s, our conception of the kind of research needed simply seemed outsize to many. As we demonstrate in this book, however, some of the Challenge projects proved nonetheless influential in terms of school reform policy. But the influence was of a kind rarely acknowledged—one associated with what we call *connection*.¹ More about this below.

With respect to evaluation design, the influence of the Annenberg Challenge has been even more indirect. Several of the Annenberg cities—as well as other places—eventually built at the local level the capacity for cross-project formative and summative evaluation of school reform that we imagined. They are using this capacity to build longitudinal tracking systems and ongoing data analysis systems with good feedback loops to districts and schools (Sparks, 2012). Most have been inspired in this regard by the success of the Consortium on Chicago School Research, one of whose earliest projects was the evaluation of the Chicago Annenberg Challenge. One purpose of our book is to encourage more cross-city conversation about such local studies. Indeed, our book exists (despite the failure of our larger plans) because the Spencer Foundation invested in *our* cross-city conversation. It sensed the value of the community of practice we had formed within the context of the Annenberg study and hoped that others might learn from it. We had visited each other's projects, had read and responded to each other's research reports, had talked together regularly about the prospects and pitfalls of contemporary school reform, and had begun to write together. Spencer provided funding to keep our community of practice going post-Annenberg—long enough to gain a better perspective on the data we had collected in a small number of Challenge sites; to share data and perspectives on similar work we did later; to refine our emerging ideas of how *meaning* and *doing* relate in the context of school reform; to construct a theory of how ambitious reform arises, proceeds, collapses, and in a sense survives; and to report on all this. This book is our report.

Theory of Action Space

Four interrelated ideas emerged from our study. They constitute what we call our theory of action space. We introduce these ideas briefly be-

low, then explore them more thoroughly in the next chapter. Finally, we illustrate them throughout the book in stories.

Idea 1: The necessity of reframing deeply held beliefs about school reform

In 2005, newly sworn-in US senator John Thune spoke to a *New York Times* reporter about having just met newly sworn-in US senator Barack Obama. “Barack and I have talked about exchanging visits,” he said, “him coming to South Dakota to see a working ranch or an Indian reservation, and me coming to Chicago to see the inner city” (Stolberg, 2005, p. A21). We have not been able to determine whether this exchange of visits ever took place, but we think it was a good idea, and Thune’s mention of it helps us illustrate what *reframing* is. In our terms, he implicitly invited his new colleague to help him reframe what he calls “the inner city”—which for him is as tangible as a ranch or an Indian reservation, though it is also in some sense elusive, requiring an interpretive guide. To our ears, Thune’s phrasing conveys attraction but also fear—a familiar combination in the American context whenever race is involved. As Thune may have sensed, seeing first hand is fundamental to working out this tension. He may also have understood that seeing is not enough, that it must be followed by reflective conversation about what *is* seen, always in tension with what *might be* seen.

Over the years, several scholars have explored the difference between this *is* and this *might be*—beginning with Erving Goffman (1974), and including Lee Bolman and Terry Deal (1997), Frank Fischer (2003), George Lakoff (2002, 2004), and Donald Schön and Martin Rein (1994). The frames our minds favor in ordinary perception are rooted in class, race, age, gender, geography, and political and cultural orientation, as well as other sources of “common sense.” As Schön and Rein (1994) put it, these frames rest on belief and appreciation. In other words, we ordinarily see what we expect to see and also what we like to see—a formidable combination that makes our ordinary frames inescapable without the conscious effort that Schön and Rein call frame reflection and that we call reframing.

Reframing is what Thune and Obama planned and what we think school reform requires. It is a necessary precursor to gaining the resources that support reform. In this book, we explore the reframing of certain deeply held beliefs. Some of these beliefs are positive—or, as we

put it, *encouraging*—with respect to taking action. For example, there are the widespread beliefs that school reform can save the economy, and that it can also end social inequality. And there is the similarly widespread belief that business is a good source of ideas for how to conduct school reform. These three beliefs have arisen from the larger political economy in which all schools and reformers operate, and they seem compelling to many people as a spur to action, a matter of common sense. However, they may encourage too much, raising false expectations. And they may propel action at such high speed and with such unwarranted confidence that the action falls short of its mark. Reframing uncovers this downside, and leads to inventive ways to avoid it. Meanwhile, other beliefs, also widely held and deeply felt, are negative with respect to taking action. They discourage it. These also need to be reframed. For example, there is the widespread belief that many schools serving low-income communities are essentially incorrigible, and that money spent on school reform there is wasted.

Of course, reframing does not alter facts about schools—ones that include incoming reading scores and reading readiness, teacher qualifications, children’s birth weights, family income and access to medical care, neighborhood violence and employment statistics, and more (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, and Easton, 2010; Neuman, 2009). Nor does it alter large social trends that include obstacles in the United States to social mobility and educational attainment (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, and Saez, July 2013; Duncan and Murnane, 2011). However, the frames people bring to facts affect whether they invest in gathering them, whether they pay attention to them, whether they want to change them, whether they think they *can* change them, and, finally, what they think change should entail.

Idea 2: The surprising impotence of school reform arguments

Arguments for school reform prescribe particular courses of action: do this or do that. They are the offspring of encouraging beliefs. The pronouncements about reform that we typically encounter are more declarations than arguments in a strict sense because they are unburdened by evidence. Thus we use the word somewhat in the manner of Lawrence Levine, who quipped that arguments are “examples of how things do not happen” (1996, p. 29). He meant that arguments do not come easily to the ground, being too rigid in their construction to accommodate ac-

tual contexts and their complications. Instead, they hover in the air, contributing a sometimes confusing, if nonetheless helpful, strategic chatter. Arguments are insistent, even strident. They seem sure of themselves. When revealed, their actual limitations can take proponents by surprise.

In chapter 2, we present and explore a list of contemporary school reform arguments, but for readers already feeling lost in abstraction, here are a few examples, drawn from a recent film called *Waiting for Superman* (Chilcott & Guggenheim, 2010). We use imperative verbs to capture their stridency: (1) fire ineffective teachers and hire better ones; (2) close the big failing neighborhood schools and open an array of small, choice-based ones; (3) surround schools with social services to overcome the effects of poverty on learning. Even when such arguments are made more concrete—use value-added assessments to identify ineffective teachers; open no-excuses charter schools; replicate Geoffrey Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone—they still tend to oversell themselves. And they sometimes resist combination. The fiercest proponents of each reform imply that theirs is all that is needed, and that it is adoptable instead of merely adaptable. Their arguments become in the process alluring beyond reason, and a source of incoherence. In any given context, stakeholder groups crucial to a civic alliance for reform—parents, educational leaders, teacher unions, politicians, business roundtables, and foundations, among others—find themselves attracted to arguments, though often different and conflicting ones. Or they may be attracted to different interpretations of the same argument but lack opportunities to discover and bridge the differences. Thus arguments make the politics of reform very complex.

Still, arguments are hugely valuable, rhetorically and politically. Reform requires, among other things, that people be rallied, goals set, and plans devised. Arguments help us do these things. And they at least tell us what to try, point us in specific directions. Then, when what we try falls short, they supply something else to try. At first, movement is everything. The trick, however, is to learn soon enough that something more is needed. Learning this prods us to take command of arguments—wrestling them to the ground, bending them to the demands of context, combining them to attract and hold together coalitions of support. In the best circumstances, we also spell out our assumptions—say why we think a particular argument will work when modified as we plan. and devise means of tracking the results over time. Finally, we use the evidence gained through this tracking to modify our plans and even our goals. By

these means, we channel the energy of arguments into theories of action (Argyris and Schön, 1996). All this happens within what we call action space.

Idea 3: The crucial role of action space in school reform

When policy grows really ambitious, David Cohen and Susan Moffitt (2009) claim, it outstrips the capacity of practitioners to implement it—all things being equal. This is an important insight. In this book, however, we focus on what happens when all things are *not* equal—that is, when especially talented people manage to assemble exceptional capacity for making the real conditions of schooling *actionable*. We use the word as litigators do: giving cause for taking action; but also as politicians and activists might: motivating actors, and helping them think that action can pay off. The result, we say, is *action space*, and it has the power to disturb equilibrium.

Action space is built at opportune intersections of three resources. The first is *professional capacity*—people on hand who really know their stuff as educators, leaders, and reformers. They contribute essential skills and ideas, and also guide action once action becomes possible. The second is *civic capacity*—people with clout and stake, from both elite and grassroots circles, who have come forward in support of reform, bearing investments of social capital: partnerships, consultations, in-kind contributions, and the like. This may serve to connect the reform to the resources of the larger community—what Robert Putnam (2000) calls bridging capital. Or it may act as bonding capital—connecting the reform to the deep local culture. Investors may be from big business or a corner store, from cultural or arts institutions of any size, from major religious bodies or modest congregations. They may be from the chamber of commerce or small, community-based organizations. Their investment, in any case, signals the backing of important people beyond education. It provides political cover for the educators, educational policy-makers, parents, and students who are most on the line. It encourages these primary stakeholders to take greater risks themselves, and it warns off potential opponents of reform (Comer, 2009; Henig & Rich, 2003; Hill, Campbell, & Harvey, 2000; Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001). Finally, the third resource crucial to the formation of action space is *money*—whether from governments, foundations, intermediary partners, corporations, private donors, or all of the above, whether millions

of dollars or thousands. This is money for more than ordinary operations. It is money that aims to boost these ordinary operations into a different orbit.

Within the action space that these three resources create, reformers exercise their reform leadership. They motivate others to take action, devise action plans, and build trust. They also push hard for change, manage turbulent politics as best they can, reflect in and on action, and change course as needed—all the while striving to keep resources flowing. In the best circumstances, they also contract with people like us to make records of their action that they and others can read and use.

For the most part in this book, we refer to action space at a citywide or metropolitan level. But it is important to note that the construct can apply at other levels too—for example, when the right catalytic leadership and sufficient capacities become available at the level of a neighborhood, a small district, or a network of schools. Moreover, as we know well from our research, and have written about elsewhere, the construct can also apply at the level of an individual school. In any case, regardless of scale and the circumstances of its formation, action space eventually collapses. Yes, good action space is engineered to expect and deal with profound stress and resistance, and it is surprisingly prevalent and frequently resilient. Still (to paraphrase Robert Frost), there is something that doesn't love an action space, something that wants to knock it down. Thus most of the action space we describe in this book is now down. We insist, however, that such collapse is not tragic. What *is* tragic is a failure to learn from past experience.

Idea 4: The redeeming power of connections

School Reform is fundamentally political work, and politics is not kind to memory, except in creating and evoking icons. Leaders often seek political advantage by denying indebtedness to recent predecessors, by claiming to be the first to imagine a plan, by seeming categorically sure of the plan, and by resisting competitor plans (at least at first). Of course, much of this is just posturing; true solipsism would be counterproductive within an enterprise that also depends on shaping collective vision and rallying collective effort. Still, reformer amnesia remains a problem, particularly when memory is most needed—namely, in devising new reform efforts. To combat amnesia in this book, we tell stories in bunches and try otherwise to pull back for a wider view of the connections that

we think can feed thoughtful reinvention and generate reform energy across context, sector, actor, and time. We ask explicitly what might happen if people stopped forgetting, and deliberately built on others' expertise and past experience.

Where it occurs, making connections is a mutual undertaking of many parties. It is not enough to ask, for example, that younger reformers seek to understand what older reformers have learned and contributed. For their part, older reformers must resist the temptation to think and say that they *solved* such and such a problem before, or that such and such a strategy has little effect. Instead, they must think to themselves (bracketing in the same instant whatever skepticism seizes them), "Ah, another opportunity to make some progress, another generation to lend its energy to the tasks." In short, everyone has to think in long-haul terms. It helps in this regard if the shapers of action space create good records of what they intend to do, what they actually do, and what impact their actions have. Typically, they make such records by partnering with evaluators. A problem, however, is that prevailing conceptions of practice and of evaluation may interfere. On the one hand, as Schön and Rein (1994) put it in their critique of these conceptions, practitioners may be considered incapable of reflecting systematically and rigorously. Thus an important source of knowledge may not be cultivated. And evaluators, constrained by conceptions of rigor, may fail to meet standards of practical utility. Their findings may be too abstract, their reflections too cool, and their reports too late to have any formative impact. Conversely, they may be too complicit in the practice, or too limited in their resources or methods to generate the data necessary for a genuinely critical perspective.

Whatever the quality of the records that actors in action space leave behind, however, all the rest of us must search them for possible connections—connections between the past and the present. We must confront in general the political aversion to memory and, despite the discomfort the questions may generate, must ask again and again, "Who did this work before? What resulted? How do we know?" These questions apply whether the work involves the construction of policy, the creation of action space, the funding of reform, or the study of reform.

We know, as in the title of another book one of us coauthored, that school reform is steady work in the sense that it is highly prone to collapse (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988). But we are interested in how re-

formers might get smarter as they do this steady work, how they might more consciously and deliberately pass on knowledge from one action space to the next.

A Different Voice

As we suggested above, this book is not a conventional collection of case studies. To be sure, the book is *founded* on case studies—highly elaborate ones undertaken over multiple years by researchers at the Consortium for Chicago School Research, the Institute for Education and Social Policy, the Stanford Center for Research on the Context of Teaching, Research for Action, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. The Challenge-related material was originally published, like most educational evaluation reports, in low-circulation monographs—sixty-one in all, plus ancillary documents. But as we also suggested above, the book refracts all this, as it does other research material about other reform efforts in our four places, through the many conversations we authors have had over time, and through narrative experiments in which the coauthors have engaged.

These experiments applied two methods that Catherine Kohler Riessman describes in her 2008 book, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. The first involves what she calls thematic analysis—the application of a theory to archival material and other data sources. As typically happens in thematic analysis, the application is recursive as the archive speaks back to theory. Thus our theory evolved over time—beginning with Donald Schön’s theory-of-action perspective on the dynamics of school reform, and leading to the one articulated above (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Schön & McDonald, 1998). We coauthors applied this evolving theory to the study’s archive of research documents by means of successive conversations and much drafting and redrafting.

Meanwhile, McDonald, Reich, and Smylie pursued the second narrative method—what Riessman calls structural analysis. In our case, this involved a series of experiments in tone of voice. The term *tone of voice* refers to an author’s attitude toward his or her topic. From the beginning of our book project, we knew that our attitude toward our topic—twenty years of school reform in four huge and complex places—could neither be skeptical (the normal tone in social science writing) nor impartial (normal

though hardly pervasive in journalism). One reason is that we are writing here about events that are for the most part in the past. Since we know how they turned out, at least in broad strokes, what's the point of being either skeptical or impartial? On the other hand, these events are tied so tightly to the present that the historian's detached tone seems inappropriate too. We tried for a time what we called a *comic* tone, using the word in the narrow classical sense that distinguishes comedy from tragedy and aims to provoke hope rather than evoke dread. However, the very word *comic* seemed to early readers disrespectful of our protagonists' efforts and dismissive of the high stakes involved. We next experimented with a tone that we called *ironic*. Thus we took full advantage of the dramatic irony that comes from knowing now what neither we nor the reformers we studied could possibly have known at the time. An ironic tone seems generally suitable for exploring well-meaning and even well-designed reform efforts that nonetheless failed to reach ambitious targets, or failed by various degrees to link intention, action, and impact. Irony seems suitable too for exploring reform efforts that at first succeeded but later fell apart; it allows for admiration of ambition and achievement, even as it acknowledges fallibility and transience. It is a tone, moreover, that can accommodate looking squarely at failure without diminishing the possibilities of learning and progress. All of these effects are germane to our message. Yet again, however, some readers—while appreciating what we had to say—quibbled with how we said it. We appreciate their feedback. They find irony discouraging in the way we use that word throughout the book—that is, discouraging with respect to taking action. Yet they think school reform action is needed, and so do we.

Finally, we adjusted our tone one notch more, and we associate the adjustment with a rhetorical technique made famous by the great twentieth-century playwright Bertolt Brecht. He called it (unpronounceably, for non-German speakers) *verfremdungseffekt*. In English, this is often translated as *theatrical estrangement*. Think of Brecht's character Mother Courage bursting into song amid the horrors of the Thirty Years War. The technique is a staple now of theater, contemporary fiction, television, and to some extent film, though it admittedly shows up only rarely in social science writing. Essentially, it consists of any textual element—for example, a surprising juxtaposition or an aside—that calls attention to the fact that the whole text is an artifice, not a real experience, though one constructed to help viewers and readers think about

real experience. “This is not the real Thirty Years War,” Mother Courage’s songs suggest (as does her name and the sparsely designed stage), “so don’t get caught up in pity and dread. Use the text instead to think about war in *your* time.” The technique is sometimes used by authors who think that what they have to say may call upon their viewers or readers to engage in some unlearning. And this is how we feel. We think that readers often turn to books like ours to satisfy either their enthusiasm for reform or their skepticism of it, and we want to challenge both mindsets. We want, as we suggest above, to warn enthusiasts that reform efforts are prone to entropy and collapse, but we also want to tell skeptics that reform efforts can endure in practice even when all acknowledgment of them has vanished. Meanwhile, we want to acquaint all of our readers with a paradox—namely, that the arguments for reform that they variously embrace and debate are as impotent in one sense as they are crucial in another sense. And we also want to invite them to engage in the cognitively uncomfortable but necessary work of reframing how they think about school reform.

You will likely be pleased to know that in contrast to Brecht, we include no songs in this book, though we do other things you may find strange. For example, we slice up three of our case studies rather than tell them as continuous narratives, and we tell our stories in pairs to heighten appreciation of the theory they illuminate. Sometimes we also put special emphasis on estrangement—for example, in chapter 5, when we compare school reform in Philadelphia to a nineteenth-century Russian novel, and reform in Chicago to a made-for-TV movie.

How the Book Is Organized

This book has a thematic thread. Laid bare, it runs like this:

What may seem the craziness of school reform has a hidden logic of great strategic utility. It has to do with the fact that reframing commonly held ideas makes room for action space, which is where civic and professional capacity meet up with money, and where arguments in the air *can* come to the ground. While action space collapses sooner or later, the collapse leaves residues of achievement and expertise on which new action space can build. Thus school reform can avoid a Sisyphean fate.

The book overall relies on the complementary power of exposition and narration. Obviously, this chapter is expository, as is chapter 2, where we lay out the theory of action space more explicitly in words and figures. Then chapters 3 through 6—the narrative chapters—illustrate the theory. Chapter 3 examines the dynamics of action space over time in Chicago and New York, and attends closely to how these dynamics are affected by shifts of argument, changes in leadership, and variations in supply of the three capacities. Chapter 4 takes a broader view—this time in reference to Philadelphia and the Bay Area—in order to examine the impact on action space of state politics, culture, and economics. Chapter 5 focuses on collapse, and chapter 6 on connection. Finally, chapter 7 mixes exposition with narration (in this sole instance, fictional narration) in order to draw out the practical implications of the theory of action space for current and prospective reform leaders.