

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NEW EDUCATION  
ADVOCACY  
ORGANIZATIONS  
*in the*  
U.S. STATES:

NATIONAL SNAPSHOT  
*and a* CASE STUDY  
*of* ADVANCE ILLINOIS

By PAUL MANNA *and* SUSAN MOFFITT

PREPARED *for*



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*by* Paul Manna, Associate Professor, Department of Government,

Thomas Jefferson Program in Public Policy, College of William & Mary

<http://pmanna.people.wm.edu/> • [pmanna@wm.edu](mailto:pmanna@wm.edu) • tel: 757-221-3024

*and* Susan Moffitt

Mary Tefft and John Hazen White Sr. Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science,

Taubman Center for Public Policy and American Institutions, Brown University

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## RESEARCH QUESTIONS *and* APPROACH

New education advocacy organizations are an increasingly important force in state politics and, given the trajectory of growth in this sector, are likely to be influential into the future. During the last decade, these organizations have emerged often with comprehensive agendas focused on accountability, educator quality, data transparency, and choice. Operationally, new education advocacy organizations tend to differ from more traditional advocacy groups in two main respects.

- First, the new education advocacy organizations usually do not have large membership rolls drawn from the ranks of people who are employed by or are elected to serve in traditional school districts. Some do not even have formal members beyond individuals who might be signed up to receive informational items, such as a regular email update. Among the new education advocates that do operate as membership organizations, these groups tend to recruit into their ranks parents or business leaders who may have some interest in education but do not necessarily work for schools or school districts.
- A second related difference is that the new education advocacy organizations tend to be financially supported either completely or in large part by foundation grants and donations from individual contributors rather than membership dues.

We provide two vantage points from which to view new education advocacy organizations. A high-altitude view summarizes conditions across the U.S. states, and an in-depth case study of one group, Advance Illinois, provides a detailed perspective. The study addresses the following **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**:

- What are the characteristics of new education advocacy organizations, including their basic organizational features and their priorities?
- In what ways have new education advocacy organizations contributed to public discussions and education policy agendas in states?

- What factors help to explain the track records of new education advocacy organizations?
- What does the evidence suggest for new education advocacy organizations themselves as they attempt to refine their work, and for foundations making decisions about supporting their efforts?
- What are some of the potential broader implications of the work of new education advocacy organizations on the prospects for improving education in the United States?

A framework grounded in the concept of “policy entrepreneurship” organizes the study. We use the following **SIX DIMENSIONS OF POLICY ENTREPRENEURSHIP** to help us answer our research questions. These dimensions identify successful policy entrepreneurs as being:

- **CREATIVE AND INSIGHTFUL**, which means they offer novel ways of discussing policy challenges that help others to see potential problems with current practices as well as possible future solutions;
- **SOCIALLY PERCEPTIVE**, which allows them to see issues from a variety of perspectives, even as they develop and carve out their own preferred policy agendas;
- **NIMBLE BY MIXING IN A VARIETY OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SETTINGS** to find and build bridges to potential allies, while also engaging potential critics to better understand their perspectives and possibly persuade them to see issues in a different way;
- **PERSUASIVE ADVOCATES** that offer an overall general message that is consistent and compelling, while also crafting their arguments in ways that connect to the more specific needs of particular groups or individuals;
- **STRATEGIC TEAM BUILDERS** that understand how to help foster coalitions that will have high chances of working together to move policy in the direction that the policy entrepreneur prefers; and finally
- **PREPARED TO LEAD BY EXAMPLE** by signaling their strong commitment to the arguments, proposals, and to the coalitions that they attempt to help build.

Our **METHODS AND DATA SOURCES** include:

- coding the characteristics of 62 new education advocacy organizations across the country, drawing on publically available information;
- in-depth elite interviews with 27 individuals familiar with education policy developments in Illinois;
- coding of traditional and new media coverage of education issues in Illinois;
- analysis of publically available primary source documents describing the activities of new education advocacy groups across the United States; and
- analysis of publically available and confidential primary source documents describing the work of Advance Illinois.

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## NATIONAL SNAPSHOT *of the* NEW EDUCATION ADVOCACY

Our broad overview strongly suggests that new education advocacy organizations have contributed to the discussion of policy issues and the machinations of the legislative and regulatory processes in states. The burgeoning number of these groups suggests how individuals interested in agitating for policy change in education have found new education advocacy organizations to be useful vehicles for moving their agendas forward.

The 62 new education advocacy groups we studied fall into two broad categories. The first are groups that operate as stand-alone entities within individual states. The second are state groups associated with national umbrella organizations. The total number of groups operating has expanded rapidly since the year 2000.

Key findings on **LEADERSHIP** are:

- Not all new education advocacy organizations operate with a board of directors or advisors. Among those that do, the size of these boards vary with most maintaining between 6 and 15 members.
- Among the board members for which we have biographical information, the evidence shows that these individuals come from a variety of professional perspectives. They bring diverse prior experiences working in education, for example. Additionally, 54.5 percent have business experience and another 29.2 percent have worked in politics either in staff positions or as elected officials at local, state, or federal levels.
- In terms of partisan political involvement, board member bios indicated an equal split between those who have worked as or for members of the nation's two major political parties. Where evidence of partisan affiliation was available, we found 13.5 percent affiliating with Democrats and the same percentage with Republicans.
- Patterns of campaign contributions from board members tended to favor Republicans, although the number of contributions was more balanced. During the 2012 federal election cycle, we found evidence of 36.3 percent of board members making a total of 1,238 contributions to candidates or groups, with some contributing to both. Of those contributions, 502 favored Democratic candidates or groups, 569 favored Republican candidates or groups, and 167 (all to other groups) did not have a partisan affiliation. The amount of the contributions favored Republicans by more than a 2 to 1 margin. Contributions to Democratic candidates or groups totaled \$686,383, contributions to Republican candidates or groups totaled \$1,693,213, and contributions to groups not affiliated with a party amounted to \$343,022.
- Organizational leaders, meaning the individuals who direct and oversee the daily operations of these groups tend to have titles such as “executive director” or “president” and are compensated typically between \$100,000 and \$200,000 per year, based on available data in IRS filings from 2011. In general, leader compensation represented a relatively small part of overall organizational budgets.
- The most common professional experience of these organizational leaders is prior work in the non-profit sector, with 60.7 percent of leaders having worked in a non-profit before joining their new education advocacy organization. Additionally, 54.1 percent had political experience either as an elected official or staff member. Numerous leaders had prior experience in education with 31.1 percent having been

teachers, 27.9 percent working to support school choice efforts, 18.0 percent in education research or consulting, and 16.4 percent in traditional school or school district administration.

- Organizational leaders tended to have stronger affiliations with the Democratic Party than the Republican Party. We found evidence of Democratic affiliations among 26.2 percent and Republican affiliations at half that rate, 13.1 percent. Our analysis discovered extremely few political contributions from organizational leaders in the 2012 election cycle, unlike board members where there was much more data to analyze.
- Regarding their educational backgrounds, 76.6 percent of organizational leaders had graduate training, with most having completed a Master's degree.

Key findings on **FUNDING AND STAFFING** are:

- Based on available data in IRS filings from 2011, the majority of groups tend to have operating expenses and revenues hovering at or below \$2 million.
- Foundation support, although inconsistently reported, appears to be an important source of revenue for new education advocacy organizations. In addition, 75.8 percent of these groups invite donations from individuals to support their efforts. Among the stand-alone groups, which lack a national umbrella office, 48.1 percent had a donate option, while 97.1 percent of the state affiliates of national organizations did.
- The modal category is for these groups to have only one staff member. Beyond such groups, the number of staff varied widely. Some clustering appears in a few spots (around 4, 8, and 12 staff members), but clear patterns are not apparent, suggesting that these organizations have adopted diverse staffing models.

Key findings on **ISSUE PRIORITIES** are:

- Most of the groups' mission statements suggest a broad focus, encompassing numerous facets of education policy. Many groups refer to the general aims of improving student achievement and increasing the quality of their states' education systems. Another common theme is improving college and career readiness. Many also mention a focus on the achievement gap and the imperative to address the specific needs of disadvantaged students.
- The five national organizations with state affiliates that we examined (50CAN, Democrats for Education Reform, Stand for Children, The Education Trust, and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute) have policy portfolios that embrace wide-ranging topics. These organizations commonly address policies involving teachers including evaluation, hiring and firing practices, and teacher distribution. The groups also share a focus on policies involving standards, testing, and accountability. Multiple groups have addressed school choice as an issue, but not all groups embrace all versions of choice. Other issues, which frequently touch on the theme of equity, also emerge.
- Our examination also included brief reviews of five new education advocacy organizations that are not state affiliates of a national group: the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education, the Rodel Foundation of Delaware, the Texas Institute for Education Reform, Mass Insight Education, and DC

School Reform Now. These groups embraced some of the same priorities just described. Yet their priorities and their approach to advocacy varied, with some being more active at the state level and others focusing more on the local level, with one group, Mass Insight Education, proving to be equally active in both arenas.

Three **OVERALL CONCLUSIONS** about new education advocacy organizations emerge from our national snapshot and the policy entrepreneur framework that we used to study them.

- First, there is interesting variation in how these groups appear to act as strategic team builders. Some build coalitions along more narrow partisan lines while others seek to be more inclusive.
- Second, the groups also vary in the degree to which they seem able to mix in a variety of social and political settings. Some groups appeared to focus more heavily on treetops policy advocacy work, interacting mainly with decision-makers and those working at the state level on developing and passing legislation. In contrast, other groups seemed to engage much more in outreach activities on the district or school level, involving themselves in the ground-level implementation of education policy initiatives.
- Third, these groups are not necessarily coming up with new ideas of their own because they seem to share many of the same issue priorities and reform preferences, which themselves carry much weight in national reform debates. Examples include advocacy to support the various elements of the federal Race to the Top agenda and the Common Core State Standards Initiative. Yet while the ideas may not be novel, these groups still appear to be making strong efforts to draw out potential implications of these approaches by adapting them and explaining what they could mean for their individual states.

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## CASE STUDY *of* ADVANCE ILLINOIS

Advance Illinois is a new education advocacy organization that began its work in 2008. Its stated mission is to be “An independent, objective, voice to promote a public education system in Illinois that prepares all students to be ready for work, college, and democratic citizenship.” It was founded with the support of the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and leading figures in Illinois from across the political spectrum. During its initial startup phase it also received support from the Wallace Foundation. Its original board chairmen were the state’s former Republican governor Jim Edgar, and Democrat Bill Daley, a native Chicagoan and son of the city’s former iconic mayor, the late Richard J. Daley. Edgar and Daley’s presence provided Advance Illinois with bipartisan bona fides and, given their stature in state politics, helped recruit additional well-known state leaders to serve on the board.

Since its founding, Advance Illinois has grown as an organization and it has developed a multidimensional agenda that spans pre-K, K-12, and higher education. It has become a well-known and consequential participant in the state’s education policy arena. Its most general main objectives have been to influence discussions about education in the state and to influence the content of policy.

Key findings on Advance Illinois's **CONTRIBUTIONS TO DISCOURSE ABOUT EDUCATION** are:

- Advance Illinois has been influential in shaping education policy debates in Illinois. Three contributions stand out. First, the group has been recognized as a key source of information for state policy elites inside and outside government. Second, it has effectively engaged the media and generated favorable coverage of its work and the agendas it supports. Third, it has positioned itself as a valuable intermediary between groups and individuals, helping to transmit information and build bridges between supporters and sometimes even otherwise reluctant or potentially unknown partners. Much evidence reveals that Advance Illinois has contributed positively to education policy discussions in Illinois. Several of our respondents noted how the organization has a reputation for doing its homework before taking its positions. On balance the organization deserves high marks for its effectiveness in advancing discussions consistent with the agenda it has embraced.
- Additional perspectives on the organization's contribution to discourse also exist, although these came up less frequently in our research than the points just noted. Consider these three perspectives. First, among its critics and some of its friends, Advance Illinois has received criticism for how it grades the quality of education in the state, using an A to F system published in its *The State We're In* reports. Second, as the organization has matured, and it has become more focused on advancing its agenda, some people feel that it has been less likely to be open to different perspectives as it appeared to be when it began its work. Third, some of our interview respondents indicated that Advance Illinois sometimes may use data and evidence too narrowly, focusing on findings that support its work and not considering alternative perspectives as well as it should. These last two points seem at least partly due to a predictable evolution that one would expect to see as a new organization develops and begins establishing itself. It is also consistent with behavior of other new or traditional education advocacy groups.

Key findings on Advance Illinois's **CONTRIBUTIONS TO EDUCATION POLICYMAKING** are:

- Interview respondents and additional evidence attest that Advance Illinois has positioned itself to make consequential contributions to education policymaking in the state. Three particular examples of this work stand out. First, it has influenced the lawmaking process in Illinois on important legislation in recent years, including the state's major changes to its teacher evaluation policies. Second, it has assumed formal and informal roles in partnerships with traditional governing institutions, including the state education agency (known as the Illinois State Board of Education, or ISBE) and the state's P-20 Council. Third, it has contributed to policy development in the state by being an effective resource mobilizer for state agencies and other groups, helping to enable these organizations to carry out their increasingly complicated and numerous duties.
- Advance Illinois's efforts in the legislative process and as a supporter, either as collaborator or resource mobilizer for traditional state institutions, has enabled it to amass an impressive array of policy accomplishments in its relatively brief history. While we found no evidence challenging the claim that the organization has had much influence, two alternative perspectives on its contributions to education policymaking did emerge. First, the speed with which Advance Illinois has forged its connections with traditional state institutions has created some perceptions that the group has too much influence that sometimes lacks transparency. Second, its main focus on state-level advocacy, treetops work as our respondents described it, has created the potential for Advance Illinois to be less attentive to whether the policies it supports align with the enabling conditions on the ground required for reforms to succeed.



Our **OVERALL OBSERVATIONS** about Advance Illinois and its work are:

- An assessment of Advance Illinois should begin by evaluating the organization based on the goals and objectives that it has outlined for itself and by the promises it has made to its supporters. Using those criteria as a basis for judgment, which are independent of whether one agrees with the advocacy agenda that Advance Illinois has developed, the organization deserves high marks. In a remarkably short period of time, the Advance Illinois staff and board members have demonstrated an impressive ability to weave the organization into the fabric of the education policy quilt in the state and to push forward many elements of its expansive agenda.
- Looking ahead, potential opportunities and new challenges will emerge for Advance Illinois as the policy system turns attention to implementing the blizzard of recent reforms that have become law. On numerous issues, Advance Illinois will be in the position of defending the current system to protect prior victories, rather than advocating for policy change that shifts from the status quo. The move from “offense” to “defense” will likely be challenging because reform initiatives have been so broad and sweeping, future costs of implementing them are still uncertain, and some of the practical details of the initiatives themselves, as with Common Core and its accompanying assessments, are still taking shape.
- One factor that will be missing in the future, which helped prompt a sense of urgency in 2009 and 2010 and contributed to some of Advance Illinois’s early successes, is the absence of the Race to the Top carrot and its promise of a potential windfall of resources for the winning states. Given the dysfunction in the U.S. Congress, future injections of similar federal funding likely will be more limited, if available at all, in the coming years. As a result, Illinois, as with other states, will be relying on the generosity of its own taxpayers and the judgments of its state legislators to supply adequate funding and flexibility to move their initiatives forward.

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## IMPLICATIONS *and* CONCLUSIONS

Two sets of implications emerge from the study. The first is directed towards the new education advocacy organizations themselves who are working across the country and the second addresses foundation leaders that see these groups as potentially valuable recipients for their giving.

We encourage **NEW EDUCATION ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS** to attend to the following five issues as they develop their advocacy agendas:

- the distinction between policy development and policy implementation, and the need to be attentive to both;
- the potential virtues of working with traditional groups and institutions, such as state education agencies, union affiliates, or management groups;
- the degree to which they might pursue elite-level strategies that focus on state leaders or mass-level strategies that mobilize local leaders or individuals;

- the need to think through the timing of their proposals so that local districts are not overwhelmed with too many initiatives at once; and
- the issue of constructing their own identities while still developing network partnerships with other new and traditional education advocacy groups.

We encourage **FOUNDATIONS** considering supporting new education advocacy organizations to attend to the following five issues:

- the methods and metrics used to measure performance of new education advocacy organizations;
- the degree to which foundation grants should support narrow or broad objectives;
- the virtues of considering grant strategies that simultaneously engage state-level policy development and local-level implementation so that useful models can eventually be brought to scale;
- the degree to which state enabling conditions, including the political environment, should be used as criteria to evaluate the merits of supporting new education advocacy organizations; and
- the implications for state capacity building that might unfold due to grant awards to new education advocacy organizations.

Our charge in conducting this analysis was to assess the work of new education advocacy organizations and to describe their basic features, examine how they have contributed to state policy discussions and agendas, attempt to discern the factors that help to explain their track records, and then to conclude by offering advice to new education advocates themselves and to their potential foundation supporters. The evidence shows that the new education advocacy organizations are making increasing contributions to state-level discussions and policy. An important issue beyond the scope of our study is the degree to which new education advocacy organizations have advanced agendas that are likely to best address the challenges facing the nation's education system, which broadly focus on promoting educational equity and excellence. This larger issue is vital for education observers, policymakers, and advocates to consider. New education advocacy organizations ultimately will prove their value not simply by offering something new or different, but by showing that their preferred policies produce more success than the alternatives.

For the complete report, please visit: [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).

The Wallace Foundation is a national philanthropy that seeks to improve education and enrichment for disadvantaged children. The foundation has an unusual approach: funding projects to test innovative ideas for solving important public problems, conducting research to find out what works and what doesn't and to fill key knowledge gaps – and then communicating the results to help others.

Wallace has five major initiatives under way:

- School leadership: Strengthening education leadership to improve student achievement.
- Afterschool: Helping selected cities make good afterschool programs available to many more children.
- Arts education: Expanding arts learning opportunities for children and teens.
- Summer and expanded learning: Better understanding the impact of high-quality summer learning programs on disadvantaged children, and enriching and expanding the school day in ways that benefit students.
- Audience development for the arts: Making the arts a part of many more people's lives by working with arts organizations to broaden, deepen and diversify audiences.

Find out more at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).