

# RESEARCH UTILIZATION BRIEF:

## WHAT CAN COLLEGES OF EDUCATION LEARN FROM THE NEW ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS?



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In a recent report from The Wallace Foundation, *New Education Advocacy Organizations in the U.S. States: National Snapshot and a Case Study of Advance Illinois*, Paul Manna and Susan Moffitt (2013) used the concept of “policy entrepreneurship” to examine the characteristics and priorities of 62 newly formed education advocacy organizations, how they have contributed to policy, and factors associated with their success. Importantly, this analysis, which also included an in-depth case study of Advance Illinois, holds a number of interesting possibilities for contemporary colleges of education.

This Brief summarizes findings from this report and identifies key implications for colleges of education wishing to increase their influence and impact within their state and local contexts. Those wishing to read the full report can access it from the Wallace Knowledge Center ([www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org)).

### THE NEW ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS

Today, the educational policy arena includes many new actors. The past decade witnessed tremendous growth of new educational advocacy organizations at the state and national levels. Some of the most widely recognizable names include national networks (many with state affiliates), such as Students First, Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), and the 50-State Campaign for Achievement Now (50-CAN). At the state level, groups like the Mass Insight Education and DC School Reform Now have attained strong name recognition.

Although the mission statements of such groups tend to reflect a broad focus, such as “improving student achievement and increasing the quality of their states education systems” (Manna & Moffitt, 2013, p. 9), their key initiatives are fairly specific. Most focus on standards; testing; accountability; choice; or policies associated with educator quality, including preparation, evaluation, and hiring and firing practices. Importantly, although many of the groups are considered to be national-level organizations, most strategically focus efforts at the state level. Among the primary contributions of the new advocacy organizations are the contextualization of national policy trends for state and local contexts, followed by assisting state and local

leaders in the development of policies, programs and regulations.

### POLICY ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Manna and Moffitt make use of Mintrom’s (2000) policy entrepreneurship framework in their effort to understand the work and impact of these new groups. The report examines group characteristics and charts how various groups, and in particular Advance Illinois, positioned themselves to make a difference.

These groups differ from traditional educational organizations on at least two important characteristics: they do not have a large membership like traditional educational advocacy organizations (e.g., the National Education Association), and their funding comes almost exclusively from foundations and private donors. With regard to their strategies, the new advocacy organizations translate key policy issues for state and local decision makers, provide research-based analyses that tap into contextually relevant educational values and goals, and make “strong efforts to draw out potential implications... adapting them and explaining what they could mean for their individual states” (Manna & Moffitt, 2013, p. 10). Additionally, these organizations tend to focus on both educating policy makers, what Manna and Moffitt refer to as “treetop” work, and at the ground level with educators and communities.

Based on a case analysis of Advance Illinois, the authors provide an in depth look at this new breed of organization. Advance Illinois has become a widely known and effective participant in Illinois state policy. The organization focused on developing strong relationships with Illinois lawmakers; building its reputation as a trusted resource; and providing policy makers with policy briefs and other resources in order to directly influence key legislation, such as the state’s teacher evaluation policy. Of equal importance, the group helped to build policy-relevant, state-level alliances that included state agencies and other traditional educational groups and then took on both formal and informal roles within those alliances, effectively increasing its reach and influence.

Manna and Moffitt identified six activities, in particular, that have enabled the new educational organizations to be effective: (1) translating and discussing policy in creative and insightful ways, (2) providing socially perceptive interpretations of policy, (3) nimbly interacting within a variety of social and political settings, (4) persuasively advocating well-articulated messages to targeted audiences, (5) strategically building coalitions, and (6) being prepared to lead by example.

Complementing the above high-impact activities, the report identified five important organizational considerations. First, organizations wishing to support state and local improvement efforts must understand the difference between policy development and implementation and be able to support activities at both ends of the spectrum. Second, organizations must be prepared to develop advocacy coalitions with a variety of traditional and nontraditional groups in order to gain widespread engagement and commitment. Third, organizations should develop their capacity to work at both the “elite-level treetops” as well as the grassroots levels. Manna and Moffitt noted that having a strong grassroots base is important for sustaining change overtime, particularly in the wake of state-level leadership or regime change. Fourth, organizations must be sensitive to what Kingdon (2002) called policy windows. “Timing matters greatly for securing policy victories and implementation successes, the zeal of new education advocates... can produce overreaching... or foster reform fatigue” (Manna & Moffitt, 2013, p. 69). Finally, organizations are advised to carefully frame their identities within an “increasingly crowded education advocacy environment” (p. 70).

## IMPLICATIONS

Although the report’s implications focus squarely on advocacy organizations and foundations, some of the strategies may be relevant for colleges of education as well. Historically, colleges played important roles within their states as centers of research and professional training and development. While colleges continue to provide these essential functions, their prominence has declined and their relationships with states and local schools have become less significant and, in some cases, strained. College personnel may benefit from the example set by new education advocacy organizations like Advance Illinois.

One of the key takeaways from the report is the importance of substantive relationships. The fact that Advance Illinois has been “recognized as a key source of information for state policy elites inside and outside government” reflects not just the quality of information the group provides, but also its investment in impactful relationships. It has invested in staff, networking and other efforts, enabling it to position itself as a valuable and trusted partner and information resource. Moreover, such relationships have enabled Advance Illinois to generate “favorable coverage of its work and the agendas it supports” within the media (p. 11).

Importantly, many colleges, departments, and faculty participate in local, regional, or statewide partnerships; however, the nature, purpose, and scale of such relationships differ dramatically from the strategically focused and supported structures put in place by organizations like Advance Illinois. Similarly, while adoption of one or more of the six key advocacy organization practices (listed above) could enable colleges of education to play a more significant role in supporting educational quality and equity, successful implementation may not be possible in the absence of significant organizational shifts. For example, although college faculty members have significant expertise around a variety of educational issues, their ability to serve as resources and partners can be undermined by their own institutions. In general, institutional priorities, policies, and infrastructures are not organized to support policy entrepreneurship.

Colleges of education have traditionally approached policy advocacy tentatively, if at all. Yet, Manna and Moffitt’s analysis indicates that in the current educational policy context, strategically stepping up to serve as a resource is a more effective strategy than waiting to be tapped. Whether colleges have the capacity to step up is, however, unclear.

## REFERENCES

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