

Powerful Professors

Research can change the political agenda...if the circumstances are right

When the status quo is protected by vested interests, then school reform must be driven by ideas backed by clear evidence. Results from our 2009 national poll tell us that a solid research finding has the capacity to shift public support for charter schools from 39 to 53 percent, a substantial increase (see “The Persuadable Public,” *features*, page 20). A study’s power to persuade turns out to be as potent as Barack Obama’s persuasive capacity two months after he assumed the presidency.

To get a better sense of how research can influence the real world of policymaking, consider recent events in Massachusetts, where Boston’s longest-serving mayor (1993–present), Thomas Menino, is seeking reelection for an unprecedented sixth term. “Mumbles,” as the mayor is affectionately called, is best known for his commitment to snow removal, neighborhood parks, and symbiotic relationships with political insiders. On education matters, he appoints the school board and lets the members run the Boston schools as they please—so long as they avoid upsetting the local teachers union. But on the eve of his current campaign, Menino asked the legislature to expand charter school operations in Boston.

Why did Mayor Menino suddenly get charter school religion? Only recently, teachers unions seemed to be riding high in the saddle, enjoying for the first time in more than a decade a government unified under the union-friendly leadership of a Democratic governor and a legislature controlled by the same party. The mayor has generally distanced himself from education issues, and Boston’s best-known school reform consists of “pilot” schools, which have more than usual autonomy but are still subject to the district’s education-crushing collective bargaining agreement. Governor Deval Patrick, in a nod to the mayor, backed legislation that would expand pilot schooling throughout the state while curtailing charter school operations (see “Accountability Overboard,” *features*, Spring 2009).

The nail in the charter school coffin was expected to come with the release of a charter and pilot school evaluation initiated by the Boston Foundation, a reliable public school supporter. The foundation had nonetheless arranged for its

evaluation to be conducted under the leadership of economist Thomas Kane of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, who has considerable credibility on all sides of the charter school debate. The study was designed as a gold-standard randomized field trial, in which students were (by means of a lottery) randomly given the opportunity to go to charter schools or not. The achievement of students who won the lottery and attended charter schools was compared with the achievement of students who entered but failed to win the lottery. Ditto for pilot schools.

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To the surprise of the Massachusetts education establishment, the charters won—and the pilots lost—the research contest. No matter how the data were analyzed, charter schools routinely outperformed both Boston’s pilot schools and its traditional public schools. Pilots turned out to be no improvement on the status quo whatsoever.

The research findings reinforced the pro-charter campaign led by a local think tank, the Pioneer Institute. Statewide, newspapers editorialized in favor of charters and against the governor’s so-called reforms. Even the liberal *Boston Globe* climbed on board the school reform train. It didn’t hurt that the state legislature was riddled by scandal and Governor Patrick’s tax, fiscal, and transportation policies were going nowhere.

Politically, it was time for Mayor Menino to separate himself from the nonsense emanating from the state capitol. The best way for a popular mayor to remain that way is to catch a changing wind before it acquires gale force, in this case a wind set in motion by the Kane evaluation. When circumstances are right, professors can be as powerful as politicians.

Well...let’s not exaggerate. Mayor Menino may have climbed out of the teachers union bed but only into a twin bed in the same room. The mayor’s call for action will need to be accompanied by well-timed use of mayoral muscle inside the state legislature if more charter schools are to come to Boston. Still, research has nudged the thinking of one of Massachusetts’s most savvy politicians—no small feat.

— Paul E. Peterson

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
