

Fight Club

Are advocacy organizations changing the politics of education?

By PATRICK MCGUINN

Every few weeks, a group of education reform advocacy organizations (ERAOs) gathers in Washington, D.C., to compare notes and plot strategy in what is (half in jest) referred to as “fight club.” Like the subject of the 1999 David Fincher movie, this fight club sees itself as the underdog in an epic struggle for freedom and equality. While the target of the film’s ire is consumerism, these national ERAOs and their counterparts at the state level are focused on enacting sweeping education policy changes to increase accountability for student achievement, improve teacher quality, turn around failing schools, and expand school choice. As Terry Moe documents in his recent book, *Special Interest*, for decades the politics of school reform have been dominated by the education establishment, the collection of teachers unions and other school employee associations derisively called the “blob” by reformers. But the past two years have witnessed an unprecedented wave of state education reforms, much of it fiercely opposed by the unions. The ERAOs played an active role in pushing for these changes, and it is clear that they are reshaping the politics of school reform in the United States in important ways. But does the reform blob really stand a chance of defeating the education blob?

What Are the ERAOs?

Interviews with ERAO leaders reveal that the challenges of implementing No Child Left Behind (NCLB)—in particular, states’ efforts to game its accountability, choice, and school restructuring mandates—spawned the creation of policy advocacy organizations that could push for



reform in state capitols. As Joe Williams, executive director of Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) explained, “There was recognition over time that good ideas alone weren’t enough and weren’t going to get us across the finish line in terms of systemic reform. There needed to be a significant investment of time and resources in advocating for political changes that would enable and protect reform.” The largest of the ERAOs (in terms of staff, budget, and reach) are Stand for Children, StudentsFirst, the 50-State Campaign for Achievement Now (50CAN), DFER, and the Foundation for Excellence in Education (FEE), but this remains a relatively decentralized and fragmented movement. Different groups embrace somewhat different policy agendas and tactics, from grassroots mobilization to lobbying policymakers and operating political action committees.

Another way that ERAOs differ is in their scope and where they operate. Groups such as Advance Illinois and the Tennessee State Collaborative on Reforming Education are independent operators that focus explicitly on a single state or city. Stand for Children, 50CAN, DFER, and FEE are national organizations that work in multiple states. Stand for

Children currently has affiliates in 9 states, 50CAN operates in 4 states (originating from its flagship ConnCAN, which operates in Connecticut alone), and DFER has 11 state chapters (see sidebar, page 31). How do the ERAOs decide what states to operate in? Marc Porter Magee, president and founder of 50CAN, talks about a “vetting process” that centers on figuring out what the “advocacy value-add score” would be in a potential state. Collectively, the ERAO leaders I spoke with identified three critical factors: 1) Is there a void to fill (no existing organization already doing the work)? 2) Is there sufficient local support for reform, and are local champions in place to lead the effort? 3) Is state philanthropic support available to fund the effort and sustain it over time?

While the groups vary considerably in tactics and geographic base, several common elements are apparent. The first is a connection to school choice, and, in particular, to the charter school movement. Many of the ERAOs emerged from the frustration of charter school operators—and their supporters in the business and civil rights communities—at the restrictions placed on charter operations and growth. In addition, ERAOs generally embrace test-based accountability, reforms aimed at improving teacher quality, and aggressive interventions in chronically underperforming schools. One of the most important developments in recent years, in fact, has been the coming together of two previously separate strands of the education reform movement: “system refiners,” who embrace accountability, and “system disrupters,” who advocate choice. Many reform groups are funded by the same foundations, particularly the “big three”—Walton, Gates, and Broad. The support of conservative foundations and the embrace of market-based school reforms have led some observers—and many critics in the education establishment—to label the ERAOs “corporate school reformers.” StudentsFirst CEO Michelle Rhee called this description “bizarre” and noted that she, like many others in these organizations, is a lifelong Democrat with a deep concern for social justice. Suzanne Tacheney Kubach, executive director of the Policy Innovators in Education Network (PIE Network), emphasizes that a focus on partisan orientation or funding sources obscures that “almost all the advocacy groups working in the country were either founded by or are advised by civic boards made up of state leaders concerned about the direction of their public schools.”



Marc Porter Magee, president and founder of 50CAN

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The ERAO Playbook

A critical first page in the playbook for reform groups is to increase the amount of information available about school system performance. Virtually all of them support reforms to improve the quality and transparency of state standards and assessments and the creation of state report cards that enable policymakers and parents to view school-level data on student achievement. The increased availability of this information—one of the most important legacies of NCLB—in turn helps the groups to highlight the need for school reform in state capitols and build support among parents and community groups. ERAOs use these data to create a sense of urgency and to craft detailed evidence-based policy recommendations. 50CAN, for example, releases a detailed “State of Public Education” report prior to launching a new state branch. The groups also build momentum for change—and help policymakers make tough political choices—by documenting community support for reform through public opinion polls. In Indiana, for example, Stand for Children hired an independent firm to survey teachers about proposed reforms and was able to report that many reforms had strong teacher support despite the opposition of their union.

There is both a public and private dimension to ERAO work. Behind the scenes the groups work to cultivate relationships and build credibility with governors and state legislators and their professional staff as well as with state education-agency folks. They hold regular briefings for these insiders—often bringing in nationally recognized experts—to make the case for reform and report on how other states have tackled similar challenges. They also wage a very public campaign for the hearts and minds of average citizens by organizing town hall meetings with parents and publishing op-eds in state

and local media. They publicize the report cards developed by national research organizations—such as the National Council on Teacher Quality’s “State Teacher Policy Yearbook” and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute’s “State of State Standards,” which enable comparison of one state’s policies with those in the rest of the country. ERAOs organize phone banks, rallies in state capitols, and online petitions to build momentum behind reform.

While newer reform advocacy organizations often partner with older groups like the Education Trust, they differ in approach and tactics. Older groups have tended to confine their efforts to research and lobbying, while the newer groups are more explicitly political, creating public pressure for reform to make it easier for policymakers to embrace difficult changes and then rewarding those who advance their agenda. Robin Steans, executive director of Advance Illinois, observed that “in the past the SEA [state education agency] was often alone in pushing reform in the state but now we are able to help lead the charge, to bring media attention and change the stakes and get folks to the table.” Central to this effort, as Bruno Manno has noted, is the quest to mobilize parents (see “Not Your Mother’s PTA,” *features*, Winter 2012). The perception that older parent groups such as the Parent Teacher Association are closely aligned with teachers unions and wedded to the status quo has led to the formation of new reform-oriented parent groups (such as Parent Revolution) and parent advocacy campaigns by groups like Stand for Children. The ERAOs take advantage of data microtargeting capabilities to identify potential supporters and use social media like Twitter and Facebook to regularly inform and mobilize them for advocacy.

A Coordinated Movement?

It is tempting to see the patchwork of state and national school reform organizations as a fully integrated and coordinated movement. Yet, as a January 2012 study from the PIE Network concluded, “The most common thread across these states that enacted reforms was actually a lack of tight coordination among the varied members of these coalitions.” While many ERAOs share goals and move on parallel paths, and coordinate where it makes sense, no one

group dominates or is in charge. One reason is the significant variation in political context. The unique policy landscape of each state necessitates that reform coalitions and agendas be built state by state. In Colorado, for example, the coalition that successfully pushed for the “Great Teachers and Leaders Act” comprised 22 different stakeholder groups and 40 different community and business leaders. While many members of state reform coalitions are education-specific groups, others focus on civil rights or business issues. Coalition size and diversity ensure considerable variation in the groups’ education agendas, and often even greater variation in their noneducation agendas. Civil rights and business groups, for example, often find themselves on the same side of school choice debates but on opposite sides of collective bargaining and taxing-and-spending issues. As a result, a standing coalition of ERAOs is difficult to build or sustain across different policy proposals.

Many of the groups talk to one another frequently,, through a regular conference call organized by the Education Trust, at meetings organized by funders such as the Walton Family Foundation, and at conferences convened by groups such as the NewSchools Venture Fund. To the degree that there is an organizational home for ERAOs, it seems to be the PIE Network, which held its first meeting in 2007. The PIE Network emerged, according to executive director Kubach, because of “the growing



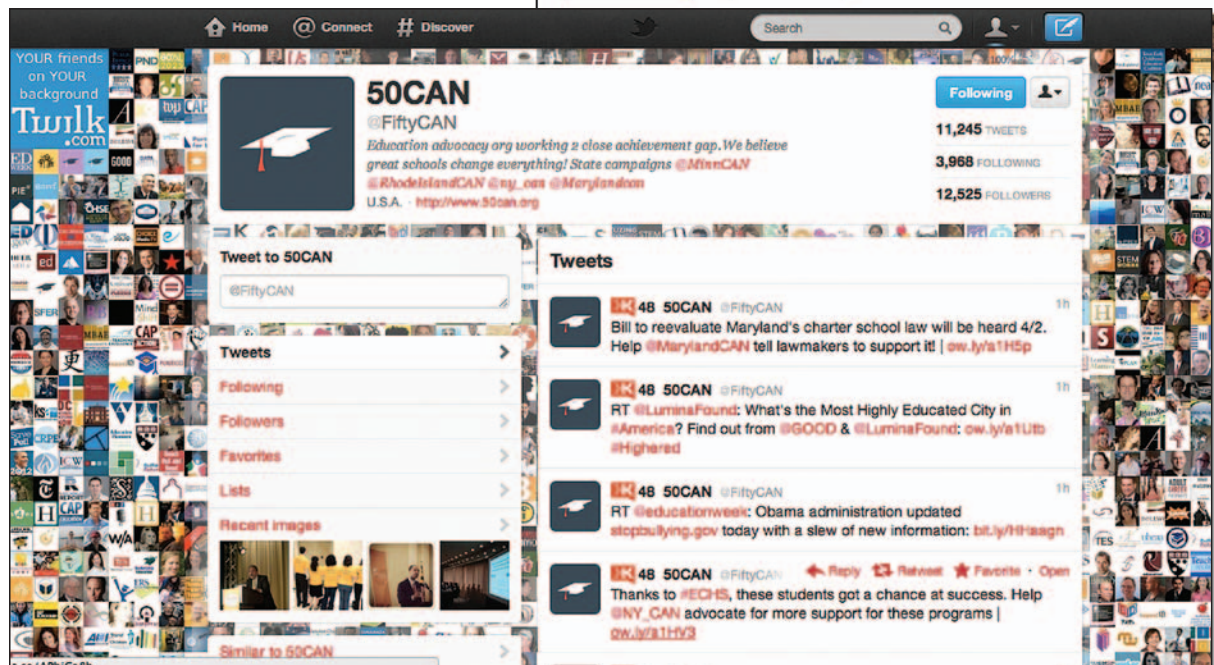
Suzanne Tacheny Kubach, executive director of the Policy Innovators in Education Network

"The arena of state policymaking matters a lot for school reform, and you can't just do everything at the federal level."

realization that the arena of state policymaking matters a lot for school reform and you can't just do everything at the federal level. We needed to connect the conversation in Washington with a coalition of different kinds of groups at the state level—business leaders, civic leaders,

The ERAOs use social media like Twitter and Facebook to regularly inform and mobilize supporters.

Twitter



Facebook



and grassroots constituents.” The 34 organizations in the network operate in 23 states and Washington, D.C. Network members include affiliates of Stand for Children and 50CAN, business groups like the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, the Oklahoma Business and Education Coalition, and Colorado Succeeds, and civic groups like Advance Illinois and the League of Education Voters (Washington). The PIE Network is also supported by five “policy partners,” which span the ideological spectrum but agree on the network’s reform commitments: Center for American Progress, Center on Reinventing Public Education, Education Sector, National Council on Teacher Quality, and Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Like many ERAOs, PIE Network is funded by the big three (Walton, Gates, and Broad) along with the Joyce and Stuart foundations.

The PIE Network facilitates regular communication among its members: it distributes a bimonthly newsletter, hosts a monthly conference call for leaders of its member groups, and convenes two face-to-face meetings each year—one with about 40 participants for group leaders and another larger, invitation-only meeting designed to bring the advocacy group leaders together with policy experts and policymakers. The organization also uses Twitter to act as an information clearinghouse by

retweeting/aggregating all of the posts from its member organizations. Kubach argues that it is extremely difficult for individual state reform organizations to do this work by themselves and that the PIE Network has worked to encourage cross-state collaboration and the “cross-pollination” of reform ideas, and enable the “acceleration of the school reform movement.” One tangible example is that PIE Network members share legislative language for school reform bills (such as to improve teacher evaluation and tenure) that are being pushed in state legislatures, obviating the need for groups to undertake this time-consuming and technical work on their own. Nonetheless, despite the increasing communication among ERAOs, it appears to be too early to speak of them as constituting a coordinated movement, and given some of the challenges and divisions identified below, they may never become one. Indeed, Kubach explained that, at least for the PIE Network, centralized coordination has never been the goal: “There’s a pretty clear understanding across the sector that states are where most of reform policy is made and that local actors concerned about their schools are the most credible voices to lead that change. Our goal is to strengthen those local voices—not to overshadow them with a single-minded, nationally orchestrated campaign.”

ERAO Victories

The ERAO leaders I spoke with praised the Obama administration's Race to the Top (RttT) competitive grant program for creating momentum behind reform at the state level and providing political cover for reformers. Rhee observed that "RttT was a brilliant idea. It really helped us build bipartisan coalitions. Right now Republicans are being more aggressive on education reform than Democrats at the state level, but being able to say that a Democratic president and education secretary were supportive really helped to convince Democrats to do more courageous things." As Steven Brill noted in *Class Warfare* (see "Great Teachers in the Classroom?" *book reviews*, Spring 2012), school reform advocates seized the momentum created by RttT to mobilize and collaborate in advancing their agenda in state legislatures. PIE Network director Kubach observed that it "created urgency, a moment of real comparability across states and pressure to change." ERAOs helped to facilitate state-to-state comparisons and develop legislative agendas by assessing existing state policies against the RttT criteria. They then lobbied state policymakers and created grassroots campaigns to mobilize support.

It is difficult to precisely gauge their impact, but it is clear that ERAOs are having a large—and increasing—influence on education debates at the state and national levels and that their efforts have contributed significantly to the passage of important legislation. Indiana governor Mitch Daniels recently remarked that he has seen a "tectonic shift" on education in states and that "more legislators are free from the iron grip of the education establishment." Hari Sevugen, communications director at StudentsFirst, noted that "what we've lacked and what those fighting for the status quo had was an organized effort that decision makers had in the back of their mind as they put together education policy. That equation was highly imbalanced, but is now changing." StudentsFirst claims to have signed up a million members in its first year and to have helped change 50 different state education policies.

The recent wave of teacher quality reforms offers perhaps the best evidence of ERAO impact, as no area of education reform has been more strongly resisted by the unions. Nearly two-thirds of states have changed their teacher evaluation, tenure, and dismissal policies in the past two years: 23 states now require that standardized test results be factored into teacher evaluations, and 14 allow districts to use these data to dismiss ineffective teachers. While in 2009 no state required student performance to be central to the awarding of tenure, today 8 states do. ERAOs have been hailed for playing a pivotal role in the passage of these new laws, with Stand for Children leading the effort in Colorado and Illinois. Former Illinois board of education chairman Jesse Ruiz said that the group was "an instigator, a catalyst, you might say." In fewer than 100 days, Stand raised about \$3.5 million in the state and used \$600,000 of that to make contributions to seven House and two Senate campaigns. This kind of hardball

political organizing and lobbying has long been employed by the unions to defeat school reform legislation but increasingly is being utilized by the ERAOs to drive change.

Democratic Divides

While the ERAOs emphasize bipartisanship so that they can work effectively with policymakers on both sides of the aisle, the groups confront two very different challenges related to partisan politics. First, the Democratic Party is divided over school reform—particularly on school choice, test-based accountability, and teacher quality. One of the most important and unresolved issues is how the groups will navigate their complicated relationship with civil rights organizations and teachers unions. Teachers unions are a crucial part of the Democratic Party's base and yet have long been resistant to the kinds of reforms the ERAOs are advocating. But the unions themselves are also in flux. Harvard's Susan Moore Johnson has noted the rise of "reform unionism": support for reform is increasing inside the unions, particularly in the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and among younger teachers. This trend has spawned such pro-reform teacher organizations as Teach Plus and Educators 4 Excellence.

Collectively, civil rights groups have assumed an ambiguous and fluid position in the school reform debates, though with major groups at times supportive of elements of the ERAO agenda. As Jesse Rhodes observed in a 2011 article in *Perspectives on Politics*, a number of civil rights groups have "played a central role in developing and promoting standards, testing, accountability, and limited school choice policies in order to achieve what they view as fundamentally egalitarian purposes." Yet these groups have historically been closely aligned politically with the teachers unions and continue to find common ground given the large number of minority teachers, particularly in urban areas. This helps to explain why the NAACP sided with the unions against school closures and charter school expansion in New York City and Newark, for example, even as the group supports the ERAOs' call for closing achievement gaps. There is also a major generational and racial gap between the leaders of groups like the NAACP and ERAO leaders, who are an overwhelmingly young, elite-schooled, and "white" bunch and as such are often viewed skeptically by people of color. Figuring out how to create state-level alliances with civil rights groups and mobilize urban communities—which are disproportionately minority and poor—remains an ongoing challenge.

The Need for a "RFER"

The second challenge is preserving over time the fairly broad bipartisan consensus on the ERAO agenda. As DFER's Williams observed, "There are times where we agree with



Joe Williams, executive director of Democrats for Education Reform

“There are times where we agree with Republicans, but also plenty of times where we disagree—especially at the federal level and about funding.”

Republicans, but also plenty of times where we disagree—especially at the federal level and about funding.” While ERAOs generally support an active role for the federal government in promoting school reform and accountability, the rise of the Tea Party has highlighted how many conservatives continue to oppose such activism. And while ERAOs have led the charge to reform teacher evaluation and tenure policies, they have generally opposed more fundamental changes to collective bargaining pushed by Republican governors in places like Wisconsin. Similarly, while many Democrats (as well as many of the ERAOs) support the expansion of charter schools and school choice, there is much greater ambivalence over the school voucher proposals that Republicans are pushing in many states.

The creation of DFER has shifted the politics of education inside of the Democratic Party and provided cover for reform-minded Democrats in Congress and state capitols from the more liberal, union-friendly base. But a Republican counterpart to DFER—which insiders jokingly refer to as ReeFER—has yet to emerge. The Foundation for Excellence in Education (FEE) serves that role to an extent, but it does not currently lobby or make political contributions. FEE was started by former governor Jeb Bush to help spread the accountability reforms he enacted during his time in office and has been very active in the South and West. The organization

hosts an influential summit every year for state policy-makers and also sponsors Chiefs for Change, current and former state education superintendents who advocate for school reform. FEE has concentrated its work on six states (Florida, Indiana, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Louisiana, and Arizona) but is active in more than 20.

Winning Battles or the War?

Over the past two years, ERAOs have shown that they can mobilize quickly and effectively on behalf of reform. But as FEE’s Patricia Levesque warns, education reform is a long-term endeavor where “success is incremental” and “progress can be torn down quickly if momentum is stopped.”

The recent struggles of the winning Race to the Top states have demonstrated that ensuring that policy reforms are implemented effectively on the ground and sustained over time is crucial, though less “sexy” than winning legislative victories. Major policy victories can quickly be undone by a new governor or legislature or undermined during the rule-making process, what Levesque called “death by a thousand cuts.” Battles over implementation occur in different venues (state boards, task forces, and education agencies), are more technical and less visible, and demand different tactics than legislative fights. ERAOs’ roles must include technical assistance, reporting, and watchdog vis-à-vis state education agencies.

To date, ERAOs have focused on states they consider hospitable to their efforts. There are important limitations to this approach, as it leaves many states unserved; 27 states, for example, are not represented on PIE Network’s membership list. Indeed, this strategy may actually ensure that states *most* in need of reform advocacy (and perhaps with the worst-performing school systems) will be ignored. The hope among ERAOs is that laggard states will feel pressure to follow reform-oriented states, but there is no guarantee that this will happen. It is also important to keep in mind how new the ERAOs are and how small their staffs are, often just a handful of folks. Sevugen at StudentsFirst

remarked that despite ambitious goals, the group is essentially a “start-up” and that “we are trying to fly the plane while we build it.” Clearly, to be successful over the long haul, ERAOs will need to better coordinate their efforts within and across states. Rhee is optimistic on this front, noting that “more critical masses of reform-oriented folks are being built up, and I’m seeing more leaders of education reform organizations saying ‘we need to figure out how we can align our efforts in a more effective and efficient way than in the past.’ It’s not going to happen overnight, but I’m very hopeful that it will happen in the next two to three years.”

Though the groups are still young, the “reform blob” is providing a counterweight to the teachers unions in school reform debates at the state level. The ability of the ERAOs to overcome the unions should not be overestimated, however. The unions’ extensive resources—and large staff—enable them to be present everywhere, and it is unclear whether the ERAOs will be able to match their efforts in every venue. Kubach commented that “in California, there are reform groups like EdVoice, California Business for Education Excellence, and the Education Trust West that among them have maybe 25 employees working in rented office suites. The number of employees working for the teachers unions and administrators associations is much, much larger, and they all own multi-story buildings near the capital. [Even with] StudentsFirst there, that doesn’t come close to tipping the scales. The suggestion that the reform movement is the ‘big money game’ in any state capital is simply laughable.”

Still, the unprecedented state school reform activity of recent years—and, in particular, the enactment of a large number of teacher quality and school choice bills—testifies to the role these groups are playing in mobilizing political support behind reforms that even five years ago faced long odds. Several ERAO leaders recalled how few reform organizations there were, and

how few local or state politicians were willing to take up the mantle of reform. Today, it is clear that a new club of reform organizations is itching for a fight and that politicians in both parties are increasingly willing to join them in the ring.

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ERAOs by the Numbers

Democrats for Education Reform

Started in: 2007 **Staff:** 30 **Annual Budget:** \$8 million

Location: Headquartered in NYC. Ten state chapters in California, Colorado, Indiana, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, Washington, and Wisconsin.

Foundation for Excellence in Education

Started in: 2008 **Staff:** 20 **Annual Budget:** \$8 million

Location: Headquartered in Tallahassee, Florida. Reports chapters in 20 states, focuses on Florida, Indiana, Oklahoma, Arizona, Louisiana, and New Mexico.

Advance Illinois

Started in: 2008 **Staff:** 10 **Annual Budget:** \$1.2 million

Location: Offices in Chicago and Springfield.

Stand for Children

Started in: 1996 **Staff:** 120 **Annual Budget:** \$15 million

Location: Headquartered in Portland, Oregon. State affiliates in Massachusetts, Tennessee, Illinois, Indiana, Texas, Colorado, Arizona, Oregon, and Washington.

50CAN

Started in: 2011 (emerged from ConnCAN, which started in 2005)

Staff: 29 **Annual Budget:** \$8 million (2012)

Location: Headquartered in NYC, with branches in Rhode Island, Minnesota, New York, and Maryland. Plans to enter three more states in 2012.

StudentsFirst

Started in: December 2010 **Staff:** more than 50

Annual Budget: not available

Location: Headquartered in Sacramento, California. Reports activity in 7 states, with plans to add up to 16 more in 2012.

SOURCE: Author