Building Upon Uneven Common Ground: Coming to Consensus in Michigan's Education Reform Landscape

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INTRODUCTION

Many individuals and groups claim stakes in Michigan's education system, from the students themselves and their families, to educator associations, legislators, and partisan think tanks. All public education stakeholder groups seek a high quality education for students, but they often disagree on the means to achieve it or even how it may appear. They have identified major issues facing Michigan's educational systems today -- the teacher evaluation process, the schools of choice debate, accountability for charter and traditional public schools, the design and impact of standardized tests, transition to and validity of the Common Core State Standards, the influence of unions and teacher collective bargaining rights, among others -- that impact what and how children learn. The dilemma for broad-based education reform initiatives, and what is currently absent in policy discussions, is a common, unified voice made up of these diverse factions; that is, the voices of the individuals and groups who genuinely desire to improve education in Michigan and are willing to collectively push for reform. The question that remains, then, is how do groups move from places of splintered interests to the more ambitious goal of working collectively toward clear objectives that will positively impact education policy?

Coming to consensus -- which we define as the group decision making process that seeks agreement by most of the parties involved -- is a complex task, considering how many different and often divisive facets of education reform are in play at any given time. In December 2014,

for example, the Michigan Education Association's "bill tracker" listed three bills pending in the Michigan House related to collective bargaining and union rights; 30 bills pertaining to education policy issues, such as charter school accountability, emergency management of failing schools, and minimum required test scores for promotion past third grade; 10 bills related to wages, benefits, and/or retirement in the public school system; and 12 bills centered on budgets for statewide education. The people who try to influence the voting on these bills are students, teachers, parents, administrators, business owners, philanthropists, and lobbyists; their perspectives and opinions are as varied as their understandings of how public education works and what is needed to better serve Michigan's 1.6 million students.

To find areas of common ground in Michigan's education reform landscape, we studied the process involved in uniting coalitions to better understand the supports and barriers related to reaching consensus. We asked, "In what ways do educational stakeholders approach consensus building around policy reform efforts?" and "What factors constrain educational organizations from reaching consensus or, conversely, support them to reach consensus on reform strategies or outcomes?" Our data collection and analysis centered on two primary sources: interviews of more than 20 influential players in Michigan's education system who are representatives of important groups in the state, and observations of consensus-building meetings.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Our question about how consensus is approached in education reform was answered in ways both expected and surprising. We found that some people and groups approach consensus deliberately and inclusively, taking the time and effort to bring the right people to the table and to develop solutions that have good chances of success. On the flip side, we found that others

engage in intentional non-consensus (or, purposeful avoidance of consensus or compromise as a tactical strategy), sometimes blocking initiatives that have broad support by people who don't share their beliefs. Building consensus or purposely avoiding it are considered strategies that must be planned and carefully implemented. Generally, consensus doesn't happen by accident; rather, it is something that is approached with deliberation, shared goals, strong leadership, and even stronger relationships among and between groups and individuals.

We found that factors like an organization's goals or the money spent on initiatives can be supportive of the consensus process, can be barriers of the process, or they can be both supportive and prohibitive, depending on the situation. We found that the consensus process itself and the intentionality surrounding it were viewed as important for consensus building, whereas money was not as significant an area on which to focus for our participants. When specifically asked about barriers, the conflicting goals of individuals and organizations became the primary topic of conversation as factors that slowed down the process of consensus building.

When groups rally around a common cause and come to consensus about how to solve a problem, they cooperate with others who have overlapping interests without losing sight of their own. Coalitions emerge when an alliance of like-minded people need to address a large-scale issue that is more likely to be solved when many voices are needed to get the point across to policy makers.

Consensus Sound Bites From Interviews…

"Everybody was included and that's what made it work."

"Relationships are built so proactive conversations can take place."

"We prefer the all happy, not the partially happy."

"We have to assume that people are going to come to the table with vastly different opinions, and that to reach consensus we're not going to get to convince everyone in the group that our position or opinion is right and the only way."

"Getting into real stories, carefully chosen, tends (to lead) toward much more consensus than staking out sides."

All in all, building consensus in education reform is difficult, especially when so many people have divergent views of what's best for the education system. Through interviews of stakeholders and observations of a working advocacy coalition, we were able to demonstrate that there are education reform issues that people believe are necessary to change Michigan's education system. Some areas of common ground, such as school funding, are contentious and will require much time and intentionality to gain broad support, but other issues like dual enrollment and early childhood programming are less controversial and more likely to move quickly through an intentional consensus building process toward policy action. We learned that a coalition of diverse stakeholders will find more success in reforming education if it takes the time and effort to find good leadership, plan thoughtfully, invite a cross-section of people to the negotiation table, communicate with one another, and be guided by common beliefs.

AN EXAMPLE OF SUCCESSFUL CONSENSUS BUILDING

More than half of our interviewees described the same example of successful consensus building, which began in 2011 when Public Act 102 established the Michigan Council for Educator Effectiveness (MCEE). The MCEE was a temporary group of six main council members, appointed by the state legislature, that was charged with identifying and recommending state evaluation tools for teachers and school administrators, a student growth and assessment tool, and changes to the teaching certificate requirements. The council did a thorough job of searching for answers; it commissioned a pilot study of evaluation tools, consulted with experts, examined research, talked to practicing educators, and opened meetings to the public.

The MCEE invited people from all walks of life - including legislators from opposite sides of the aisle, union representatives, teachers, administrators, among others - to weigh in on the topic of educator evaluation. Each organization had its own unique goals, but their desire to collectively come up with a solution to the problem of monitoring educator quality sustained their involvement in the process. Also, the relationships within the group were healthy enough to survive disagreements; people were still welcomed back to the table after voicing dissenting opinions. In this example, everyone was mostly on the same page, and the relationships within the coalition held everyone together.

> *"I think a big part of it was just people wanted to be heard, they wanted to have some acknowledgement that their concerns were valid and even though they didn't get everything they wanted, I think that was the key to really getting [a traditionally uncooperative organization] on board. Everybody was pretty shocked [the organization] had stayed supportive of this legislation throughout."*
> - Study Participant

The council's efforts resulted in recommendations in 2013 that were universally accepted by diverse groups such as unions, administrator organization, teachers, and legislators. However, their recommendations, as written, stalled out in the legislature because a small faction opposed them after receiving political pressure from supporters. Nevertheless, the process itself and the resulting recommendations are widely heralded as a shining moment in Michigan education reform history, as a broad range of very different people and organizations built consensus around a contentious issue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the data we have gathered and the conclusions we have reached, we are making two policy-related recommendations. These represent our translation of our work into actionable items that we believe can alter the landscape of Michigan's education system. Both recommendations spin off of consensus building activities that were deemed successful.

#1: Rebuild the MCEE coalition and try again.

Over and over again we heard that there was broad consensus around teacher evaluation systems, but it fell apart at the end. The reasons people offered for this phenomenon varied in our interviews, but many felt like there was room to move on this important area. Our recommendation, then, is to rebuild the coalition and see it through to the end because the issue of educator effectiveness is still a hot topic in education reform. The relationships between the MCEE participants and the problem of how to evaluate educators still exists, as our interviews showed. Leadership needs to emerge, though, and participants need to get back on board.

#2: Build a coalition to create a new funding system for Michigan.

Proposal A was identified as another area around which consensus among diverse stakeholders was successfully built. Since the passage of Proposal A in 1994, Michigan's per pupil funding follows the student from district to district, be it of the traditional, online, or charter environment. Proposal A represented an effort to rectify inequities in school operational funding, and, in the past, it managed to keep disparities between the "haves" and the "have-nots" from getting too large. However, Proposal A did not address the significant disparities on local operating costs, which are still tied to property wealth and becoming increasingly evident as school facilities and infrastructure vary significantly across the state.

> *"There is something about being on a team that when you're pulling together for a common good. There are disagreements within that team, but because people are united in trying to do something, it helps momentum to arrive at some point of solution."*
> - Study Participant

In our study, school funding was mentioned more often than any other reform issue; however, it was also identified as the least likely to be at the root of a consensus building process. Because Michigan's economy is currently struggling, and because so many of its districts are facing financial crises, it is time to rethink how we fund our schools. Reformers should use the knowledge of the consensus building process discussed in this brief; they should carefully create a coalition of committed organizations that is strong enough to withstand the pressures of time, conflicting goals, philosophical differences, and other barriers.

CONCLUSION

Based on our conversations with influential education stakeholders, we learned that they believe success in building consensus will happen if their coalitions deliberately structure the process of finding common ground and push for solutions to common problems. They have to take the time and effort to

> *"You have to be really deliberate in order to build consensus, and you have to think educationally about it. To me, it's like a process of learning, like who needs to learn what."*
> - Study Participant

find and cultivate good leadership, plan thoughtfully, invite a diverse group of people to participate, communicate with one another, and be guided by common beliefs. It may seem impossible to form a group like this, given term limits, partisanship, and a general lack of confidence in the ability to build consensus around tough issues, but the reformers we interviewed spoke to the necessity of pulling groups together and persevering toward common goals in order to ensure that all Michigan students receive the education they deserve.