

***The Redesign of Urban School Systems:
Case Studies in District Governance.***
Donald McAdams and Dan Katzir, Editors
Harvard Education Press, 2013. 355 pp.

Review by Tom Szczesny
University of Pennsylvania
Graduate School of Education

The *Redesign of Urban School Systems: Case Studies in District Governance*, a volume edited by Donald McAdams and Dan Katzir, presents twelve case studies that “show the emergence of major reform strategies district leaders have developed and attempted to implement” (p. 1). The editors picked the cases because each employs one of their five theories of action for change. The cases also help McAdams and Katzir achieve their goal of illustrating for school leaders the difficulties of enacting reform within the context of urban districts where competing interests often complicate the process. Accountability with autonomy, aligned instructional systems, contracts with instructional providers, and the diverse provider model are all offered as reform paradigms for urban districts (p. 6-7). These reform strategies will be recognizable to many who have studied the School District of Philadelphia. In fact, two cases focus on Philadelphia, although other urban districts beyond those examined in the book have experienced the reforms discussed.

According to some, the similarity of reforms across urban districts is not an accident, nor are they welcome. This group of critical and frequently resistant activists, represented locally by TAG Philadelphia and often associated with education scholar Diane Ravitch, traces the existence and perpetuation of certain reform elements, such as the emergence of the diverse provider model, to a

particular faction within the education reform debate. *The Redesign of Urban School Systems* is literally that faction’s textbook.

In their introduction, McAdams and Katzir disclose that the book developed as a result of trainings that occurred at the Center for Reform of School Systems (CRSS) and that The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation is the primary funder of both CRSS and the case studies (p. 2). Depending on one’s perspective, The Broad Foundation has been either a tremendous boon to public school systems or a destructive force in them. The foundation endorses the styles of reform mentioned previously and runs a Superintendent Academy whose graduates frequently adopt them. A growing number of academy graduates have taken charge of districts around the country, including Dr. William Hite in Philadelphia, and many of them have found themselves mired in controversy soon after their appointments. Critics of the reform movement may therefore be skeptical of the authors’ ability to reflect without bias on the various redesigns represented in this volume.

The case studies in *The Redesign of Urban School Systems* often revolve around controversies, a useful context for advancing the editors’ goal of illuminating challenges in the education reform process. It also follows from the reasonable claim the editors make in their introduction that “the

interaction of boards of education with their superintendents and the communities they represent is the fulcrum on which district-wide reform efforts rest” (p. 1). However, the cases fail to treat both sides of that fulcrum equally. While the views of the superintendents enacting reforms are fully explicated, community members’ voices are minimized and the reasons for their objections to those reforms are often excluded. With the community given limited representation, it is hard to ascertain the true nature of the dynamics McAdams and Katzir seek to illustrate.

The second case study on Philadelphia is an example of the book’s tendency toward selective portrayals of reforms. The narrative begins with an overview of the District’s leadership changes since 2000 and concludes with an examination of Arlene Ackerman’s tenure, herself a Broad Academy graduate. First introduced in 2009, Ackerman’s *Imagine 2014* plan initiated the turnaround process for designated Renaissance Schools and Promise Academies. The description of these efforts is telling.

Critics of Broad’s favored reforms note that supporters of them often disregard data or elide information that does not fit their narrative. Word choice within this book reveals the way that narrative can be constructed. The language is not entirely objective. For example, Philadelphia is described as having “three brilliant superintendents in a row” (p. 202). This unflinching positivity potentially undermines the credibility of the text because appraisals of David Hornbeck, Paul Vallas, or Arlene Ackerman—to which the aforementioned comment refers—rarely reached such a glowing consensus. Furthermore, Ackerman

receives plaudits for high levels of community engagement during the creation of the *Imagine 2014* plan (p. 216). However, it is never mentioned that much of this engagement involved negative reactions from people who viewed her plans as confusing and lacking transparency. Later, it is stated as fact that “The Promise Academies inspired even more enthusiasm [compared to Renaissance Schools]” (p. 221). While Ackerman’s enthusiasm for the Promise Academies was unequivocal, the teachers and communities affected by the reconstitution of those schools were rarely so effusive.

The act of ignoring certain perspectives in the case studies is a constant. The book marginalizes the valid concerns of community members, teachers, and others who object to its reform framework. Diction and evidence seem purposefully selected to present the reforms discussed as effective despite the fact that their outcomes are rarely analyzed in the cases. In this telling, the problem lies not with the reforms themselves but with the people who oppose them. Instead of constructive engagement with the reasons for widespread opposition, though, the book vilifies those raising it. The book’s treatment of teachers unions demonstrates these shortcomings. Unions are demonized, such as when the editors assert, “In none of more than fifty case studies researched and written by CRSS does the teachers union provide leadership in designing, implementing, or supporting dramatic reforms to improve student achievement” (p. 325). The disdain for unions enables the dismissal of their perspective.

The Redesign of Urban School Systems frames cases in order to reinforce the message that people and politics, not the policies themselves, are the major impediments to

reform. There is little consideration of the fact that some view the reform policies discussed in the book as ineffective. As individuals enacting change amidst that debate, school leaders must be able to weigh the evidence both sides present. Unfortunately, the book does not offer a critical examination of the effects of the reform policies being implemented or a full accounting of the objections to those policies. The book's utility is restricted by this limited consideration of reasons for opposition or causes of its existence. The cases provide some historical context that informs the reader how previous events shaped present conditions in large systems, like Philadelphia, but they offer little additional insight into the complexity of challenges still facing these districts. Critics of Broad's style of reform still might find the volume useful, however, since being cognizant of your opposition's reasoning can be advantageous during a debate.