

Book Review

American School Reform: What Works, What Fails, and Why.
By Joseph P. McDonald and the Cities and Schools Research
Group. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2014. 199 pp.

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“School reform movements are destined for collapse.”

This bold premise, and its implications, underlie *American School Reform: What Works, What Fails, and Why*, authored by Joseph P. McDonald and the Cities and Schools Research Group. This professional learning community has been studying large-scale, big-city school reform for over two decades with a grant from the Annenberg Foundation, and presents its findings in this 208-page book. Through case histories of Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and the San Francisco Bay Area, they present a lifecycle model of how school reform movements are born, live, and eventually die to make way for new reform efforts. This lifecycle approach brings unique insight to the field, as many reformers move into movements with a superhero vision and may be unprepared for challenges. However, the authors’ limited focus on financial and political factors shows an unfortunate, yet typical level of remove between policy and implementation. By treating all reform initiatives as essentially interchangeable and not considering (or sometimes even mentioning) the pedagogy, curriculum, community, or expectations of educators who implement the policies, they neglect factors that may shed significant light on why some major policy reforms fail while others succeed.

The authors present a “theory of action space,” which occurs “when especially talented people manage to assemble exceptional capacity for making the real conditions of schooling *actionable*” (p. 8, emphasis original). Action space depends on three resources: *professional capacity* in the form of experienced and passionate educators, leaders, and reformers; *civic capacity* in the form of people with elite and grassroots powers of connection and persuasion, as well as partnerships with organizations; and *money* beyond the levels of ordinary spending to “boost these ordinary operations into a different orbit” (p. 9). These action spaces are viewed as transient, temporarily resilient to a number of stressors, but ultimately bound to collapse as professional capacity, civic capacity, or money are removed from the equation. The major contribution of this volume is to “insist, however, that that such collapse is not tragic. What is tragic is a failure to learn from past experience” (p. 9). This insistence on the inevitability of collapse may be of some consolation to readers who have put their hope into the exciting birth of a reform movement, only to see it lose momentum and eventually fizzle out, or those who are jaded from seeing this cycle repeated every few years. However, the insistence that these three factors are the most important may be missing the trees for the forest.

For example, the authors present a resource that they call *connections*, which is not, as one might expect, about collaboration, but rather about avoiding “reformer amnesia” (p. 9). The authors advise that reformers who have survived the rise and decline of past reform movements should share their knowledge, either by personally participating in later reform efforts, or through official reports and data. “Such learning may come too late...to serve a particular action space” (p. 24), the authors explain. They continue, “this is inevitable, our theory holds, but not disastrous because of the connections left behind.” Implicit in their description of *connections* is the belief that knowledge comes from superintendents, recognized leaders, and grant-funded research organizations, rather than from teachers, principals, and other on-the-ground resources (except through their contribution to data collection). Also unexamined is whether there is any data available early in a reform effort that might help reformers improve it at each stage rather than waiting for it to inevitably die so they can start again.

As the authors dive into case studies of action spaces in Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and the San Francisco Bay Area from the mid-1990s to present, it is worth considering the information that they both include and ignore. The authors provide a bird’s-eye-view of changes in the urban educational context—superintendents and mayors who come and go, control shifting from the schools to the central office or the reverse, foundations investing millions of dollars in large-scale but ephemeral initiatives, and paradigmatic changes in educational thinking, such as data-driven instruction, Common Core Standards, or the belief that business principles should guide school improvement. The authors swoop in occasionally on select examples, like how the Annenberg Challenge led Bay Area schools to adopt models from Xerox to create cross-school networks for knowledge sharing, continuous inquiry, and evidence-based practice. However, the theoretical basis of the reforms, and the tools used to enact them, are conspicuously absent.

The authors compare the role of reformers to that of the Hindu god Shiva, “a dancer whose continuous dancing within a ring of fire simultaneously burns down the world and recreates it from the ashes” (p. 150). Of the four districts analyzed, only New York approached this cyclicism, as action spaces matched funding to organizations and partnerships, which in turn renamed and reinvented themselves, functioning in new ways in the next action space. New York not only used its series of disruptive action spaces to shake off antiquated and cumbersome bureaucratic structures, but it also built on past successes to create more schools modeled after successful schools while leaving alone those that were doing well. The Philadelphia narrative, the most dismal of the four, follows two action spaces that both tried to do too much too fast. These spaces were created, faltered, and collapsed as a result of insufficient finances and political churn. The other two districts lie somewhere in between, making some connections across collapsing action spaces, but also obscuring valuable understandings and human capital, not to mention momentum.

Using the “theory of action space,” the macro-level reasons New York’s reform initiatives have been the most successful are that this district has been able to maintain professional capacity, civic capacity, and money in each of its successive action spaces, and that it has built on its *connections* (defined as learning from past triumphs and mistakes). Philadelphia, meanwhile, lacked professional and civic capacities at many points and money throughout, so it is now resigned to sitting and waiting for the next action space to come sweeping through, hopefully

with more success. However, the book does not question *why* New York was able to maintain those three resources despite stressors that dismantled even the motivation for new action spaces in the other three urban areas. Perhaps the answer lies in the *content* and *vision* of the reform movements, in moving beyond treating their differences as interesting but interchangeable.

Is it possible that New York's decision to try multiple strategies at just a few small schools and then replicate those that were successful over a long time frame kept up its momentum through many disruptive action spaces? Could New York's overall vision of empowering teachers in a vast array of school types or increasing principals' control over their curricula and budgets be related to its success? Is it possible that Philadelphia's top-down practices of investing in charter schools at the expense of local schools and mandating scripted curriculum for low-performing schools is in fact at the heart of its inability to recruit and maintain civic and professional capacity? To use the language of the action space framework, is it possible that New York, unlike Philadelphia, was able to build professional and civic capacity to match its money because New York's vision was more aligned with and respectful of key stakeholders? These are questions that the Cities and Schools Research Group might have the data to answer, but that they do not seem to have asked. Even these only scratch the surface, as critical readers begin to delve into curricular choices, professional development and coaching models, expectations of educator expertise, and many of the other factors that might influence outcomes.

Moreover, it is worth investigating further why Chicago's efforts over several action spaces have had no impact on student outcomes based on any metric the district considered meaningful. The district successfully amassed civic and professional capacity as well as money, but its allocation of these resources failed to increase graduation rates, achievement on standardized tests, or performance by minority groups, even in the eighteen "breakthrough schools" that received more financial and human resources (p. 100). While this might seem like a dismal failure, the authors brush it off as a learning opportunity and turn their eyes to the creation of the Chicago Consortium on School Research, one of the first organizations to deeply study the relationships between student/school success, and a myriad of factors that are briefly summarized without further elaboration. The fact that the reform efforts did not help students might, perhaps, be a more valid reason for their collapse than loss of funding or leadership churn. Conversely, one could ask if the causality could be reversed--if funding was cut or leadership changed because the reform efforts were unsuccessful, rather than vice versa.

The idea of implementing action spaces with the full knowledge that they will one day collapse is a significant contribution to the field, as is the value of connecting to and learning from past victories and failures. However, for educators, activists, and researchers, this book may be more valuable for gaining insight into how upper-level district administrators and policy makers may plunge into reform efforts without considering the content of such reforms or including the reactions and expertise of educators who will be implementing them.

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