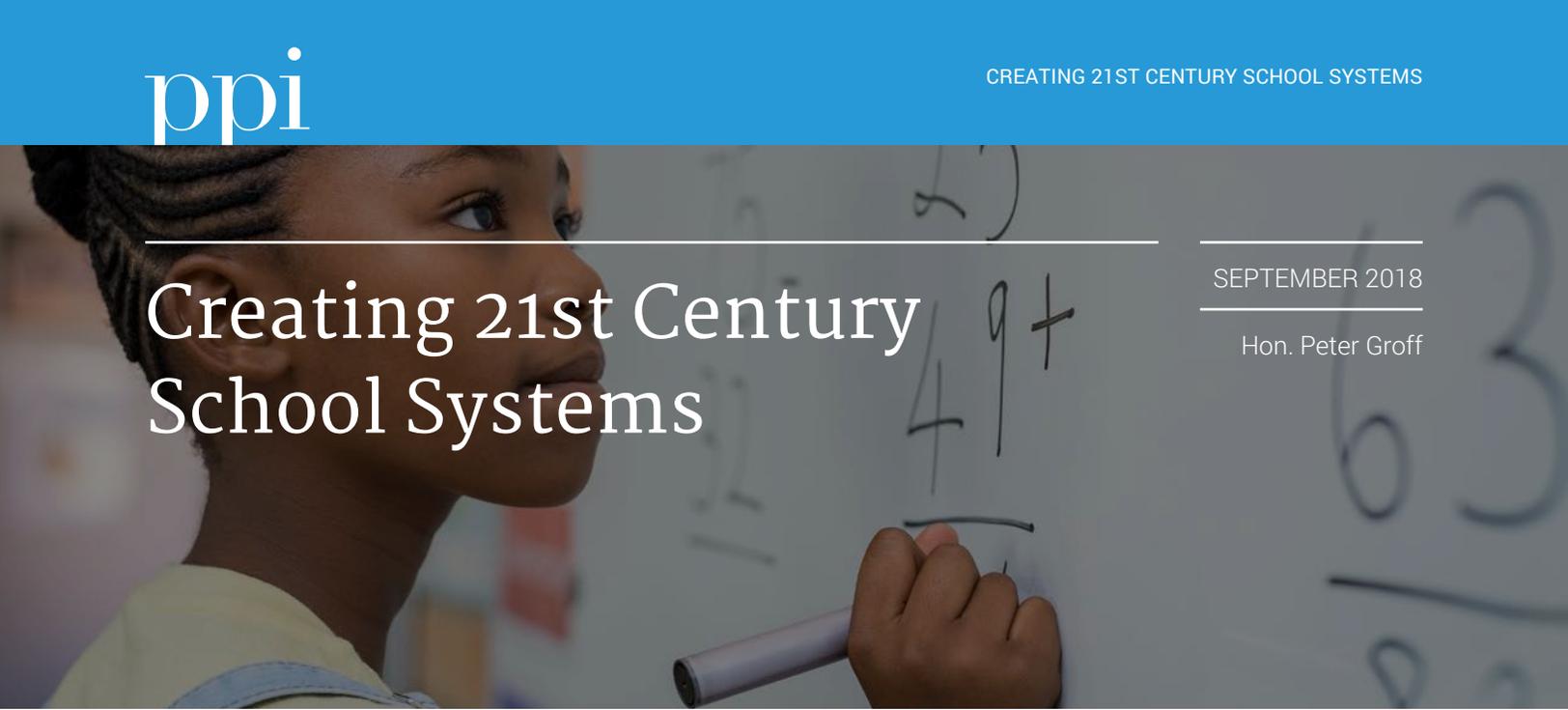

The Progressive Choice

Creating 21st Century
School Systems

Hon. Peter Groff
September 2018





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SEPTEMBER 2018

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INTRODUCTION

Progressives have long understood that access to a quality education is the one factor that consistently and permanently changes the trajectory of a life. As such, creating a strong public school system has been at the epicenter of our decades-long struggle to promote equal rights and equal opportunity for all.

For many of America's families of color, a public school education has historically been the path to the middle class. Unfortunately, America's public education system is stagnant. Scores on the most widely respected test, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), have been flat for a decade.¹ Without transformation, our school districts will be unable to prepare students for the demands of the future, and our kids won't be productive in tomorrow's global workforce. As President Barack Obama said, "In a global economy, where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity – it is a prerequisite."²

It's a prerequisite we're not close to attaining. America's public education system continues to function like one designed for the industrial era. While other industries have adapted to the Information Age and the global marketplace, most of America's school districts remain trapped in a structural model of centralized decision making and top-down bureaucracy.

Too many still operate on the principle that equity means providing all children with the same educational experience. That's problematic, because children are not all the same: they learn differently; they come from different backgrounds; they speak different languages; and they have different interests and experiences.

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When districts fail to adapt to the modern era, they fail our nation's children.

Progressive public servants, long the policy guardians of our nation's children, need to support the transformation of our public school systems into 21st century systems. As the late Texas Congresswoman Barbara Jordan once told her colleagues:

We are a party of innovation. We do not reject our traditions, but we are willing to adapt to changing circumstances, when change we must. We are willing to suffer the discomfort of change in order to achieve a better future. We have a positive vision of the future founded on the belief that the gap between the promise and reality of America can one day be finally closed.³

In cities across America, progressive elected officials have accepted this "discomfort of change" so children can experience the reality of a better future. These innovative leaders

are embracing four pillars of education reform that have been a part of the progressive model since 1991.

01
School-level autonomy



02
Accountability for results



03
Diversity of school designs



04
Public school choice



In essence, 21st century systems embrace the traditional idea of public school but allow for flexibility and innovation, so teachers can create learning environments that fit the unique needs of their students.

THE FOUR PILLARS OF A 21ST CENTURY SCHOOL SYSTEM

Because 21st century school systems are decentralized, they can be more creative and effective in adapting to fit the needs of different communities and students. A 21st century school system is built on four pillars:

1. School Autonomy

School systems for the 21st century transfer authority over operational decisions at schools – but not district-wide policy – to those who run schools. School leaders have autonomy to choose, among other things, their educational models, staffs, budgets, curricula, and school calendars. Top-down mandates by central district offices often hamstring principals and teachers, undermining their ability to educate and sometimes driving them out of public education. School-level decision making allows for innovation and problem solving. The people who work at the schools best understand the needs of their students. When they have authority over the school-level decisions, they can positively impact student learning.

At many 21st century schools, teachers not only have significant autonomy over their classrooms, but they also participate in shaping school priorities and culture. Nine out of 10 Americans believe teachers should have more authority in school-level decision making.⁴ Twenty-first century schools help professionalize teaching by involving teachers in decisions that directly impact their students and putting some of them in leadership positions, to coach other teachers. While we need to increase the compensation of our teachers for the valuable work they do, we also have to increase their authority. Many teachers do not leave the profession because of pay; they leave because they do not feel as though they are treated like

professionals.⁵ Indeed, Gallup has found, over the years, that teachers are the least likely of 12 professions surveyed to agree that “my opinion seems to matter at work.”⁶ We need to find the best and brightest teachers for our classrooms, pay them well, *and* give them more authority within their schools, so we can keep them.

2. Accountability for Performance

Since both school leaders and teachers have control over the decisions that directly affect student learning, they should be held accountable for student achievement. Seventy-four percent of Democratic voters of color agree that “holding schools accountable for making decisions based on what works to educate kids” is a very important priority.⁷

The best example of this accountability is charter schools, which operate on performance contracts with an authorizer. The authorizer – usually the local school board, a statewide board, or a university – vets applications and then approves the formation of a school. The school receives a contract, usually for about five years, which lays out performance metrics it must meet. If a school fails to meet these goals, the authorizers may close the school – and often replace it with a stronger operator. (In some states many authorizers fail to fulfill this responsibility, and the quality of their charter sectors suffers as a result.) If a school does well, authorizers not only extend its contract but may also ask it to open another campus.

Because of this process – weeding out poor applicants, replacing failing schools with stronger operators, and replicating successful schools – 21st century school systems continuously improve, creating more quality options for parents and students.

3. Diversity of School Design

As we argued above, different children thrive in different educational environments. Hence, 21st century systems offer a variety of learning models – dual-language, Montessori, project-based, internship-heavy, blended-learning, Waldorf, arts-focused, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), and many more – to meet the needs and interests of all students.

Having a variety of models allows students to find a school with a curriculum and culture that best fits their needs as individual learners. Student and parent buy-in is much greater when families have a choice in the type of school their children attend.

Since the school no longer looks and functions like a cookie-cutter industrial model, these innovative schools can also attract staff who are passionate about and dedicated to the school's pedagogical philosophy, curriculum, and culture.

4. Public School Choice

It makes no sense to force a child to go to a Montessori school, or a STEM school, or an arts-focused school. If we want different educational environments for different children, we must give their families a choice.

On top of that, attendance zones limited to one or two neighborhoods inherently disadvantage our nation's most impoverished students, often forcing them into chronically underperforming schools. Only 27 percent of millennials believe a student's home address should determine where they go to school – another sign that progressives support public school choice.⁸ Furthermore, 86 percent of African-American Democratic voters, 67 percent of Latino Democratic voters, and 65 percent of all voters agree that

“ensuring parents have a variety of public school options for their kids – including charter schools, magnet schools, and career academies – no matter where they live or how much money they have” is a very important priority.⁹

Systems of public school choice allow for all students to have an opportunity to attend a “best-fit school.” Unlike selective magnet schools in traditional school districts, charter schools cannot have admissions criteria; they must accept all students who apply. If too many students apply, the schools hold a lottery to see who gets in.

The most progressive 21st century school systems use a universal enrollment system for the entire district: Parents rank their top choice schools on one application, which is then entered into a district-wide lottery. This system is often adapted for the needs of different communities. For instance, in communities that value a neighborhood school, some schools reserve a percentage of seats for neighborhood children. Other schools reserve a percentage of seats for economically disadvantaged students, to create socio-economically and racially integrated learning environments.

Because parents have choices and can send their children to a different school, systems of choice create a second layer of accountability for schools. If too many parents pull their children out of a school, it may be forced to close. Because tax dollars follow the students, parents have more leverage in making sure the needs of their children are being met. And the competition between schools spurs them to innovate and improve, to attract more students.

Policy change – especially innovative policy change – often happens slowly. But today, the challenge of transforming our public schools is urgent. Much of our progressive base shares this urgency, because they understand the profound impact education can have on the trajectory of a child's life – for better or for worse.

A 2018 poll conducted by Democrats for Education Reform revealed that 99 percent of African-American voters and 93 percent of Democratic primary voters strongly agreed that “we need to do everything we can to ensure every child has a fair shot to succeed, no matter where they're from.” Almost two-thirds of African-American voters believed that “public schools aren't changing fast enough, leaving our students unprepared for the challenges ahead.” On a similar note, 53 percent of voters of color agreed that “we need to keep finding new ways to improve the things that aren't working in schools today,” while 67 percent believed that, without new ideas and new ways for improving schools, more funding alone cannot fix the problems in public schools.¹⁰

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In a 2015 Phi Delta Kappan poll, 64 percent of Americans surveyed favored the idea of charter schools.¹¹ In a 2016 survey by Ed Choice and the American Association for Public Opinion Research, 59 percent viewed public charters favorably. That percentage was even higher among black (74 percent) and Hispanic

(64 percent) respondents.¹²

A 2017 study revealed that millennials, the generation having the most children today, also support charters.¹³ That support is especially high among African Americans and Hispanic millennials, who are the most consistent and reliable part of the progressive base.¹⁴ Among all millennials, 63 percent of those who supported public charters agreed that traditional public schools were stuck in an outdated model and that charter schools could be more creative and effective in how they taught students.¹⁵

Cities that have embraced the four core components of 21st century strategy have dramatically increased educational equity, benefiting America's most disadvantaged children.¹⁶ In New Orleans, where progressive Governor Kathleen Blanco and progressive U.S. Senator Mary Landrieu led the charge on reforms that eventually converted all but two public schools to charters, half of all public school students dropped out before Hurricane Katrina. A decade later, 76 percent graduated high school within five years, a point above the state average. Before Katrina, 60 percent of the public school students attended the lowest performing schools in the state; by 2017, that number was down to 11 percent.¹⁷

In Washington, D.C., where the Clinton administration and Senator Ted Kennedy supported a bill creating a Public Charter School Board, 47 percent of students attended charters last year. Charter students have much higher test scores than district students in D.C.'s poorest wards. The charter sector's graduation rate was 73.4 percent in 2017, far higher than the district's, and 98.5 percent of charter graduates were accepted into four-year universities, also far higher than the district's rate.

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In Denver, where 21 percent of students attended charter schools last year and roughly the same number attended “innovation schools” with significant autonomy, test scores have risen from the 15-20th percentile statewide – meaning more than 80 percent of the schools in Colorado were outperforming Denver's schools – to the 41st-56th. At the middle school level, Denver students are outperforming the state. Denver's average scores on an ACT test taken by all high school juniors have increased more than twice as fast as the state average, while the number of students passing Advanced Placement exams has tripled.¹⁸

Indianapolis and Camden, N.J., two other high-poverty districts that have embraced 21st century strategies, have also seen impressive gains in student achievement.¹⁹

21ST CENTURY SCHOOL SYSTEMS ARE A PROGRESSIVE INNOVATION

Since the 1980s, our nation's most progressive leaders have embraced 21st century strategies, because of their deep-seated belief that access to a quality education advances equality, equity, and opportunity for all people

In 1988, Al Shanker, then president of the American Federation of Teachers, came across the 1974 writings of Ray Budde, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, in which he advocated for cutting education bureaucracy and empowering educators. His vision focused on having the faculty at each school operate on a performance “charter” with the district. Shanker internalized Budde's vision because he too saw chartering as a vehicle to professionalizing teaching, since it moves school districts away from an organizational structure built on centralized authority. Shanker supported the idea of public school choice,

and the competition that came with it, as long as an independent body provided oversight and held the schools accountable for meeting state performance benchmarks. He saw these schools as a way of protecting public education, for he feared that if public schools did not innovate to find better ways to serve their students, the public would turn to vouchers and private schools.²⁰ By 1995, he had concluded that “every school should be a charter school.”²¹

In 1990, nine months before the first state charter law passed in Minnesota, soon-to-be President Bill Clinton endorsed the concept. He traveled the country, promoting charter schools as a pragmatic alternative to vouchers, which preserved public education, equal opportunity for all students, and accountability for results.²²

In 1991, Democratic State Senator Ember Reichgott Junge worked with Democrats in the Minnesota House to push through the nation’s first charter law.²³ Other states soon followed Minnesota’s lead. California became the second state to adopt a charter law in 1992, led by Democratic State Senator Gary Hart. In 1993, Democratic State Representative Mark Roosevelt added charter schools to a successful education reform bill in Massachusetts. That year, Democratic governors Roy Romer in Colorado, Bruce King in New Mexico, and Zell Miller in Georgia signed charter laws in each of their states. By the end of 1994, the year President Bill Clinton spearheaded passage of a federal Charter Schools Program (CSP), 10 states had adopted charter laws.²⁴



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Democratic State Senator Ember Reichgott Junge works with Democrats in the Minnesota House to push through the nation’s first charter law.



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1994

President Bill Clinton spearheads passage of a federal Charter Schools Program (CSP). Ten states have adopted charter laws.

President Clinton hoped to grow the number of charter schools in America to 3,000 by the year 2000. In 1998, he signed a bill to expand the CSP, which has provided increasing funds to states for the development of new charter schools, school facilities, and the replication or expansion of successful models.²⁵ When he left office, the charter sector had grown from one school serving 35 students on his inauguration day to 1,993 schools serving 448,343 students.²⁶

President Barack Obama, who also vigorously supported charter schools, pushed through the largest increase in CSP funding since the Clinton administration. Obama used the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to launch the first federal program to expand and replicate high-performing charter schools. This program ultimately expanded to 32 charter management organizations and created more than 400 new schools, making room for 278,000 additional students. Lastly, Obama used Race to the Top Funding to incentivize states to lift their caps on the number of charters.



During his time in office, more than a dozen states changed policies to allow for the creation or expansion of public charter schools,²⁷ and their numbers grew from 4,694 serving 1,433,116 students to 6,824 schools serving 2,930,600 students.²⁸

When he left office, 90 percent of those enrolled in schools run by the nation's top-performing charter management organizations were students of color and 75 percent were from low-income families.²⁹

While the federal government has lent a hand with funding, state governments have really fueled the transformation of our public school systems. Without progressive governors, state legislators, and state superintendents, our schools would still be mired in the industrial model of a century ago.

In 2008, as Colorado Senate President, I wanted to give public schools the “maximum degree of flexibility possible,” so they could innovate and improve. To do so, I authored the nation's first Innovation Schools and Innovation Schools Zones Act, which was signed by Democratic Governor Bill Ritter.³⁰ As of 2017, Colorado had 86 innovation schools in 13 districts, and Denver Public Schools had created an innovation zone, which now has five schools.³¹

In 2010, Tennessee allowed districts with failing schools to create their own innovation zones, with the kind of expanded autonomy Colorado's act provided. In 2014, Indiana went even further, allowing districts to create “innovation network schools” that are much like charters: run by nonprofit organizations, with five-to-seven-year performance contracts with the district, but in district buildings, with district funding, and counting toward district performance scores.

Public charter schools, innovation schools and innovation zones, and public school choice are deeply rooted in, and reflective of, progressive values. Twenty-first century school systems inspired by the success of chartering and innovation schools will change the trajectory of millions of children. For the past 25 years, our nation's most progressive leaders have whole-heartedly endorsed this movement, because at the heart of these reforms are long-standing liberal ideas: empowering educators and creating equal opportunity for all of America's children.

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