RE-ISSUED BY THE PIE NETWORK
WITH PERMISSION FROM THE JOYCE FOUNDATION
SEPTEMBER 2010

RABBLE ROUSERS REVISITED

(a guide for launching state-based education reform advocacy organizations)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRO DUCTION

(some opening remarks)

Over the past two decades, a clear consensus has emerged about the necessary ingredients for improving our nation's public schools. More and more, leaders across the political spectrum agree that to meet the challenges of a dramatically changing economy, we must hold all schools accountable to a higher standard—one that ensures students graduate college- and career-ready. They recognize that great teachers, solid data, evidence, and transparency are essential to meeting that goal, and that leading innovators, like charter schools, are needed to accelerate the pace of real change.

These basic ideas have anchored the education reforms agendas of the past three presidents—even as different parties occupied that office. But these ideas have been much slower to take hold where they matter most: the state laws and policies that overwhelming shape our nation's schools. That's because while lawmaking should be guided by considerations of the public's interest, following proven practices to ensure children's needs are met, too often, it's just the opposite: an insider's game, dominated by full-time lobbyists who know how to work the system. That's why when an issue really matters to a corporation or industry, it hires full-time, professional representation. It's no different in education, where professional associations, employee groups, vendors, and other *vested interests* maintain a large, full-time presence in the policy-making process.

In fact, the process of education policy making has become so politicized that we often leave the "public" out of discussions about public education. As a result, policy makers feel tremendous pressure from every interest except the one that should matter most: the interest for improving our system of public schooling to better serve students and their families.

However, in more and more states, leading education advocates are changing the rules of that game—and they are winning. Increasingly, civic and business leaders are recognizing that public education is critically important to the vitality of their states and to improve it, they need to engage in the politics of education reform. These savvy civic leaders are creating organizations that bring a credible, professional, and constant advocacy voice to state law-making processes. In doing so, they are effectively shifting the balance of power in favor of the public's interest.

While resources are often stacked against them, these relatively small organizations are proving again and again that political will can be changed. How? First, these groups bring to policy-making chambers a clear voice so steeped in evidence and grounded in common sense it is hard to ignore. Second, they consistently leverage media and other communications to engage the broader public in a conversation that is too often left to insiders. Most importantly, they recognize that last mile of policy making is always intensely political and they aren't hesitant to navigate that terrain.

BENCHMARKING A GROWING SECTOR

The early policy innovators that created this growing advocacy sector grew organically, responding state-by-state to a clear need for a more systematic and professional approach to education reform. But, as the recognition for the importance of this work spread, the desire to create new advocacy organizations grew along with it, creating a need for benchmarking this emerging sector.

In 2006, a report called *Rabble Rousers* was written to provide recommendations for civic leaders in Illinois who wanted to create a voice for education reform in Springfield. The Joyce Foundation commissioned a benchmarking study of leading advocacy groups. More than twenty groups were reviewed, and the report focused on ten working in similar political contexts as Illinois on issues of interest to the foundation. (A more thorough discussion of methodology is described in the appendix.) The recommendations were compiled to help these Illinois leaders think through the complexities of starting an advocacy group in their state.

We called the initial report *Rabble Rousers* with a respectful nod to America's first "rabble rousers"—leaders including Washington, Jefferson, and Adams who also earned this moniker by daring to challenge the balance of power to be more responsive to the needs of the broader public.

THE LITTLE REPORT THAT COULD

Rabble Rousers was never officially released by the foundation for a broader audience, but it spread nonetheless, turning up in the hands of hopeful leaders across the country who wanted to know how they too could create change in their states' education systems. Since that time, this little report that could has helped launch education reform organizations in Illinois and Washington, D.C. It has more recently nudged leaders in Minnesota and Indiana along a similar path. Teach For America organizers also relied heavily on this report as they engaged alumni as ongoing advocates of education change.

Rabble Rousers also became one of the first comprehensive looks at a new approach to education advocacy and as a result, put a spotlight on a growing sector. In this way, the report also deserves some credit for the creation of the Policy Innovators in Education (PIE) Network, an organization founded by four national policy groups to build, support, and promote a network of state-based education advocacy organizations working to improve schools in their states and the nation.

Given the attention this report has generated, a proper release is overdue. With the permission of the Joyce Foundation, the PIE Network is revising and reproducing this work to help would-be rabble rousers get started. Like the original report, *Rabble Rousers Revisited* recognizes that policy making differs in every state. Therefore, the report doesn't spell out a precise formula for creating state-based groups. Rather, it offers questions, considerations, and advice for organizers who want to create an effective voice for change in their state's education policy-making process. *Rabble Rousers Revisited* also includes case stories highlighting some of the leaders in this work and the challenges they faced getting started in their respective states.

Rabble Rousers Revisited follows the basic architecture of the initial report, adding additional insights and feedback from members who are now active in the PIE Network. It first presents some "Big Considerations" for advocacy startup, then the "Nuts and Bolts" of creating advocacy organizations. We conclude with our "Top Ten" list of recommendations for would-be advocates seeking to create a change organization.

BIG CONSIDERATIONS

(important ones)

FIRST CONSIDERATION

1 There is no universal model

There are no formulas for achieving educational reform. Rather, like all political accomplishments, changes in education policy take place through a series of judgments that consider history, context, and other variables. Therefore, we found no simple or consistent formula for effective advocacy. Rather, we found different approaches that work equally well. (In fact, in many states, we found complimentary organizations working as a team toward common ends.) While it's valuable to learn what other groups have done, it's even more important to understand why choices were made. Otherwise, it's difficult to predict if the same approach will be as effective in a different state. In addition to the mechanics of organization building, we urge eager change agents to analyze context, policy aims, and beliefs about how change occurs in order to craft an advocacy strategy.

SECOND CONSIDERATION

2 Talent, not funding, is the most precious resource

All the organizations included in this report are making a bigger impact than their size would predict. Of course, the variable here is talent: the ability first of the organization's leader to inspire, strategize, build relationships, and find and nurture top talent. The heads of most advocacy groups are usually important players in their own right. The members of their boards often have political lives beyond the work of the group, which can create complications, but also enhances the power of the organization. The leaders with whom we spoke understand that they lead an organization, not an individual crusade, and are mindful of how they represent themselves in public. They also know that they need bench strength on their team and thus they invest heavily in finding and nurturing their junior talent, giving them room to grow and the opportunity to lead.

Another critical role of leadership is the work being done within the policy-making environment to build momentum for change. Building relationships with leading policy makers is critical to the long-term efficacy of this work. In almost every case, organizations credit the key policy makers who work with them to advance their agenda. Managing these relationships is challenging, but vital to the organization's success.

3

THIRD CONSIDERATION

Creating credibility is the most immediate task

To manage its credibility, an organization should be able to answer these questions before detractors ask them:

- Who are your leaders? What are their intentions? Are they politically honorable?
- For whom do you speak? Do you have a legitimate basis to do so?
- Who funds you and what is their agenda? How do we know this group represents more than just a narrow interest?
- Are you beholden to any particular party or political figure or can you work effectively with groups across political lines?
- Is your research (data) credible and reliable? Who is behind it? Can we trust them?
- Is your agenda transparent and widely understood? Do you practice what you preach?
- Is the organization's agenda consistent even when politics change? (Or, do your policy aims shift with the political winds?)
- Do you practice the fundamental courtesies of politics, such as working constructively even with the groups with whom you disagree, speaking well of them in public, offering the same degree of transparency you would expect of your opponent, and recognizing that your opponent might be your ally on the next issue?
- And, a question that is seldom asked directly: will you do what you promise or are you just running a good bluff?

When a new organization launches with the mission of impacting a state's political process, it always provokes a response. Regardless of the degree of professionalism with which advocates conduct themselves, the research that supports their work, the credibility of their funders and founders, or the pains they take to avoid rancor, their first task is always to defend their intentions. Or, their "real" intentions. Their detractors charge: How dare they suggest that a new voice is needed in the debate over public schooling! What's their hidden agenda? Who is really backing all this?

The most effective groups rise above the noise, keeping their focus—and that of their state's leadership—on the issues that impact students. Data and evidence are always at the heart of their communications because they know that's what drives sensible policies.

As one network leader said, "Credibility is slowly earned and quickly squandered." Credibility might be thought of as "the power to elicit belief." The launching of a new organization is really the work of establishing credibility by inspiring belief in the group's cause, in the information provided to back it up, and in the assertion that the organization will remain relentless in its efforts to advance its agenda. At the start-up phase, credibility is created (or lost) when the organization responds to the most basic questions about its mission, purpose, and base.

FOURTH CONSIDERATION

4 Power has to be demonstrated

In politics, power comes from three sources:

- **Organized money**, or a consolidation of resources sufficient to support the work throughout the time needed to realize the agenda. Detractors might be asking, is this a group with sufficient backing from significant interests or are they scraping by year-to-year? Perhaps a more fundamental question over time will be, does this group demonstrate a sophisticated enough understanding of the interplay of money and politics so it can cut in on that dance with equally sophisticated policy recommendations, or does it make simplistic, absolute demands?

- **Organized people**, or the ability to influence the thinking of key decision-makers and to mobilize advocates to support the group's agenda. A group has no power without loyalists who make phone calls, write letters, use social media, attend forums and events, and, most critically, influence policy makers to adopt and pursue their cause. This is a reminder that power is always relational; the mythic Lone Rider does not work as an archetype in a political context. In some organizations, leaders bring their individual relationships to the effort, but building an "organization" is really a continuing process of building relationships that further a group's cause.

- **Organized information**, or the ability to assemble and use credible information backed by data that frames an undeniable argument for action. Data alone is never powerful. It is powerful only when it influences opinion leaders, supporters, decision-makers, and the public.

In today's scandal-ridden political climate, the word "power" might sound to some as an impolite or even brutish word. But power is the currency of politics and understanding it is critical to success in a political world. The word "power" comes from the Latin "to be able." Where we talk about power, then, we are referring to the organization's ability to get things done.

At some point in the first few years of a startup's tenure, the honeymoon will be over and the group will be called upon to prove that it means what it says and that it can and will take action to ensure its agenda is taken seriously. It will be called upon to exercise its power.

Effective advocacy organizations know how to use all these sources of power. The best use all of them well. Sometimes, power is consolidated in staff members who bring powerful connections and relationships. Sometimes, the group generates data and promotes it in such a way that power comes from evidence that is simply too hard to ignore. In all groups, the ability to "organize people" is essential to success.

Equally important, successful groups recognize the limits of each source of power. Big resources without a thoughtful agenda can be rejected as cynical. Rallies of uninformed advocates can fail to sway. Any new organization enjoys a brief honeymoon in which its claims are taken on faith, but soon it has to deliver. Therefore, new groups should make claims cautiously. In politics, it is far better to be underestimated than defrocked.

10 IMPORTANT STEPS

(to rouse reformers)

The initial Rabble Rousers report was developed for a small group of leading funders and other civic leaders in Illinois who knew that they needed a constant state-level reform voice in their capital. The other start-up groups profiled here were much like the Illinois founders and in some cases included a strong leader who would eventually become the group's executive director.

Since the initial Rabble Rousers was released, the PIE Network has often been contacted by leading individuals in other states who know such a group is needed in their state, but who weren't as far along (yet!) in terms of organizing a group of leaders to create one. Their questions typically include, "How do we motivate civic leaders in our state to take on this challenge? How do we find the right leader for this work? What comes first; hiring staff or creating a board?" We added this section to Rabble Rousers Revisited to provide basic guidance on these and similar questions.

These "steps" should be taken at a quick clip as they build upon each other. Also, because the initial users of this manual already had a fairly strong sense of the strengths and challenges of their state's education policy framework, the original Rabble Rousers said little about developing that intelligence. Therefore, this sections also calls attention to the need for gathering data about the challenges facing a state as an essential step in the planning process.

1

FIRST STEP

Spread the news that change is possible

If a group of civic leaders has not yet stepped up to the challenge of improving state education policy, it's most often because they don't know about the advances being made in other states. Step one involves creating the belief that political will can be changed, which naturally leads to questions about how that is happening elsewhere. To inspire such curiosity, invite someone from the PIE Network to a civic meeting to talk about the exciting advances taking place all over the country with high-profile civic audiences, and pitch stories to local journalists about what's happening elsewhere that's not happening at home.

SECOND STEP
2 Organize an ad-hoc steering committee

Rabble Rousers Revisited stresses repeatedly that organizational form should follow, not drive, its purpose. However, someone needs to do the work of refining the issues and policies that most need attention in each state's political context. Most often the instinct of eager rabble rousers is to hire someone immediately to start building an organization, but doing so too soon can put limits on the organization too early in the process—and can be especially limiting in terms of the caliber of the board a group is able to build. A wiser approach was taken in Illinois and later in Minnesota, both states in which an informal advisory group or kitchen cabinet was formed to provide informal leadership without committing too soon to a structure that didn't make sense. (In Illinois, an independent organization was created; in Minnesota, civic leaders eventually brought in a national partner replicating success from another state.)

THIRD STEP
3 Start a listening tour with the most involved civic leaders

All political organizing starts with listening to key leaders about their concerns; education advocacy is no exception. Start by identifying the 25–30 leading people in your state who care the most about the quality of education and arrange for some interview time—and then do a lot of listening to what they think are the problems and solutions. These initial meetings will surface potential board members and will also start to create a clear sense of where there's a shared sense of urgency to start your work. As you conclude any such meeting, make sure you always ask, "Who else should I be talking to?" And keep track of contact information; you are already building your coalition!

4

FOURTH STEP

Start gathering data

The Focus and Issues section that follows will provide a number of questions for your kitchen cabinet to consider the how's and why's of focusing in on your policy agenda. The most essential information that will help resolve those basic questions is data describing the strengths and challenges of education in your state. If you don't already have a strong sense of how your state compares (strengths as well was weaknesses) to others, then a thorough data scan is essential to be able to answer those questions thoughtfully. It might be that this is something your growing team can do, or it might be an initial research study you want to commission if you have funding available.

5

FIFTH STEP

Map your political context

The Context and Tactics section provides a number of questions to help your planning group better understand the context in which it will be working and therefore the tactics that most make sense to move an issue agenda forward. Of course, you can't determine how you want to communicate until you determine what the message is, so a thorough step four creates a more strategic step five. And completing step five means you are now ready to start contemplating the right kind of organization to meet those goals: you are now ready to address questions of funding, governance, staffing, and launch!

6 SIXTH STEP
Begin cultivating funders

Often a group of leading citizens who are contemplating how to start an advocacy group includes potential funders. If that's not the case, work is needed to bring some funders into the conversation. The best time to approach potential backers is after achieving the clarity developed in steps 1–5. If a few funders have already taken the lead, now is the time to broaden the potential funding base and start securing some initial commitments to support an organization.

7 SEVENTH STEP
Consider national partners

Like all politics, much of advocacy is local, but there are organizations working in a number of states, bringing economies of scale to the aspects of this work that can be shared across state lines. Another consideration, then, is can you partner with one of the larger national groups like 50CAN (www.50can.org), Democrats for Education Reform (www.dfer.org), or Stand for Children (www.stand.org), which are all expanding. Before you consider going it alone, a conversation with some of these groups could make sense, but most will want to know about the resources available, which is why some work on step six proceeds step seven.

8

EIGHTH STEP

Formalize your board

The most frequent question we hear at PIE Network is, should we hire a staff person first, or build the board. Our advice is that if your goal is to attract a strong and active board, most are going to want some say in choosing the person who leads the group. So, with a few exceptions, you should at least begin to formalize your board before you launch a staff search. It might be that your initial planning group evolves into your board, or you might determine you can attract heavier hitters. The section on Governance and Staffing suggests some variation among different types of groups. Once again, the *best* model is highly contextual, depending on factors in your state. But there is one universal test for "best" when it comes to boards for advocacy groups: if your prospective board member has five minutes alone with the governor of your state, would the quality of education be their top of mind concern? If so, such a person is a great candidate. If they aren't likely to back your education agenda when they have such an opportunity, then involving them will likely do more harm than good.

9

NINTH STEP

Hire your lead executive

NOW it's time to put together that job description and find the leader who will help further shape your agenda. Why is this crucial step at the end of the list? Precisely because it is the MOST crucial to your success and getting the right person requires having a strong group of leaders who are all clear what you want that person to accomplish. Also, the proceeding steps helped you create a sense of excitement and possibility that didn't exist when you began; that buzz will attract star candidates to a job they may not have considered otherwise. As you approach this crucial step, the PIE Network can help you gather job descriptions from leaders of groups with similar political contexts to your state.

10

TENTH STEP

Plan your launch!

The work we've outlined here can take months; as can a hiring process to find the right person. The next planning event is your actual coming out party. If you've done your early diligence well, your strategy for announcing your group should be self evident. And if you've hired well, creating an event or sequence of events that introduce you as a political player is their most immediate task.

NUTS & BOLTS

(or, how to construct a solid foundation)

EARLY INNOVATORS

The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence

The Prichard Committee began in the early 1980's—long before the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) was passed in 1990. The committee set the stage for the eventual success of that landmark legislation and is recognized as one of the nation's early leaders in bringing a public voice to education policy making. At the time, neither Kentucky's public officials nor its citizens had high expectations for the state's public schools. The Prichard Committee worked to change that by reaching out to the public, the media, and local and state business groups to raise awareness about the possibilities for reform.

The job wasn't easy and in the near decade between the committee's formation and the passage of KERA, members often became discouraged. In a state with little history of civic activism, an ethic of public involvement had to be created. In order to pass KERA, the committee recognized that the basic structure of governance of the state's education system needed fixing.

The Prichard Committee has remained the leading public voice for education reform in Kentucky since that early work. Before his recent death, Executive Direc-

Building an effective advocacy organization has proven to be a challenging and complex undertaking. Most groups take between six to eighteen months to prepare for an effective launch. Several national advocacy networks are emerging that may tighten these timelines somewhat, but thoughtful planning remains an essential ingredient to building an effective advocacy voice.

In this section, we detail the decisions aspiring advocates need to make, and then identify some of the considerations, tradeoffs, and lessons learned by leading groups in making when faced with similar issues. We present these in roughly the same order in which we advise they be considered: first, what is the organization trying to accomplish? ("Focus and Issues"); then, how should a group organize itself to accomplish that work? ("Context and Tactics", "Governance and Membership", "Staffing and Structure", and "Fundraising").

In each of these sections, we summarize thoughts interviewees had about these tradeoffs under "Cautions and Considerations".

FOCUS AND ISSUES

The organizations with whom we talked had different policy priorities. But they faced similar choices related to creating their overarching policy framework. The clarity of purpose, transparency, rationale, and success measures for a group's agenda are all critical ingredients for building the credibility needed to advance policy aims.

tor Bob Sexton said two factors contribute to the organization's longstanding credibility. "We have remained a centrist, non-partisan group with an agenda that remains constant despite changes in the political climate of the state," he said. "We stay focused on measureable school performance."

The Partnership for Learning

The Partnership for Learning was founded in 1994 when the state of Washington's education reform initiative was barely more than a good idea. Recognizing that raising expectations for all students required as much community support as legislative action, the Partnership was founded to promote broad community engagement and to represent the voice of that community in the state's policymaking process.

The Partnership was an early innovator in finding ways to engage the general public in education policy issues. It partnered with McDonald's to deliver messages on restaurant placemats, like the importance of homework. The group organized "take the test" events in local shopping malls to help the broader public learn to trust the state's new assessment system. An early adopter of the power of the Internet, the Partnership for Learning gathered a bank of e-mail addresses through its Web site. "It's hard to imagine now, but back then, that was unique. The simple fact that we could have sent an immediate communication off to 35,000 names gave us a lot of leverage,"

1

CLARITY OF PURPOSE

What is the unique reason the organization exists?

Focus: How much can the organization reasonably accomplish? What are the organization's annual goals for changing policy and what keeps it focused on these goals?

Long view: What values, beliefs, or objectives do you hold that provide a longer view of the organization's objectives? What does the ideal world look like?

Action vs. reaction: To what extent will you lead according to your own agenda versus focus on the issues policy makers queue up for action? Will you recognize the importance of a strong defense as well as a good offense in your legislative strategies?

2

TRANSPARENCY

Is the organization's agenda...

Clearly communicated as a part of its mission, policies, or other defining information about the organization?

Conveyed in such a way that allies and other supporters can **easily identify the ways they can help**?

says Executive Director Carolyn King, the Partnership's fourth leader since 1994. The Partnership for Learning's founding agenda still holds today: reinforce the state's ambitious efforts to create an education system that leads the nation, improve use of data and assessments, and promote accountability. And in all efforts, make sure that the public has accurate information about Washington's progress as it compares to other states. While the Partnership's agenda has been unwavering, its tactics have continued to evolve with advances in technology to bring the public's voice to the state capitol.

Constant and Unrelenting

Organizations such as The Prichard Committee and the Partnership for Learning demonstrate the importance of steady vigilance in education reform. "This is not something you fix once and for all," says Steve Mullin, current president of the WA Business Roundtable and an early leader in the Partnership for Learning's work. "We need to be in the room when the bills are first debated and stay there to defend those gains." Sexton added, "This work requires maintaining the momentum of a campaign, not a program-oriented organization. It's constant."

3

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

How will the organization hold itself accountable?

Bottom line: Did the organization achieve its objectives for policy change? Did it move legislation or block a bad policy from being implemented?

Interim strategy measures: If we hosted a meeting, did people come? If we posted a press release, where did it run?

Measures of seeds planted: Creating buzz or changing the conversation are important first steps; these can be measured by media placements or other critical references to the group's agenda.

4

RATIONALE

Will the organization's agenda be formed by...

Conducting **unique research** with internal staff?

Funding research conducted by credible local institutions?

Basing its work on **readily available information** about goals and practices?

5

RESEARCH

For what purpose?

All "research" is not the same. For what purpose does your organization need research? In some states, advocacy groups can mine great research from policy centers active in their state; while other groups may need to create research that helps to make the case for change. Almost always, an advocacy organization will find that thoughtful academic research needs to be translated into tight summaries for policy makers. They will also need to invest in research that translates big ideas into state-specific plans. Reform organizations might seek research to:

Define or describe the problem. Seek as much data as possible to gain understanding.

Agitate action by framing or changing the debate. Use data selectively to make an argument or reinforce a point of view.

Investigate feasibility. Include benchmarking, case studies, evaluation, and data used in the context of stories.

Investigate levers for change. Include studying policy-making institutions to better understand where authority lies and to frame the specific policy changes needed to solve a specific problem.

Inform tactics and strategy. Include polling, focus groups, interviewing, and political "meet and greets."

6

PRIORITIES

Who decides on the organization's policy agenda?

We'll say more about governance later, but the role of boards and advisors in guiding policy is worth mentioning here.

What role for boards? In every group, staff played the leading role in identifying, researching, and recommending the policy focus. But that agenda was often approved or anointed by the organization's board of directors, a step critical to increasing the credibility of that agenda. An agenda backed by a powerful board is much harder to dismiss than an agenda created by a dynamic but small staff team.

What role for advisors in setting policy? Every organization had some variation of a kitchen cabinet or a more formal group of advisors that lent additional expertise and credibility. Presenting an issue agenda to these groups is critical not only for credibility, but the process of gaining input and feedback provides crucial seasoning within a circle of supporters, strengthening the group's ability to anticipate and respond to potential detractors.

Some Cautions and Considerations:

FOCUS AND ISSUES

1 **Build on success.** It is better (more credible) to publicly expand an agenda than to collapse it. Commit publicly only to those goals for which the organization has specific plans for impact and can therefore hold itself accountable for success or failures.

2 **Be a lone voice.** There are many sympathetic causes in public education that enjoy the support of a wide variety of interests, but the toughest issues often are the ones with few champions. In determining focus areas, one test should be how much the organization's voice will matter to advancing the issue.

3 **Practice what you preach.** A group can't credibly call for public transparency while at the same time insisting that it deserves privacy for aspects of its organization such as who funds it or who is on its governing board. Similarly, it's hard to argue for better use of data if data doesn't figure prominently in the organization's policy pursuits or the measures of its own success.

4 **Be transparent about who and how your positions are determined.** If that isn't clear, it will pull attention away from the issues the organization is trying to solve. If the group resists straightforward answers to these questions, it will attract more attention to the group's functions and away from its agenda.

5 **Give credit where it's due and even when it's not.** Don't hold onto your agenda so tightly that others don't feel ownership as well. Giving credit away can be a more powerful way to move an agenda than claiming credit.

6 **Use data strategically.** Data alone isn't powerful. Tactics for promoting data and its conclusions make it powerful.

7 **Follow your data.** The "next" issue naturally emerges from research that seeks to understand a problem.

THE NEXT GENERATION

ConnCAN

Before ConnCAN launched in 2005, most leaders in the Connecticut business community were fed-up with "reform," having tried and failed in earlier efforts to impact policy making. Gaining support for the idea of ConnCAN then, meant rebuilding confidence that a small, outside force of business and civic leaders could indeed impact the politics of education at the state level.

The core vision behind ConnCAN was created by Jon Sackler, a leading Connecticut businessman, working with the group's current executive director, Alex Johnston. Both were convinced that if some of Connecticut's urban public schools could close achievement gaps and help all children succeed, more could if the state's policy structure could be changed to support those efforts.

ConnCAN's agenda includes protecting and promoting high performing public schools—including public charters—and pushing for changes in state policies that prevent more public schools from finding similar success. Because the state lacked clear public reporting for its schools, ConnCAN created its own system to rank and compare schools. When ConnCAN focuses on an issue, it does everything from early research and communications to make the case for change through working with policymakers to draft legislation for the final bill, relentlessly looking to

CONTEXT AND TACTICS

All the groups we interviewed shared the tactic of advocacy, or spending face time with policy makers to broadly inform decision making regarding issues. And all recognized that while a range of tactics is needed to advance an issue, crossing the finish line requires political engagement. Beyond these commonalities, tactics vary a great deal. Many groups use data and research as tools to influence. Some focus most on mobilizing people in support of their agendas. Some heavily leverage the media and public opinion to create an environment of support for their agenda among the broader public. Some find they can effectively engage in lobbying in the form of a nonprofit; others have created formal political action committees (PACs) in order to influence the broad political motivations of elected officials.

Considering three critical questions will help to determine the right tactics:

- What characterizes the nature of political decision making in your state?
- Who else is working in your state to influence education?
- What stage of action is needed to move a particular issue?

data as its measure of success. Johnston explains, "We operate with the discipline of campaigns: we set clear targets and hold ourselves to the same standards of accountability we demand from the public schools."

EdVoice

Before EdVoice was founded in 2003, many might have said the last thing California needed was another education policy group. But EdVoice founders recognized that, despite the myriad of policy groups providing information in Sacramento, a clear voice for change was still missing in California's political process. "We all had plenty of white papers saying there was a problem," said Reed Hastings, an EdVoice founder and financial backer, "but no one countering the education lobby in the state capitol."

Because California's education policy landscape was so crowded, EdVoice didn't need to conduct its own policy research; it could partner with other groups and focus more time on direct political engagement. EdVoice formed as a 501(c)(4), which enabled it to employ the full range of political tactics. "We make political contributions, run initiatives, and help draft legislation," said Bill Lucia, EdVoice President and CEO. "When tough votes come up on reform, legislators want to know someone is there to support them and make sure their constituents know they voted for what's best for kids even if it make adults in the system uneasy," he said.

1

FIRST CONTEXT QUESTION

What characterizes the nature of political decision making in your state?

All advocates are trying to influence policy makers; the assumptions they make about the abilities and motivations of the leaders in their state informs their tactics. Advocates need to gauge the extent to which current state leaders are...

Well-meaning but lack good information; therefore, providing better information (i.e., sound policy analysis and better data) will create an environment in which better decisions are made. This is likely the case in states with part-time legislatures who have no staff support, but not in states with well-staffed legislatures.

Siloed, lacking opportunities to discuss issues in environments that draw out the values and tradeoffs inherent to all policy debates. Here, a convening role can be a useful contribution.

Poll and media-driven; thus, influence the media and you will influence their opinion as well.

Juggling complex and competing interests beyond education. Most legislators have political motivations and pressures that can be at odds with doing the "right thing" in any one sector.

Effective advocacy requires political mapping to understand the full range of a policy maker's interests and ambitions in order to influence them.

EdVoice regularly engages the public with a common-sense reform agenda that includes high standards for all students, quality educators, intelligent accountability, fiscal transparency, and public school choice. Several years after forming, EdVoice created a 501(c)(3) to support its public education efforts, including one of the best legislator retreats in the country. “We don’t call it ‘training’ because everyone contributes and everyone learns,” said Lucia “That’s why it works.”

Working Smarter

Both EdVoice and ConnCAN credit their success in large part to looking outside of education for examples of effective advocacy, including studying organizations such as the Sierra Club, the Association of American Retired Persons, and the National Rifle Association, to form a new kind of advocacy effort in the education sector. Says Johnston, “Other sectors are just smarter about advocacy than we are in education.” Lucia adds, “We know how much pressure is on policy makers to resist change and tactics used to create that pressure. We can’t be afraid to use similar tactics to counter the defenders of the status quo.”

2

SECOND CONTEXT QUESTION

Who else is working in your state to influence education?

Does the state have **a few strong leaders** who are already motivated to address the organization’s policy agenda, or are the state’s leaders distracted by other interests and causes, which means the first task is to get someone’s attention?

Does the state **lack strong intelligence** regarding the organization’s issues or are a host of groups trying to provide policy advice and data? If the latter, what distinguishes the organization in this noisy environment?

Are there **allies** in the state whose work you can borrow, enabling the organization to build power in different ways?

Does the state suffer from **an overabundance of data,** recommendations, and leaders, and simply need some impetus to sit down together and hammer out solutions? Or, are clear data and analysis lacking?

3

THIRD CONTEXT QUESTION

What stage of action is needed to move a particular issue?

All "research" is not the same. For what purpose does your organization need research? In some states, advocacy groups can mine great research from policy centers active in their state; while other groups may need to create research that helps to make the case for change.

Almost always, an advocacy organization will find that thoughtful academic research needs to be translated into tight summaries for policy makers. They will also need to invest in research that translates big ideas into state-specific plans. Reform organizations might seek research to:

- **Define or describe the problem.** Seek as much data as possible to gain understanding.
- **Agitate action by framing or changing the debate.** Use data selectively to make an argument or reinforce a point of view.
- **Investigate feasibility.** Include benchmarking, case studies, evaluation, and data used in the context of stories.
- **Investigate levers for change.** Include studying policy-making institutions to better understand where authority lies and to frame the specific policy changes needed to solve a specific problem.
- **Inform tactics and strategy.** Include polling, focus groups, interviewing, and political "meet and greets."

AND FINALLY

The Tactics

The following list of tactics is illustrative but certainly not exhaustive of the ways groups attempt to influence policy:

- Research / white papers / public opinion polls
- Communications / P.R. / awareness
- Lobbying / Advocacy
- Legislative action
- Voter mobilization at the grassroots (get out the vote efforts, letter writing, rallies, etc.)
- Legal action
- Advocacy training
- Issue forums and debates
- Outreach to opinion leaders and the media through public appearances and press releases
- Web-generated advocacy and communications (push lists, blogs, etc.)
- Political contributions to members
- Public forums and dialogues
- Legislator trainings

Virtual Organizing: the New Civic Organization?

One set of tactics deserves special mention. Several groups count as a leading tactic the mobilization of the grassroots. Technology is easing this work considerably, enabling those interested in the organization's work to sign in online to regularly receive information and to manage their information in the group's database. Blogs now create forums online, forgoing the burdens of making nametags and serving coffee. These same tools enable organizations to create a virtual lobby that sends letters prompted by push emails. Tools like Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn are allowing people to collaborate in exciting new ways.

The biggest challenge in managing this kind of outreach is eased—but not eliminated—by technology: the task of maintaining information to contact an active base of support for broad issues and then focusing communications when mobilization is needed around specific issues. Even when technology helps to gather information for mailing lists or social media networks and provides for some degree of self-maintenance for databases, it does not entirely eliminate the challenges of list maintenance. If the organization intends to use this tactic, then it should build in time for maintaining its virtual organization.

Benchmarking Leading Communicators

Next to "direct advocacy," professional communications is perhaps the most important tactic for any advocacy group; it therefore deserves special mention. In early 2010, communications directors from across the PIE Network participated in a study of effective communications tactics across the network and how those tactics could be improved. The findings included:

While there was some divergence in target audiences—from the governor's office to the general public—the groups overwhelmingly see **education policy makers** as their most important audience.

The strategies for influencing those policy makers ranged from "inside lobbying" to broad-based grassroots lobbying campaigns. Accordingly, **key tactics varied** substantially, including one-on-one lobbying, legislator symposia, town hall meetings, a PAC mobilizing allied citizen groups, and large grassroots letter/e-mail writing campaigns with 30,000–50,000-strong databases.

A gap analysis found these tactics represent the strongest opportunities for the groups since they were **rated highly effective, but underused**:

- Lobbying by board members
- Conference calls with key players (e.g., superintendents).
- Original opinion research commissioned or conducted by the group
- Policy summits
- Editorial boards

Tactics that worked and were being **done frequently** were:

- Cultivation of reporters
- Lobbying by staff
- Lobbying by consultants.
- Maintaining a database of supporters, media, and other audiences.
- Speaking engagements.
- White papers
- Conferences
- Op-eds

And tactics that may be overused in terms of the **time spent versus their perceived effectiveness** include:

- Newsletters
- Press Releases
- Web sites
- Online and Social Media

Maintaining a web site can be time-consuming and expensive. If the site is getting little traffic, one of two steps should be considered:

1. make it a whole lot better and develop a strategy to drive traffic; or

2. keep it as an online brochure and devote the time saved to more productive activities.

The frequency of use of online and social media was not great. The highest rated online or social media tool was email alerts, followed by Twitter, blogs, Facebook, YouTube, and RSS feeds.

Important Elements for Effective Communications

The study identified important elements for effective communications. This list underscores that the best communications are an extension of the organization and its mission, not an afterthought or a repackaging.

1 **A clear mission**; a statement of what your organization was founded to accomplish, upon which all communications messages rest.

2 **Strong/connected leadership**; a talented communications director needs latitude to shape messaging without interference from the group's executive director or board. However, that leader should also maximize the contributions of a board or steering committee made up of individuals that can help give your organization a seat at the policy table, raise funds, and provide greater assurance that your voice will be heard.

3 **Formalized policy/political and communications objectives** to keep the organization focused and messaging consistent and on point.

4 **A defined communications strategy** that reflects those objectives and the organization's particular resources.

5 **Identify relevant target audiences** to focus all of your resources on communicating your messages to the people who matter.

6 **Establish an overarching theme** which captures your objectives and reflects your strategy, which you can use to focus and discipline your messaging.

7 **No more than three to four key messages** which add specificity to your overarching theme, support your policy/political objectives and are repeated over and over again.

8 **Select communications tactics strategically** use those that are likely to have the greatest impact on your objectives, given your strategy.

9 **Measure and evaluate.** Measure how each communication tactic is doing to meet your organizational and communications objectives.

Some Cautions and Considerations:

CONTEXT AND TACTICS

Invest in your rationale. Developing a theory of change is time well spent, especially if it includes research about the state's political context. This kind of analysis can inform tactical choices and help the organization prioritize where it spends time and resources.

1. **Admire solutions.** Early work to build awareness and urgency for change is always essential, but be wary of getting mired in admiring problems. Groups with gripes but no solutions lose credibility quickly.

2. **Tell stories backed by powerful data.** Stories alone are moving, but easily negated. Data alone is credible, but unemotional. The combination is powerful.

3. **Don't shortchange your strategy.** In sophisticated policy environments, most tactics and their mechanisms are well understood. Tactics that are too slick or that take shortcuts to building real buy-in can backfire and damage credibility.

4. **Use outreach tactics strategically.** As quickly as online letter campaigns became technologically feasible, the e-mails calling us to act became tiresome. Too much information turns communication into noise and can make it harder, not easier, for people to figure out what is most important for them to do. Calling for action only when it is most needed ensures the welcome is not worn out.

5. **Professionalize communications.** The best organizations know that effective communications are as important—and as sophisticated—as direct lobbying skill.

6. **Find ways to support and praise.** Work that educators view as supportive can develop the credibility and trust advocates need when it's time to push hard on difficult issues. The advice, then, is to not operate only as oppositional. Now and again, find ways to support issues that matter to the established interests.

GOVERNANCE AND MEMBERSHIP

When launching an organization, the first questions that will demand answers are: Who are you? Who is on your team? Who do you represent? Who cares about the issues you care about? How do you know they care? These questions lead to boards, participants, advisors, and other associates and allies.

Boards

If a group is creating a separate 501(c)(3) organization, it will definitely need a board to act as its governing body. Incorporation bylaws require groups to name a board and define its role. In most cases, groups keep the bylaws and other formal rules simple. Formal meetings range from once or twice annually to quarterly. A strong board also brings credibility, clout, wisdom, and resources.

Even if a formal board is not required, most effective advocacy groups are backed by some group—either a steering committee, an advisory group, kitchen cabinet, or other configuration that suggests broad community representation.

The specific role that boards play varies considerably across the groups with whom we spoke. The following variations are examples of the different ways to configure a board:

GOVERNANCE & MEMBERSHIP

Types of Boards

Power Boards. Some boards are organized to amplify the power of the organization. Its members are powerful individuals who have political identities in their own right. Power boards also tend to be the leading (or in one case, the only) funders for the organization, either through defined contributions or via the organization they represent.

Policy Boards. Some boards are primarily tasked with helping shape and approve the organization's policy work. This tends to be the model in which the organization was created by one or several start-up funders.

Representative Boards. Some boards are organized to assure that the communities affected by the organization's decisions are represented on the board.

Membership Boards. In membership organizations, every member has representation on the board. In this model, members typically make contributions as part of membership. In a few cases, the "board" was made up of a sizable membership (i.e., 100 members), which then elect a smaller executive group to lead the organization's governance decisions. In this model, the members approve policy and the executive committee is involved in the more detailed finance and staffing decisions.

Functional Boards. Another variation, or layer, of board building is to consider how the board's composition extends the functional expertise of the organization. All nonprofits need various kinds of expertise, including legal, fiscal, and/or public relations skills and connections as well as policy insights and community connections; a board can add that talent to the team.

NO MORE BUSINESS AS USUAL

Advance Illinois

Illinois state leaders, long frustrated with how far Illinois lagged behind other states in education reform, took a powerful first step toward change in early 2006 by forming a kitchen cabinet to methodically study the work of civic groups in other states to improve education. The more they heard, the more convinced they became that such a group could make a huge impact in Illinois. That early kitchen cabinet formalized into a board of Advance Illinois. Co-chaired by Jim Edgar, former governor of Illinois and William M. Daley, former U.S. Commerce Secretary, the board brought together similar heavyweights from across the political spectrum. That and the backing of the state's leading philanthropists sent a powerful message that the state's leading citizens would no longer accept business as usual in the state's system of schooling.

Robin Steans, Advance Illinois's Executive Director, brought even more clout to the state by forming a national advisory panel to plot their agenda. Advance Illinois launched with powerful, research-based agenda to make the case that "We Can Do Better." Since that launch, Advance Illinois has quickly become a visible player in the state capital, calling for improved student data systems, better methods for evaluating teachers and holding them accountable for performance, higher standards for students and more support and flexibility for educators to enable them to get the job done.

1

WHEN AND WHY BOARDS MEET

Advisory Groups

Some organizations name a formal advisory group to extend their affiliates—and with that their credibility—beyond their immediate board. Advisory groups also provide a way to involve with influential people without including them formally in governance decisions. Most groups at least have informal advisory groups, ad hoc committees, or kitchen cabinets they pull together as needed. A few groups are considering whether to formalize these committees, while others have already considered and rejected that idea. Those who prefer the ad hoc approach to committees do so because formal committees can quickly take on a life of their own, drawing staff focus inward. Also, many found that working on an information basis with advisors creates a healthy burden on the organization to use people's time in more meaningful ways.

Groups that are formalized typically meet once or twice annually, although one group found that advisors preferred to be tapped on an "as needed" basis. Regardless of whether an advisory body is formally named or operates on a more ad hoc basis, the consistent lesson is to wait to schedule a meeting until there is something real to discuss. Do not commit to regularly scheduled meetings that require staff to invent agendas or prepare presentations mostly for the edification of 'advisors'.

Texas Institute for Education Reform

When the Texas Institute for Education Reform (TIER) was founded in 2006, Texas was widely recognized as a national leader in K-12 public education reform, with a system of standards, assessments, and accountability that are often ranked among the nation's best. That system had been built over twenty years by a statewide reform coalition of educators, administrators, legislators, and business leaders whose commitment was heralded as a crucial ingredient in the state's early leadership in education reform.

However, many of the same visionaries who built that early reform coalition could see that intractable problems remained, requiring new energy and bolder action. They created TIER as a business-only group to anchor the progress that the state had made and to bring a renewed commitment to the ongoing fight for reform.

The 2007 Texas legislative session proved their vision prescient. A faction of well-funded business and education leaders—believing that the era of accountability had passed—urged the legislature to "sunset" the accountability system that was responsible for placing Texas at the forefront of the public education reform movement. TIER and its allies were crucial in defending—and even enhancing—the Texas public school accountability system. TIER remains a leading force in Texas to defend the state's policy advances and to continue to push this system to ensure that every Texas student graduates ready for college, career, and citizenship.

2

WHEN AND WHY BOARDS MEET

Members or Constituents?

Every group in this study understood the critical importance of involving a constituency broader than the board in their work. Some regularly convene allies and interested stakeholders for forums or discussions. All maintain some kind of distribution system for disseminating information to broad audiences. Few groups actually have formal "memberships" in their organizations, but instead focus on mobilizing a broad base of concerned citizens who share their core concerns.

3

WHEN AND WHY BOARDS MEET

A Role for Educators?

Most of the groups we spoke with declined to involve educators on their governing boards; if they did so, those groups do not make up a majority of the governing board. The rationale was clear enough: if the goal is to be a voice for the public's interest, educator involvement confuses that message. As one group leader explained: "Educators already have the overwhelming voice in our state capital through their various associations. If we brought the interest lobby to our meetings, our discussion would get rutted in the same issues that already complicate the public debate. Our goal is to have a conversation that looks at the issues differently, considering only the students without the adult agendas." An even blunter explanation was: "We tell our teacher's association that when they invite our leaders to vote on their boards, we will include union representation on ours."

Board Support is Crucial

Advance Illinois and TIER demonstrate a crucial ingredient in all state advocacy groups: strong, committed boards that bring added clout to the organization. “The fact that my board regularly interacts with our current state policy makers is a crucial reason Advance Illinois became such a central player,” said Steans. Andrew Erben, the Executive Director of TIER, adds, “Many of the people on our board have been at this for more than twenty years. It’s plenty clear by now that they are not backing down—we are not going away.”

4

WHEN AND WHY BOARDS MEET

A Role for Government Officials?

An old political adage sums up the advice here: In politics, never friends, only alliances. In general, civic groups decline to invite sitting policy makers to their governing board because doing so can often complicate their ability to advocate consistently for their agenda. Including public officials in meetings also risks creating a positional environment in which little gets done. Therefore, while all groups have strong working relationships with policy makers, active public officials are not drivers of these leading reform organizations. However, once officials leave office, they have more latitude to align with advocacy agendas. In fact, several former public officials chair active advocacy groups. When such high powered leadership is available, groups find it is almost always important to create partisan balance among the organization’s leaders and to ensure that the organization’s brand, not the reputations or interests of leading individuals, propels that group’s work.

5

WHEN AND WHY BOARDS MEET

A Role for Business Leaders?

When it comes to business involvement, there tend to be three variations:

- Business members completely or partially comprise the board.
- The organization works in close partnership with an affiliated business group, which enables "good-cop/bad-cop" positioning depending on political alliances.
- The group takes pains to distance itself from "business boards."

In many states, the business community has taken the lead role in providing an alternative voice in education policy. In fact, it is fair to credit the National Business Roundtable and its call for state-level affiliates for creating some of the momentum behind state-level education reform. Business involvement in education policy making is often sought both for financial backing and for the credibility that business leaders bring, especially to issues of managing large organizations.

However, we also found in these interviews that the sword of business involvement can be double-edged. Some groups reported that in their states, the "business agenda" for education has become a foregone conclusion, causing policy makers to dismiss business-aligned messengers, especially in heavily Democratic states.

"Business leadership" requires CEO involvement. Over the last decade, the model of business group advocacy has been so well studied that many are now wise to its ways. A "business voice" cannot be propped up in an organization with a few figureheads and non-business funding. Nor does the fact that someone who works for a corporation conveys "business" leadership. Business credibility only comes to an organization that is led by credible, senior business leaders (ideally sitting CEOs) whose core passion is education, that is funded primarily by businesses (as opposed to foundations whose operations are distanced from their corporate founders), and that is run by an active business board (not delegated passively to non-business staff). Perhaps most important, a business group has to run on more than a good bluff. From time to time, the leadership must call in political chits to influence education policy.

Some Cautions and Considerations:

GOVERNANCE AND MEMBERSHIP

1 **Define board roles.** Be as clear as possible about the reasons for inviting someone onto a board. Are they being asked to represent their own thinking or to represent a constituency? What is the role of the board as it relates to the organization's policy agenda? Will members be asked to contribute or help raise money? Written statements of expectations can be as helpful for the board as they are for staff.

2 **Resist micro-managing boards.** In politics, decisions are often needed quickly—more quickly than a board can gather for a discussion. In most groups, boards approve broad policy goals that guide the team's work, but leave the detailed implementation to staff. If staff must continually bring issues back to boards and committees, it slows the organization's strategic abilities.

3 **Stay nimble.** Groups that started with larger boards found that for directing key organizational issues, a smaller group was more effective at making clear decisions. If the board is large, consider charging a small executive committee with ongoing decision-making responsibilities.

4 **Focus team efforts on the job, not the board.** Board committees require staffing. Most groups preferred to stay small and nimble, keeping staff focused outward, not on the care and feeding of the organization or its stakeholders.

5 **Be transparent.** One of the first questions organizations are asked to explain is: Who drives your agenda? Resisting direct answers can keep detractors focused on that question—and fuels suspicions that there's a "hidden agenda" lurking somewhere. Transparency about who is involved in the organization, and in what way, is critical to keeping the focus off the organization and on the problems it seeks to solve.

6 **Manage relationships with elected officials carefully.** If the group wants to affiliate with educators or public officials, advisory boards rather than boards of directors seem to be the best way to include those voices.

7 **Engage the board!** Boards are as likely to dwindle if members feel irrelevant as they are if they feel overworked. Board members want to help; give them serious jobs to do.

STAFFING AND STRUCTURE

When a small group of people is motivated to solve a problem, it will be tempting to charge out, staff up, and incorporate quickly so it can begin to pull in the resources needed to support the work. But here, form should absolutely follow function. The steps taken to staff and formally incorporate are crucial, defining ones that should be taken thoughtfully.

Staffing

Without exception, every organization stated that its people are the key to its success. Unfortunately, this is where a magic formula most eludes benchmarking. The best lesson is that the more an organization is able to define what it expects of its staff, the better chance it will have of finding people to meet those expectations. And the good news is that these organizations demonstrate that amazingly talented people can be found to run small, focused nonprofit organizations for modest salaries. There is no need to compromise in the search for talent.

Incorporation

How an organization is defined in its incorporation will drive (and constrain) many aspects of how it does business. Incorporation status drives how an organization manages accounting and reporting, sets parameters around the sources from which a group can seek funding, and sets the rules for how, if at all, a group can lobby. These decisions are expensive both in terms of actual costs and how their eventual effects drive staff resources. Slow and steady might be the wisest course here.

The temptation to file for incorporation quickly can be driven by the desire to receive funds needed to launch the work. But there are mechanisms through which funders can support a lean staff and the initial research needed to get an organization started without first filing for incorporation. For example, fiscal agency or affiliation provisions enable a group to buy fiscal support and oversight from an established organization. Some groups launch as affiliates of other organizations; a move that enables them to focus more energy on solving immediate challenges.

Details on the financial and legal issues of incorporating are outside the scope of this analysis. When the time comes, organizations should consult with experts to guide them. Our aim here is to begin to describe some of the variation to help start-ups begin to understand the terrain.

More Devilish Details

Incorporation is only the beginning of the paperwork needed for formalizing an organization. A new organization must create bylaws for governance and make decisions about employee compensation packages including insurance, workers compensation, and retirement issues. It should consider whether directors and officers liability insurance is a wise investment (most likely, it is). It will at some point need to find office space, furnishings, and supplies. And don't forget about designing a web site and branded materials. The caution here is to not allow these details to overwhelm the momentum needed to convince funders, policy makers, and other important constituencies that the organization means serious business. In the start-up phase, leaders should find ways to delegate these details rather than letting attention to them drive out attention to the core mission.

1

STAFFING & INCORPORATION

Start-up Staffing

With few exceptions, most organizations started with a small team of one to three people working with the support of consultants. The consulting talent included researchers, communicators, and political strategists. The groups built up the size of their teams strategically, building out capacity as needed in policy, advocacy, and communications. Similarly, efforts to create office space and other organizational supports focused only on the essentials; these too were seen as potential drags on staff time.

The decisions about how to initially configure staff evolve from the organization's leading tactics. In those groups whose work includes grassroots mobilization, the outreach team was viewed as the most critical staff. When promoting research was the chief tactic, researchers and communications staffs were most vital. As the leading tactics changed, staff changed to reflect that. If there was one constant, it was in the need for strong outreach and communications early in the organization's work to credential the group and build its constituency.

2

STAFFING & INCORPORATION

Staffing versus consultants?

A few guiding questions might be:

- What are the leading tactics for success?
- Should that talent be in-house and available to help drive the day-to-day work?
- What projects and issues take place more cyclically?
- What talent requires specialty skills not easily found in the labor market?

Another consideration is that consultants can sometimes bring connections and visibility due to their work with multiple clients, so they can add value differently than full-time staff.

3

STAFFING & INCORPORATION

Variations for Incorporation Options

There are four big variations of incorporation that organizations might consider. For each variation, there are two considerations: the first is whether an organization is allowed to enjoy not-for-profit status and the second is who can enjoy tax benefits by giving to the organization.

- **501(c)(3)** nonprofit status enables an organization to enjoy nonprofit status and allows its donors a tax deduction for their gifts, but prohibits the organization from "substantial" participation in lobbying efforts.
- **501(c)(3)(h)** elections establish guidelines under which a 501(c)(3) organization can elect to participate in lobbying activities without loss to their nonprofit status, with varying tests for grassroots and direct lobbying.
- **501(c)(4)** nonprofit status enables the organization to lobby on issues of public policy and enjoy the benefits of nonprofit status, but prohibits funders from taking tax deductions for their donations.
- **Fiscal agent or affiliate** enables a group to receive tax-deductible donations through another organization's 501(c)(3) status, usually for an agency fee. In this scenario, the incorporated agency is ultimately accountable for the grant.

THINK ABOUT...

Questions to Help Startups Get Started

Before meeting with legal counsel to discuss incorporation options, an organization should have answers to these questions:

- How much time do you expect to spend with policy makers?
- To what extent does the organization expect to engage grassroots activists in its work?
- Does the organization want the ability to contribute to or comment on specific legislation or regulations?
- Does the organization anticipate asking the public to comment on specific legislative proposals?
- Would the organization be satisfied with conducting broad information campaigns about issues without specific reference to candidates or legislative proposals?
- Are there potential allies of the organization with whom it can partner to accomplish formal lobbying gains?
- If the organization opts for the options to lobby, can it sustain itself with the more limited pool of donors this will create?

Some Cautions and Considerations:

STAFFING AND STRUCTURE

1 **First, find people who care.** Advocacy is not a dispassionate business; it requires some fire in the belly to carry out the argument.

2 **Stay lean.** Keep the issue agenda front and center and build up staffing and infrastructure cautiously.

3 **Prioritize issues and tactics;** staff and organization needs will naturally follow.

4 **Invest time in building a constructive team.** Advocacy is hard enough without staff wearing one another down internally.

5 **Explore options** for formal incorporation carefully and don't rush to finalize details. Similarly, build staff slowly. Consultants can help to round out a team until the work stabilizes.

6 **Pay attention to diversity** among staff, especially in selecting the people to represent the group publicly. As one leader advised, you can hear the same things differently from different people.

7 **Trust you'll find top talent for a cause.** A few groups regretted not bringing full-time communications support on board sooner. One explained that they didn't realize there was so much readily available and affordable talent for hire in their labor market. The lesson, then, is to test assumptions about what talent costs and who is available. The number of smart people eager to work for a good cause can be pleasantly surprising.

FUNDRAISING AND FUNDER OBLIGATIONS

The work of fundraising is really another version of building a constituency and testing the viability of the organization's agenda; it is an important ingredient in building power. While fundraising might be a chore, it is a defining one. It pushes leaders to effectively make their case for their agenda and strategy.

Sole funding: Blessing or Curse?

Some groups started with sole funders. All have done well over time. But two lessons emerge. First, the groups that started with sole funders all said that while the security of a start-up guarantee was appreciated, all wished they had diversified sooner. And what looks like stability can be a huge vulnerability where program priorities of the funder shift. The second big lesson is that the groups starting with large donor bases had less work to do in defending the interests of their funders. It's simply harder to accuse a large coalition of a hidden agenda.

THINK ABOUT...

Variations in Funding

Start-up funding comes in two ways:

- A high profile group of funders launches and funds the group, acting as its board.
- A few foundations launch and fund the group, which then works to attract more funders.

Ongoing funding is grown by drawing from the following sources:

- Member contributions
- Foundation grants
- Corporate contributions
- Individual contributions
- Government funding to support programs
- Fundraising events
- Earned revenues

Some Cautions and Considerations:

FUNDING AND FUNDER OBLIGATIONS

1

Resist government financing. Taking funding from the government can burn hours of staff time completing compliance paperwork. Worse, it can tie the organization up in conflicts or hamper ability to hold government leaders accountable on other issues. Most groups resist money from these sources.

2

Diversify your funding base. A broad funding base can also protect any one funder from the heat that sometimes comes when a group takes a controversial stand. There is strength in numbers. Also, anticipate that, over time, even the most enthusiastic funders will take a year or so off. Some see this as a way of challenging the organization to diversify its base.

3

Know your funder's expectations. The work of fundraising is not over when the check is deposited. All funders have reporting requirements. With any funder, accept funds cautiously and evaluate whether the organization has the staff capacity to respond to a funder's reporting expectations.

TOP 10 RECOMMENDATIONS

(for start-up rabble rousers)

1 FIRST RECOMMENDATION
Hire the best people

This seems obvious, yet every organization, in the end, says its team is really the engine behind its success. Boards and founding funders can start organizations, but they can't make them great. One leader advises: "Hire people so good they leave you breathless, people so good that you have to run to stay a step ahead of them."

2 SECOND RECOMMENDATION
Focus first on issues, not on organization

Form should absolutely follow function. While the temptation will be to file incorporation papers and staff up, those temptations should be tempered by careful planning. The strongest organizations were created by a core group of concerned citizens who focused strongly on mission and purpose, then created an organization to advance that agenda.

3 THIRD RECOMMENDATION
Lead from purpose, not from function

Detractors will focus on a group's form and function, trying to find hidden agendas in the mix. The challenge for a startup will be to command as much attention to the mission of the organization—not to the organization or its leaders. When the public asks about the group's agenda, be ready with a data-rich answer. One group announced its organization as it released the results of a major study. In doing so, the organization focused the public's attention on the issues and effectively minimized the usual barrage of questions about the founding funder's intent.

4 FOURTH RECOMMENDATION
Expect to win and raise resources accordingly

Too often, advocates are satisfied working the process of politics regardless of the results, taking comfort in the "moral victories" of expressed indignation regardless of the actual outcome of a legislative session. But the best advocacy organizations expect to change laws, and then raise the resources to support that work and staff themselves accordingly. They launch with multiple-year funding commitments, acknowledging publically that they are in their work for the long haul.

5 FIFTH RECOMMENDATION
Tell compelling stories backed by powerful data

Opponents to change are effective at using emotional anecdotes about the dangers of disrupting the status quo. Data is critical to combating that strategy. But data, while credible, is unemotional. A clear, student-centered story backed by data that illustrates how many times that story is true is a powerful combination. Many organizations use it to keep students at the center of their advocacy.

6 SIXTH RECOMMENDATION
Maintain campaign discipline

The best advocates are really campaign managers who identify objectives for each cycle of policymaking and pursue those goals with the discipline of political campaigns. One leader says, "We need to be transparent about our goals and accountable for our wins and losses." He adds, "Accountability starts at home." Says another, "In each session, we tell a dramatic story and our volunteers help craft the ending."

7 SEVENTH RECOMMENDATION
Build and protect credibility

One leader warns: credibility is slow to build and easily squandered. Transparency, consistency, follow-through, and maintaining the political high road are all critical to maintaining credibility.

8 EIGTH RECOMMENDATION
Support outreach with technology

There is so much technology now available to make outreach easier and cheaper. Established groups are converting mailings list to online tools. It is easier for new groups to start building their constituencies with those tools.

9 NINTH RECOMMENDATION
Diversify funding

A few groups in this sample spoke appreciatively of a founding funder who provided them with a few stable years of running time to launch the organization. But all regretted not seeking other funders more quickly, advising that it is easier to address questions about the intentions of the organization when it supported by a larger coalition of backers. "Our funders are one more symbol that we have a broad group of stakeholders who care about our agenda," said one leader. "It's important to have broad and stable backing."

10 TENTH RECOMMENDATION
Build a clear constituency

In any organization, leadership is key. But in advocacy work, a solitary, compelling leader can be more easily dismissed when he or she is not clearly backed by a larger constituency. Power comes from relationships. Regardless of the tactics or issues, define your organization clearly in terms of who is involved. Be transparent with that information. And, be prepared to demonstrate that the people behind the organization's mission are ready to act if necessary to advance the cause.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Joyce Foundation, a Midwest-based foundation with a particular concern for the vitality of public policies affecting education, health, the environment and the economy, commissioned the original *Rabble Rousers* study in 2006 to help leaders in Illinois better understand the possibilities for creating a sustained force for education change. The foundation contracted with Cross & Joftus, LLC to conduct a benchmarking study drawing lessons from around the country. The intent was to learn from the influence of the state-based reform organizations and from any hindsight they might offer looking back over their own histories.

The goals of the original study were to identify...

- Leading organizations for civic engagement in education policymaking;
- Key variations in the models for creating and sustaining these organizations; and,
- Lessons learned across the country in these efforts, focusing specifically at the startup phase.

In selecting groups to benchmark, the researchers looked for some of the best examples in the country, initially identifying twenty or so groups working in some way to impact education reform. They further narrowed that group to ten organizations that represent a diversity of approaches (i.e., lobbying, research, legal, etc.), organizational models (i.e., membership organizations, policy vs. funder boards, etc.), and geographic balance. In addition, they considered size and organization tenure, seeking a balance on a continuum of small to large and startups to veterans.

Because the Joyce Foundation had a special interest in teacher quality issues, the original sample included groups intent on improving teacher quality. Beyond this, no particular policy lens was used for selecting groups; therefore, in some cases groups in the original sample might hold opposite views on policy issues, even though all groups would fairly be described as working for the improvement of the education system.

The following list of organizations were contacted for the original *Rabble Rousers* study; organizations in bold are now members of the PIE Network.

- The Business Education Partnership (Rhode Island)
- The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning (CFTL—California)
- The Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession (Washington)
- **ConnCAN (Connecticut)**
- **EdVoice (California)**
- **The Education Trust—West (California)**
- **The Prichard Committee (Kentucky)**
- Public Advocates (California)
- The Rennie Center (Massachusetts)
- **The Partnership for Learning (Washington State)**

One of the groups featured in the case studies in *Rabble Rousers Revisited*, the **Texas Institute for Education Reform** (TIER), was not included in the original study.

Goals for the Revised Report

We asked leading members of the PIE Network to review the original report and suggest areas that needed refreshing. Therefore, *Rabble Rousers Revisited* includes an expanded introduction, making the case why "rabble rousers" are so important to education and our nation's future, along with revisions throughout the report and the concluding top ten list. Thanks especially to Marc Porter Magee, president of 50CAN, for his careful review and many suggestions for improving the report's recommendations and to PIE Network Communications Director Karen Frankola for her careful editing on the final report.

This new report also includes case studies illustrating common challenges of starting new advocacy groups; thanks to the leaders from the six organizations featured for their candor.

The expanded section on communications was developed through the initiatives of the network's many communications directors whose member-led review of communications provided a robust discussion of these crucial efforts. With the assistance of Prime Group and Focalpoint Marketing, these members created a survey of best practices in communication based on 10 in-depth interviews and an online survey of communications personnel in 14 network organizations conducted in February and March of 2010.

About the Authors

The original *Rabble Rousers* report was written by Suzanne Tacheny, PhD, then a senior associate with Cross & Joftus, LLC and Christopher T. Cross, chairman of Cross & Joftus, LLC.

Rabble Rousers Revisted was reshaped by Suzanne Tacheny Kubach, PhD, now Executive Director of the PIE Network; Kubach wrote the expanded introduction, added case stories, and revised much of the report's content.

About the PIE Network

The mission of the PIE Network is to build, support and promote a network of education advocacy organizations working to improve K–12 education in their states and the nation. To learn more, visit www.pie-network.org.

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