

Crossing the Partisan Divide in Education Policy



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MARCH 2024

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Executive Summary

In the 2024 political cycle, the education sector is navigating through a period of significant transformation and uncertainty. This paper examines the potential for making real progress in education policy amid a complex and often polarized political environment. It briefly explores the reshaping of the educational landscape, influenced by the enduring impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the social and racial reckonings of 2020, and discusses how these changes necessitate a reevaluation of traditional approaches to education policy.

Overview of Current Education Policy Landscape

The current education policy landscape is marked by a departure from long-standing bipartisan traditions, spurred by the challenges of recent national and global events. The COVID-19 pandemic not only disrupted educational norms but also brought to light significant inequities within the system, leading to increased scrutiny and political pressures on schools and educators. The racial and social awakenings of 2020 have further complicated the educational context, pushing the sector to a crossroads where every aspect of school life is subject to intense debate and political activism. This new reality calls for an urgent examination of the driving forces behind these changes and an emphasis on a strategic and responsive approach to education policy.

The Potential for Cross-Partisan Achievements

Despite the apparent challenges, there is still significant potential for achieving cross-partisan successes in education policy. In this paper, bipartisanship is defined as the traditional collaboration between the two major political parties, symbolizing commendable compromise and collective victory. Cross-partisan, on the other hand, is used to reflect a contemporary understanding of political collaboration that transcends traditional partisan boundaries, emphasizing support from diverse political spheres, often stemming from varied motivations. Across various states, substantial reforms are being enacted, often with support that transcends traditional party lines. These reforms indicate that meaningful progress is still achievable, even in this era of heightened partisanship. This paper showcases these opportunities and offers a pragmatic blueprint for realizing similar success in other contexts.

Key Elements for Successful Cross-Partisan Education Policy Initiatives

- 1. Easy to Communicate and Broad Appeal:** Policies should be straightforward and resonate with a wide audience.
- 2. Responsiveness to Local Context:** Tailoring policies to meet local needs and garnering support from local leaders are crucial.
- 3. Political Cover:** It can be helpful to provide protection and support for policymakers advocating new or unconventional positions.
- 4. Mutual Wins:** Policies should be structured so that all parties involved can claim success.
- 5. Media Influence:** Utilizing media effectively can raise awareness and accelerate policy movements.

Additional Considerations for Policy Success

Effective education policy requires more than just a strategic approach; it demands attention to several additional factors that can significantly influence outcomes.

- **Understanding the Political Landscape:** A thorough knowledge of the political environment is essential.
- **Managing Expectations:** Recognize the limitations and possibilities within the current political framework.
- **Addressing Frontline Concerns:** Consider how teachers and school employees will be supported through the policy change..
- **Focusing on Inclusion and Expansion:** Policies should aim to expand opportunities rather than limit them.

Checklist for Policymakers and Advocates

- Assess the ease of communication and broad appeal of the policy.
- Evaluate the policy's responsiveness to local needs and contexts, and who will speak to those local concerns with credibility.
- Identify sources of political cover and support.
- Ensure the policy allows for mutual wins across the political spectrum.
- Utilize media strategically to support policy initiatives.
- Understand the political and educational landscape thoroughly.
- Set realistic goals and manage expectations accordingly.
- Consider the impact of policies on frontline education workers.
- Frame policies to enhance inclusion and expand opportunities.

Pitfalls to Avoid in Policy Development

Policymakers and advocates navigating the complex realm of education policy must be aware of potential pitfalls that can derail even the most well-intentioned initiatives. Avoiding these common mistakes is crucial to success.

- Avoid engaging in value signaling and mission creep.
- Prioritize mission critical issues rather than spreading efforts too thinly.
- Remain open to understanding and incorporating different political values and perspectives.

Conclusion

This paper seeks to encourage optimism and highlight the potential for real and achievable impact through cross-partisan collaboration, emphasizing the need for policies that genuinely serve the interests of students and communities in the current divisive political climate. Policymakers and advocates that embrace these strategies while being mindful of potential pitfalls can find a promising path toward meaningful and impactful education policy reform. This path not only addresses the current challenges but also sets a precedent for future collaborative efforts in a politically divided landscape. With thoughtful planning, clear communication, and a commitment to collaborative student-based solutions, transformative progress in education policy is not just an aspiration but a reality within reach.

INTRODUCTION

As we are in the midst of the 2024 political cycle and with pandemic-induced learning loss lingering, the question of whether substantial progress can be made in education policy amidst our current political climate is a both relevant and pressing question.

Education, traditionally a sector underpinned by bipartisan and community support, is now at a crossroads. The challenges of COVID-19 and the events following the racial reckoning of 2020 have dramatically reshaped the educational landscape. This shift, characterized by escalating political pressures on schools and educators, marks a departure from the conventional approach to education policy.

The transformation of the education sector has been rapid and multifaceted. The pandemic era provided parents unprecedented insight into educational practices, leading to varied reactions and increased scrutiny. Additionally, the actions of teachers' unions in some states and localities, and disparities in educational resources that were revealed across the country have eroded trust and intensified tensions. Consequently, every aspect of school life, from curricular decisions to extracurricular activities, has become a focal point of political activism. This new reality, significantly different from past norms, prompts an examination of the factors driving this change and the pace at which it has occurred.

The pandemic drew attention to glaring inequities and sparked widespread dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction was further fueled by social media, which transformed into organized movements that influenced political outcomes, as evidenced by significant electoral events such as the election of Governor Glenn Youngkin in Virginia. The Pew Research Center's findings on the [deepening partisan divides in K-12 education](#) underscore this trend, suggesting that [education will be a central issue in the 2024 election cycle](#).

In addition to the immediate political skirmishes lie deeper and more consequential issues: the state of student outcomes, the erosion of trust in educational institutions, and the fraying of community relationships. The focus on political divisions often sidelines critical conversations about improving educational outcomes and rebuilding community trust. While not the purpose of this paper, it is worth acknowledging that in this context, education policy advocates must vigilantly guard against losing focus on the underlying challenges affecting the well-being and future of our children and communities.

Amid these challenges, one might question the feasibility of enacting education policy that bridges the political divide. The contemporary American political landscape, with its incentives that favor ideological extremes, poses significant obstacles to cross-partisan collaboration. This polarization, compounded by a media environment that often emphasizes sensationalism, has led to legislative gridlock at both state and federal levels. However, despite these barriers, there are reasons for optimism. Across various states, meaningful education policy changes are being implemented with cross-party support, [providing a contrast to the stalemate in Washington, DC](#).

CHARTING A PATH FORWARD

In this highly polarized environment, the pursuit of cross-partisan education policies might seem daunting. Yet, contrary to prevailing skepticism, substantive cross-partisan achievements in education are possible. This paper aims to not only highlight this potential but also offer a pragmatic blueprint for bringing about similar achievements by delving into the dynamics of successful cross-partisan education policy and drawing on real-world examples and insights.

Education policy continues to hold unique potential for uniting policymakers across the political spectrum. These are not marginal adjustments; states nationwide are enacting substantial reforms with profound impacts on students and communities demonstrating that meaningful progress is possible even in an era of heightened partisanship.

Central to these successes are key factors that enable the development and implementation of effective, cross-partisan education policies. These include clear and appealing policy communication, support from local and visible champions, political cover for stakeholders, the ability for all sides to claim victory, and strategic media utilization. By understanding and leveraging these elements, advocates and policymakers can navigate the complexities of education policy, crafting solutions that address the fundamental needs of students, families, and communities.

This paper serves dual purposes. Firstly, it acts as a beacon of hope, showcasing that cross-partisan progress in education policy is not only possible but is occurring across the nation. Secondly, it functions as a practical guide, providing a roadmap for stakeholders aiming to effect meaningful changes in the education sector. Through an examination of successful cross-partisan education initiatives, we identify the critical elements underpinning these achievements, equipping education advocates and policymakers with the necessary tools to replicate these successes in a landscape where education policy can remain a unifying force amid polarization.

The insights in this paper lead to an essential realization: The field of education policy, even within our divided political climate, harbors significant potential for collaborative and impactful change. This potential is rooted in tangible successes across diverse states, illustrating that with strategies focused on transparent communication, grassroots support, strategic political maneuvering, and media engagement, policymakers and advocates can guide education policy toward meaningful cross-partisan accomplishments. These efforts extend beyond political triumphs, representing significant advancements in creating an educational landscape that genuinely serves the interests and futures of students and families. Thus, education policy emerges not just as a realm for potential cross-partisan cooperation but as a dynamic catalyst for positive societal change.

CROSS-PARTISAN VS. BIPARTISAN

In our analysis of the state policy landscape over recent years, we found numerous policy initiatives that have garnered bipartisan, or more aptly, cross-partisan support. The term "cross-partisan" is employed to reflect a contemporary understanding of political collaboration, as the traditional notion of bipartisanship has evolved. Historically, bipartisanship was highly regarded, symbolizing a commendable compromise and a collective victory. However, the current political climate often interprets bipartisanship as a capitulation to opposing views, diminishing its value for some. While we remain hopeful for a shift back to a more positive perception of bipartisan efforts, the present reality necessitates a different perspective.

Despite these changes, it is noteworthy that various policy proposals continue to receive backing from diverse political spheres. These instances of support, though possibly stemming from varied motivations, exemplify what we now describe as "cross-partisan"—a term denoting support that transcends traditional partisan boundaries, resulting in either a public demonstration of support from people with differing political philosophies or a tangible policy accomplishment.

FACTORS IN BUILDING CROSS-PARTISAN SUPPORT

As part of a larger body of work focused on rebuilding bipartisanship in education, we looked across the state legislative landscape over the past couple of years. Our focus on state-level analysis, rather than federal, is predicated on the fundamental role states play in education policy. By design, education in the United States is primarily a state responsibility. This is underscored by state constitutions, which explicitly allocate the duty of education to state governments. Consequently, states are the primary architects of educational policies, frameworks, and funding mechanisms.

While looking across the state landscape and holding small focus groups with education leaders, we found successful initiatives that have some basic things in common. These factors didn't necessarily guarantee success in all cases, but they seemed necessary if not sufficient. In other words, the presence of these factors did not automatically guarantee success, but without these factors, efforts were much less likely to be successful. Following is an examination of each factor we identified.

FACTOR 1

Problems and Solutions Must be Easy to Communicate for a Broad Base of Appeal



The first factor that emerged was the ease in communicating the policy proposal, which resulted in a broad base of appeal. When voters are able to quickly and easily understand what is being proposed and it seems logical, the result is a broad base of appeal that helps give the proposal momentum. It sounds fundamental, but we in the education policy space have a great talent for overcomplicating things, creating confusing jargon, and not communicating well. Ensuring that a policy change is easy to communicate, considers geographical context, and “makes sense” to the average family are critical components to achieving a broad base of support. As Rick Hess, Senior Fellow and Director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, says, “It’s not hard to get to 50% agreement on aspirational concepts. The hard part is the remaining 50% - where rubber meets road.” The key to securing that second 50% is boiling policy initiative details down to generally held values and communicating those values simply and clearly.

Some examples include:

- Every child is unique and education options should be available to families to meet those unique needs.
- All students can and must be taught to read.
- Students should leave high school prepared to participate in work and community.
- There is a shortage of teachers.
- Students should feel safe and supported in school.

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It would be difficult to find anyone who would disagree with these statements. They communicate the essential goals of the following policy initiatives that have gained traction in states with varying political compositions:

- School choice initiatives;
- Efforts to align reading instruction to the science of reading;
- Initiatives to advance career and technical education (CTE) and multiple pathways to work through credentialing;
- Efforts to increase teacher recruitment and retention (including certification requirements and teacher pay); and
- Initiatives to increase student wellness and engagement.

The most prominent recent example of an issue that was easy to communicate and quickly translated into policy change is the science of reading. All parents care deeply about ensuring our children are gaining the skills needed to be successful readers. When a child is having difficulty reading, it causes fear and anxiety, and affects overall academic success. So when American Public Media released the podcast [Sold a Story](#), it was as if the world stopped turning. This deeply researched series, based on reporting by Emily Hanford, underscored two fundamental points: Kids can't read, and we know why. This was a simple message that everyone could understand. Everyone knew someone with experiences similar to those highlighted in the story. It immediately took off because thousands of parents and educators found in it an answer to a deeply troubling problem they had been trying to solve. And the solution was available in the research. Policymakers and advocates could immediately take action—and they did. As of October 2023, [15 states have passed laws](#) about how reading is taught since the Sold a Story podcast aired in 2022. Demonstrating the tectonic shift related to this issue, earlier this year Gov. Kathy Hochul of New York [announced a proposal](#) to require schools to use “scientifically proven” reading curriculums by 2025 and to invest \$10 million in retraining teachers.

The teacher shortage is another example of an issue that is easy to communicate. According to the [National Education Association](#), teacher job openings started to consistently outpace hires in 2017. That gap has gotten steadily worse every year since, and in the aftermath of the pandemic, school systems reached record levels of unfilled teaching jobs. There are an estimated tens of thousands of unfilled teaching positions across the country, and more than 160,000 jobs are filled by under-qualified teachers, according to research from [Tuan Nguyen, a professor at Kansas State University's College of Education](#).

The teacher shortage is a foundational issue. It underpins everything we expect and want from schools, it is widely experienced by parents and communities, and it's extremely easy to communicate—we don't have enough teachers to teach our kids. Parents are generally supportive of their own school even when critical of the overall education system. And while parents and students can hold complicated and sometimes contradictory views on public education, they do seem to know the good teachers from the not-so-good teachers. Many parents also intuitively know the “why” behind the shortage—everything from geography to pay to subject expertise. And they know that a child's experience in school—and their success—is inextricably linked to the quality of the teachers in that school.

As a result, efforts to solve the shortage have led to some interesting cross-partisan support. For decades, the U.S. government has funded apprenticeship programs to help increase training for workers in the skilled trades. Such apprenticeship programs allow workers to train for a new career at little or no cost while also earning a paycheck. Starting in 2022, states that registered apprenticeship programs for teachers were able to tap funding from the U.S. Department of Labor to pay for on-the-job training, wages, and other support services. In January 2022, Tennessee became the first state approved by the Department of Labor for a permanent teacher apprenticeship program. [The list of states approved for such programs now stands at 16 and counting](#). Participating states include Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Texas, South Carolina, West Virginia, and Wyoming. These states—all considered solidly “red”—are tapping into federal funds being distributed by the Biden administration in support of education. But the bottom line is that policymakers in these states are able to look parents in the eye and tell them they are actively working to solve a problem that is widely understood.

FACTOR 2

Responsive to Local Context



Another important factor in successful policy efforts is having strong support that is closest to students and families—that is, local support. Ideally, visible, credible leaders support the proposal. Families and political leaders value solutions that feel responsive to the local context and are not coming from another community or state. While many communities are open to learning from their neighbors, they want to know that any new policies are specific to the concerns in their communities rather than transplanted from somewhere else to be “tried” on them. In the absence of local support, district-level or state support can also drive change, depending on the context. In most states, rural communities are wary of solutions originating from the cities—even cities in their own state. So the more local the better. To be responsive to the local context, it’s important to have the right actors involved. According to Courtney Criswell of the PIE Network, “the key to building local coalitions and identifying key champions is for local groups to spend time matchmaking and exploring areas of common interest. It is often surprising what issues communities galvanize around, and the local champions quickly become apparent.”

The new [Interstate Teacher Mobility Compact](#) is an example of a policy solution responsive to local context that is getting cross-partisan support. According to [EducationWeek](#), under this compact “a teacher who has a bachelor’s degree, completed a state-approved program for teacher licensure, and has a full teaching license can receive an equivalent license from participating states.” This effort grew out of a need to help military families who must frequently relocate. Military spouses who were certified teachers in one state were finding it nearly impossible to navigate the recertification requirements to secure employment when their spouse was reassigned to another state. Military communities are tight-knit and draw broad political support. When it became clear that military spouses were facing local employment issues due to unnecessary and burdensome requirements that were shutting out highly qualified and experienced teachers, the compact came together fairly easily.

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Currently [11 states are in the compact, but more are expected to join \(five additional states have legislation pending\)](#). What makes this policy solution powerful is that it bubbled up from local community needs (rather than being driven first at the state or federal level). Military communities were facing a dual problem: highly valued members of their community who were underemployed and a teacher talent shortage. The [burden of meeting state-specific licensure requirements without consideration of prior certifications was a barrier to making the talent-to-vacancy match](#). According to Cara Candal, vice president for policy at Excel in Ed, “Policymakers were able to respond to this local problem by making some sensible agreements across state lines that did not lower standards and allowed local districts to maintain their autonomy.” This new state compact has proven to be particularly helpful in communities that straddle state lines. Unsurprisingly, neighboring states have been the early adopters (i.e., Alabama and Florida, Kansas and Nebraska, Utah and Colorado).

Other examples of locally responsive policies are many of the state initiatives promoting career and technical education (CTE). Many states are developing CTE initiatives that are specifically sensitive to local needs. In March 2023, Idaho’s governor signed into law a bill to establish the Idaho Career Ready Students Program. While this law was passed in a Republican-controlled state, it has received strong support throughout ideologically diverse communities because it is so responsive to their local context. According to [Advance CTE](#), this program creates additional opportunities for students in grades 7-12 to experience CTE and creates a pool of grant funding for new CTE programs proposed by local education agencies (LEAs). The goal of the new law is to create 180 new local CTE programs.

According to Advance CTE:

Appropriating funding for middle school CTE programming is an action many states are beginning to look into since the earlier learners have exposure to different career pathways, the more likely they are to embrace pathways outside of the ones they witness in their immediate environment. Allowing experts from the secondary and postsecondary CTE field, experts representing state workforce needs and the legislature to work together to disseminate the funding creates an interesting opportunity to collaboratively steer local CTE programs in the direction learners need to thrive in the workforce.

Similar work has been ongoing in [North Carolina where myFutureNC](#) has brought together stakeholders from across the education and workforce development sectors to form the North Carolina Workforce Credentials Advisory Council. This coalition has worked to identify non-degree credentials offered throughout the state that are industry-valued (i.e., the credentials lead to employment in high-demand, high-growth fields that pay family-sustaining wages). To date, the council has identified more than 150 such credentials. The state’s Democratic governor and Republican legislative leadership responded by creating the North Carolina Short-Term Workforce Development Grant Program to offer no-cost pathways to industry-valued credentials using federal Governor’s Emergency Education Relief funds and state appropriations. This year, through the collaborative advocacy of myFutureNC and its partners, these grants are set to be codified and to receive recurring funding in North Carolina’s budget. This exceptional cross-partisan impact resulted from the advisory council’s members—including the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, the state’s community colleges, the North Carolina Department of Commerce, business and industry, and the Office of the Governor—who dedicated time and resources to develop criteria for examining industry-valued credentials. While each partner is responsive to its own stakeholders, this collaborative effort underscores a shared recognition that improving educational attainment and economic growth are best accomplished by coming together and leveraging each partner’s unique expertise and influence.

FACTOR 3

Political Cover

When policy change is seen as “new,” different from what has been done in the past, or just downright unpopular, a high dose of political courage is necessary. Even the most courageous policymakers can find themselves isolated and in need of political cover. This is the notion that there is protection from a constituency or higher political power for taking a risky or “new” position on an issue. Political cover can come from many sources: parents, teachers, the business community, or politicians in higher office. Governors, for example, often provide political cover for other, state-level policymakers and local practitioners.



In the case of the science of reading mentioned earlier, some courageous teachers proved to be a powerful source of political cover. The media coverage was chock full of interviews with teachers detailing their personal experience with a curriculum they felt was not serving their students. This [palpable anger and sense of broken trust among teachers](#), combined with abundant [data](#), provided good political cover for policymakers regardless of ideology.

Another great example of the importance of political cover is the recent [process Virginia undertook to revise its history standards](#).

In today’s climate, one might conclude that changing anything to do with how history is taught would be a nonstarter. The script for the debate between the “woke” and the “anti-woke” and the fights about what to teach and what not to teach are easy to imagine. Or as *Politico Magazine* put it, [“This is an almost wearily familiar narrative in our fractious republic: red-state governor declares war on ‘woke culture’ and ‘critical race theory’ and then force-feeds the glory of dead white males to an increasingly diverse society.”](#)

Local leaders and politicians want to be seen as responding to constituent interest—not simply pushing policy ideas that they believe in or have heard worked elsewhere.

But what actually happened didn’t follow the script predicted by the pundits. A draft of new Virginia history and social studies standards underwent significant revisions following a change in political leadership. Initially prepared under Democratic Governor Ralph Northam, the standards aimed to update historical and civic education. However, when Republican Glenn Youngkin was elected governor, the process was paused. The Youngkin administration then consulted with a national group of partisan experts and produced a new draft, which faced criticism for its content and approach. After public outcry, the Virginia Board of Education unanimously rejected the standards, and several months of work ensued to produce a new version. The board held six public meetings around the state and took a more active leadership role in driving the process that ultimately produced the compromise standards. “In a process like updating standards, there is always something for everyone to hate,” said Andy Rotherham, member of the Virginia Board of Education. “But there is always much more agreement than what is depicted in the media and public debate. [The trick is to try to ignore the misinformation peddling and stay focused on listening and finding the areas of agreement.](#)”

The key “political cover” in this instance was a looming and immovable deadline. Virginia law requires standards to be updated every seven years. The Board of Education was already behind its prescribed timeline, as the history standards were supposed to be updated by the end of 2022. Once the process started, there was great urgency to complete it, particularly when it fell apart and was delayed. The mandated deadline created the political cover needed to keep the process moving.

“The process ended in a long meeting in which board members went through the standards page by page, without the sustained attention of media or loud voices,” Rotherman explained. “It was slow going, but the board worked through contested issues. Our board president did an admirable job making sure everyone had input where they wanted. We did not get to agreement on everything, but in the end, a politically diverse board approved the standards on a 9-0 vote.” Despite beginning as a highly politicized process, the new standards emerged because of the Board of Education’s mandate—board members didn’t have the option to argue about their opinions, they were required to act, and to do it together. While the process was long and publicly messy, it ultimately led to standards that were eventually accepted by the board, the governor, and the community, reflecting a compromise across differing viewpoints that was widely hailed in the media as a success.

FACTOR 4

Both Sides Get a Win

Nothing is better for policymakers and advocates than “getting a win.”

That is always the goal—being able to tell your constituents and stakeholders that you got it done for them. And, as alluded to earlier, in today’s political environment, this sometimes means being able to say you beat the other side. Given this political reality, it is important for both sides to walk away claiming a win—even if each side’s “win” is completely different.



A good example of this is the growing trend of raising teacher pay. Recently [EducationWeek reported](#) that teacher pay raise proposals are gaining cross-partisan support—and surprisingly from red state governors. EducationWeek highlighted a recent proposal in Arkansas championed by Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders: *“That Huckabee Sanders’ marquee education initiative couples teacher pay raises with other, more traditional conservative education policies is one example of the growing bipartisan support for boosting teachers’ pay, a cause traditionally championed by Democrats.”* Here both sides are getting a win. Republicans are able to expand school choice, and Democrats get long sought pay increases for teachers—all while addressing the overarching crisis that is the shortage of teachers. Both Republicans and Democrats contend that their favored education policies will benefit all children, regardless of their parents’ partisan affiliations.

Another example of policy progress when both sides get a win is the rise in legislative and policy activity around civics education. Both parties are wisely paying attention to this issue because [nearly 80% of likely voters think civics education is important](#). That level of political support often translates into legislative action.

According to the Education Commission of the States (ECS) in 2022:

Currently, there is heightened interest in civics education in state legislatures, as evidenced by more than 200 bills impacting civic education in 43 states. In fact, in partnership with the CivXNow Coalition, states have made significant progress over the past two years in adopting cross-partisan legislation to strengthen K-12 civic education.

Some examples include the passage of middle school course requirements in Indiana and New Jersey, high school requirements in Oregon and Rhode Island, an experiential civic learning pilot program in Utah and the establishment of permanent state civic education commissions in Georgia and Indiana. Illinois and Nevada strengthened civics content requirements, and Florida and Virginia passed laws to encourage experiential civics learning for students.

States implementing new mandates for civics content span the political spectrum. In a majority of cases, the progress on civics starts with process—like the mandate for a civics class to be taught during the second semester of sixth grade in Indiana, or Utah’s grant program that funds pilot programs in civics education for local school districts or schools that involve professional learning at the local level. These types of programs can be characterized as wins to either political philosophy because the content is not dictated. It is guided by the state standards, and decisions are made or significantly influenced at the local level. As a result, politicians on both sides can claim the win for their particular civic goals—whether increased national pride or increased civic participation. According to Dr. Desmond Blackburn, president and CEO of Facing History and Ourselves, “It will not serve you to shy away from difficult conversations or difficult people. If the parties involved in these conversations stay committed to being open and focused on the end goal, there is a way for everyone to come away with something they value, while also moving the policy forward. There is a way to get a win for everyone, especially the students we serve.”

FACTOR 5

Using the Media as an Accelerant



Media—love it or hate it—is a powerful force in our culture and particularly in our politics. And certainly media coverage can cut both ways, accelerating policy movement and adoption or causing policy destruction and disruption. But in education, we believe it can be a powerful accelerant more often than not. Mainstream media coverage can raise awareness at a scale that simply has no substitute. In particular, journalism from credentialed sources that resists the sensationalistic tendencies of social media has particular influence and staying power.

It's important to acknowledge, however, that the media's role in education policy is not immune to political manipulation. The manner in which media narratives are framed and disseminated can often reflect underlying political agendas, shaping public opinion in ways that may not always align with objective educational needs or goals. Despite this, the fundamental role of the media in informing and engaging the public remains undeniable.

The most potent recent example of “media as an accelerant” is the swift transformation on reading policy in many states. As referenced earlier, the American Public Media podcast *Sold a Story* proved to be a stunning catalyst for policy change. With over [3.5 million downloads](#), the podcast quickly went viral and garnered tremendous media coverage.

It resonated powerfully with teachers and parents, and it was soon being [referenced by state legislators and state departments of education](#). Many credit this investigative journalism with sparking [the wave of state laws mandating](#) the use of evidenced-based curricular materials grounded in the use of phonics.

*The American Public Media podcast *Sold a Story* proved to be a stunning catalyst for policy change. With over 3.5 million downloads, the podcast quickly went viral and garnered tremendous media coverage.*

Another example of the power of the media in catalyzing policy change is the recent “parent empowerment” movement in K-12 education. Born out of the mass disruption of COVID-19, parents became more aware and more organized around influencing both content and instruction methods in their schools. Some may argue that many of these efforts have not been constructive or productive and that some of these efforts have led to the political weaponization of education policy. We agree that may be true in some instances—and the jury may still be out on its full effect. But we believe that the vitriolic encounters at school board meetings that make the national news or are circulated on social media are the noisy outliers. The fact that more parents are engaged and aware of what is happening in their child’s school is a net positive for our public education system that relies on strong trust and cooperation between schools and parents. It cannot be refuted that media coverage helped give parent initiatives greater, more scalable effects and potency. Parents organizing to demand [more education options](#), [higher-quality curricular materials](#), and [more transparency from school systems](#) are all good things for students.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

In our review of cross-partisan policy successes in recent years, the five key factors previously discussed have consistently emerged. However, experts in the field have identified additional aspects as critical for advocates to consider when attempting to build cross-partisan support. Of utmost importance is to “know thy landscape.” Advocates must understand the political landscape they are navigating—in other words, know who you are dealing with and what animates them. It is also important to check your expectations. “Bipartisanship” in the traditional sense—or as it was practiced 15 years ago—may not be possible. Getting a policy initiative across the finish line may be an achievable goal, even if you don’t get all the players to stand with each other at the press conference.

Once you know the lay of the land and your definition of success, consider the following strategic factors:

- **Shared definition of the problem:** Try to determine where each side is starting from. Several experts told us that it can be important that both sides are starting from generally the same place—meaning one side is not way out ahead of the other in terms of a stated position. It is also important that neither side has spoken in absolutes about what it will or will not accept.
- **Level of urgency:** Understand the level of urgency that stakeholders feel about the issue, and think strategically about how to leverage that urgency (or lack of it). It’s easy to understand how a strong sense of urgency motivates action. But sometimes a lack of urgency can be helpful too. If there is no urgency (immediate consequences, budget implications, etc.), that may give space and time to explore shared goals and options to achieve them.

“Recognizing the starting positions of all parties is foundational in any collaborative process,” said Hal Smith, senior VP for education, youth development, and health at the National Urban League. “This approach ensures that dialogue is rooted in understanding rather than confrontation. Equally important is gauging the urgency each stakeholder associates with the issue. While urgency can catalyze immediate action, a calmer pace allows for a thorough exploration of mutual goals and diverse pathways to success. This balance between urgency and deliberation is key to crafting sustainable and durable solutions.”

- **Effect on the front line:** Determine if the policy you are advocating is threatening to teachers, unions, or frontline school employees. The more a policy appears supportive rather than threatening to frontline school staff, the more likely you will find a broad base of support. In many states and communities, schools represent the largest employer. Therefore, issues that alarm school employees can sometimes be political nonstarters.
- **Expanding vs. narrowing:** If possible, consider framing your issue as one that includes more families/students and expands offerings or options. "It is human nature to be for inclusion/ expansion and to oppose narrowing or taking something away," explained Michael J. Petrilli, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. "So if possible, frame your policy issue as something that expands options and opportunities rather than limits them."

Experts we talked to also cautioned us on some potential pitfalls they often see:

- **Watch for value signaling and mission creep:** For advocacy organizations, not sticking to issues that are mission critical can be dangerous and counterproductive. Sometimes adjacent issues require comment; however, commenting on every issue that comes down the pike not only dilutes political capital and exhausts staff, it may strain relationships that can help accomplish the organization's most important priorities. *"Advocacy organizations must remain steadfastly focused on their core mission," said Courtney Criswell, vice president, policy & programs at PIE Network. "While it may be necessary for leaders to engage on emerging issues at key moments, engaging on every emerging issue can dilute political capital and overextend staff, potentially jeopardizing the impact we seek to make or straining vital relationships needed to achieve our core objectives."*
- **Prioritize:** Similarly, organizations should have a clearly articulated list of priorities—and they should check it twice. Some organizations fall prey to doing 10% of everything when they would get better results putting 100% into their top two priorities. "Organizations must approach their mission with focused precision, prioritizing their top objectives," said Eric Rodriguez, senior vice president of UnidosUS. "We must differentiate between mere activity and genuine progress; the former is motion for the sake of motion, while the latter moves us toward our ultimate goals."
- **Check your priors:** To find cross-partisan success, advocates and policymakers must understand what their political opponents value. According to Shaka Mitchell, senior fellow for the American Federation for Children, "Being open to listening and learning is the only way to discover opportunities for collaboration. This does not mean compromising your own principles or values. But it does mean being willing to see that sometimes the definitions of morality and evidence depend on what side you are on. As Miles Law states, ['Where you stand depends on where you sit.'](#)"

Conclusion

Despite the current political polarization, there is a tangible sense of optimism for the future of education policy and according to the Hunt Institute, [American voters and parents have clear priorities in education](#). Significant policy changes are occurring in various states, often with cross-party support, countering the stagnation in the federal arena. These policies are substantive and will have far-reaching impacts on students and communities. This paper has sought to highlight successful initiatives, identifying key common elements that have contributed to their success.

Our analysis aims to guide advocates and leaders in achieving cross-partisan education policy successes. Emphasizing cross-partisan support over traditional bipartisanship reflects a realistic approach to the contemporary political landscape. It is crucial to understand this landscape, manage expectations, and focus on inclusive policy framing. In an era of heightened political divisions, substantive policy that addresses the needs and aspirations of students remains paramount. While the challenges are significant, the opportunity to affect meaningful change in education policy through cross-partisan collaboration is both real and achievable.

Acknowledgements

This paper is enriched by the insights and expertise of a distinguished group of professionals whose contributions have been invaluable. We extend our deepest gratitude to the following individuals for their partnership and guidance: Andy Rotherham, Bellwether Education Partners; Cara Candal, ExcelinEd; Courtney Criswell, Policy Innovators in Education (PIE) Network; Desmond Blackburn, Facing Our History and Ourselves; Eric Rodriguez, UnidosUS; Hal Smith, National Urban League; Louise Dubé, iCivics; Mikaela Bozza, Aspen Institute Education and Society Program; Mike Petrilli, Thomas B. Fordham Institute; Rebecca Gau, Stand for Children; Rick Hess, American Enterprise Institute (AEI); Sekou Biddle, United Negro College Fund (UNCF); and Shaka Mitchell, American Federation for Children (AFC). Their collective expertise has greatly enhanced the quality and depth of this paper. We are profoundly grateful for their willingness to share their knowledge and for their dedication to advancing educational excellence and equity.



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