

Executive Summary

From Rethinking to Reshaping: The Many Modes of Philanthropic Policy Advocacy

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Key Takeaways

- Four primary philanthropic strategies for policy advocacy emerged in the literature: thinking, engineering, brokering, and building
- Efficacious policy advocacy can be measured by its results: when grantmakers use *thinking, engineering, brokering, and building* tools to *reshape* the policy domain even in the absence of further funding
- There is limited causal evidence in the literature about *what works* in specific contexts to achieve educational policy reshaping
- Evidence on processes of persistence and change provides a framework for surfacing *reshaping* strategies by matching *policy advocacy tactics* at the right level, to the *embedded structures* that automatically reproduce existing outcomes, which may require the simultaneous use of multiple advocacy tactics.
- While many philanthropic actors routinely align their tactics, goals, and problem definitions, this framework recommends increased strategic attention to displacing the embedded structures that persistently reproduce a given status quo. This requires attention to the question: what pressures, rewards, or structures consistently produce the relevant outcome, process, or policy?
- The potential complexity of this work highlights the need for collaborations across philanthropic actors—particularly across local, regional, and national levels—in united strategies to “move” particular policy domains.

This report summarizes existing literature on known strategies for education policy advocacy and influence adopted by philanthropic actors, and to surface directions for future work. Whereas we know a fair amount descriptively about the scope and purposes of philanthropic advocacy in the education policy arena, we know less about which strategies are most effective in establishing lasting social change. As such, the second half of this brief includes both a framework for predicting the strategies for policy influence that would be more or less effective for creating sustainable change. This report also offers some critical reflections about how “success” in this domain should be defined not only by the presence of change, but also by whether or not these changes are guided by principles of racial and economic equity, democratic flourishing, and by the instantiation of evidence-based practices.

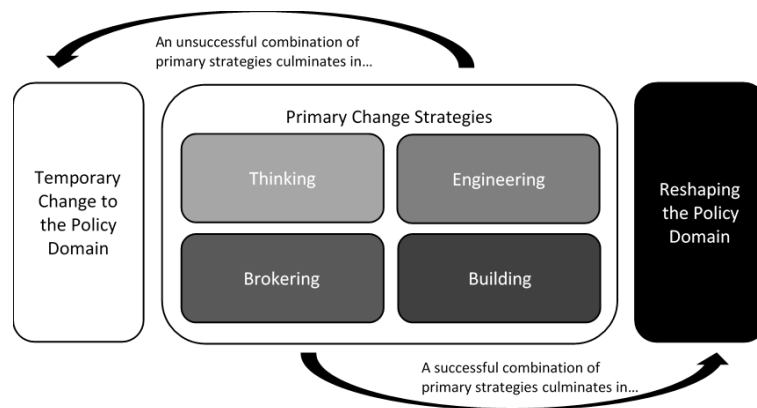
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This report synthesizes four primary forms of philanthropic policy advocacy that are emergent in the peer-reviewed literature thus far: *thinking, engineering, brokering, and capacity and coalition building*. These categories can be employed individually, but they are not mutually exclusive and can emerge together in individual projects. Lasting policy change occurs when advocates use the tools at their disposal in a way that culminates in a “reshaping” of the field. *Reshaping* denotes the use of strategies to fundamentally realign the political and practical pressures in an area of education such that lasting and meaningful social and policy change occurs. This fifth category of philanthropic strategy is ultimately a combination of the four first-level strategies. The central hypothesis fleshed out in this report is that the most potent forms of philanthropic policy advocacy occur when funder strategically employ multiple forms of influence in concert.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the five “strategies” described in this report: whereas a policy advocate may take on any combination of the four primary strategies, only certain combinations will result in a “reshaping” outcome for a given issue and context.

Figure 1. Grantmakers’ Advocacy Strategies



The second half of this report provides a framework, anchored in the available evidence, for determining what combinations will result in a “reshaped” policy domain, and what will result in “more of the same.” While there is limited causal evidence in the literature about educational policy advocacy, we can use existing evidence on processes of persistence and change to offer predictions about how foundations could achieve *reshaping* strategies in their policy advocacy endeavors.

Thinking about policy change as a matter of *reshaping* pressures, a policy advocate seeking lasting change would need to carefully analyze the mechanisms supporting the status quo and create “shocks” or strategies that will repurpose these pressures to new ends. These status quo supports or *embedded structures*, are the beliefs, processes, or incentives that persistently create and recreate educational policy outcomes without any outside intervention. For an advocacy strategy to disrupt the status quo, it must diminish existing and introduce new self-activating beliefs, incentives, rewards, or routines.

Creating persistent, systemic change requires careful analytic attention to these *embedded structures* (what they are, where they occur), the level of desired intervention and change (e.g., local or national scope), and the potential for alignment between the two (e.g., if a local foundation desires to

change something that is fundamentally national in scope). In the realm of policy advocacy, the embedded structures that require disruption could reside within the training and habits of individual teachers (e.g., reducing educator bias that leads to inequitable disciplinary outcomes in schools) all the way up through formal federal policy.

Drawing from key literature, this report argues that reshaping strategies emerge when advocates match their *policy advocacy tactics* at the right level, to the *embedded structures* that automatically reproduce existing outcomes, which may require the simultaneous use of multiple advocacy tactics. Achieving this match requires advocates to ask and answer a series of questions about the pressures, rewards, or structures that consistently produce the outcome, process, or policy they wish to change. This paper closes with a series of guided prompts, and a visual framework grantmakers can use to align strategy to embedded structures that uphold the status quo. The prompts are included below, and the visual framework can be found in the full report.

Prompts for Identifying Reshaping Strategies

- **Prompt 1: Identify the problematic outcome.** What outcome are you trying to change and for who?
E.g., the negative effects of harsh disciplinary tactics on students' academic experiences
- **Prompt 2: Identify the known inequities in the problem.** Does this process affect populations differentially? How and why? Does this affect your change target?
E.g., disciplinary actions are disproportionately affecting students of color, boys, and students with disabilities
- **Prompt 3: Identify the incentives, beliefs, organized interests, systems, or processes that continually reproduce this policy or outcome (i.e., "embedded structures").** How and why is this process persistently reproduced? What are the pressures that "lock it" into place? How do identified inequities show up in this problem?
E.g., teacher training and habit regarding discipline; teacher, parent, and administrator beliefs about students and about justice; designated spaces and procedures for traditional justice practices; district level policy
- **Prompt 4: Identify a structure or process to target in order to change the outcome.** What process are you targeting that contributes to this outcome and why? How can you use evidence to narrow this target?
E.g., introduce restorative justice teacher trainings and policies at a district-level
- **Prompt 5: Define the level of your change work.** Are you targeting processes of reproduction that occur at the individual, classroom, state, or national level? Is this a suitable level for the work given the pressures identified?
E.g. school or district level in-service PD, state-level teacher certification programs

Many funders already engaged in policy advocacy routinely attend to the alignment between policy problems, strategies, and solutions (Prompts 1 and 4). This report recommends that funders interested in maximizing the impact of their advocacy look carefully at how their strategies "shock" or disrupt embedded structures that support the status quo (Prompt 3), and which embedded structures lead to inequitable outcomes for particular groups or communities (Prompt 2). The complexity of these embedded structures highlights that a single grant and even a single funder will rarely be able to achieve systemic change unilaterally. Instead, systemic change attending to multiple embedded structures will often require collaboration with the field and amongst funders—particularly those that operate across local, regional, and national levels.