

The Annenberg Challenge: Lessons and Legacy

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Introduction

“There’s one thing they always have in the back of their minds and that’s Annenberg.” So began my former boss’s primer on soliciting major gifts for education reform. To hear him tell it, the failed Annenberg Challenge remained the ugly elephant in the room in any conversation with potential donors. To earn their support, you first had to convince them that, this time, things would be different.

In December of 1993, the publishing magnate-turned-philanthropist Walter H. Annenberg announced the largest ever private contribution to public education in this country. Half a billion dollars would go to spur innovation and collaboration in public schools. The crisis of public education—the nation’s persistent failure to educate its least well off—was front and center in the national consciousness. “Do parents trust government with the education of our children?” asked the *New York Times*.ⁱ

But how to fix public education? Centralizing services by beefing up district headquarters was the reform of the day. Privatization through vouchers was gaining increasing support. A smaller but influential bloc promoted the establishment of smaller schools.ⁱⁱ “No one has unraveled this mystery,” declared President Clinton as he celebrated the Annenberg Challenge Grants a week later at a ceremony in the Rose Garden. The president went on to herald Annenberg’s gift as the seed of widespread change, “an idea whose time has come.”ⁱⁱⁱ The first part of his statement may have been closer to the truth.

This paper began as an exploration of major philanthropic gifts to public school systems in the past several years, particularly Mark Zuckerberg’s \$100 million grant to Newark Public Schools, the Gates Foundation’s multimillion dollar support of district-charter collaboration, and the Philadelphia School Partnership’s (PSP) bankrolling of school startups and turnarounds in that city. I wanted to know how these organizations came to develop a coherent strategy for leveraging private dollars into public policy reform, if indeed they have one.

All roads led to Annenberg. The more I read, the more it became clear that my boss at PSP was correct. Over twenty years after the Annenberg Challenge was announced in the Rose Garden, its failure, or at least the perception of such, holds a profound impact on the shape of

contemporary education philanthropy. As Richard Lee Colving puts it, the initiative exposed a struggle now well known to reformers,

“between aggressively pushing school districts in a certain direction and respecting the wishes of a community and its leadership; between demanding quick results and acknowledging the complexity of school reform and the intransigence of bureaucracies; between investing in something new and injecting operating resources into a project already under way.”^{iv}

Many philanthropists continue to cite Annenberg as “an example of what they want to avoid.”^v Joel Fleishman’s comprehensive review of foundation philanthropy notes that, “Virtually all of the foundation professionals with whom I spoke cited the Annenberg Education Challenge as one of the major failures in foundation history.”^{vi}

Annenberg was education philanthropy’s Bull Run, its first sally against an opponent whose intractable nature is now well known. Some are still licking their wounds. Many others—Gates, Broad, Walton, Zuckerberg, and PSP among them—have formed their current strategy around the perceived missteps of Annenberg. But when the smoke clears, will their assessment prove accurate?

Overview

This report begins with a brief overview of privately funded school reform leading up to the Annenberg Challenge (to which I will mostly refer simply as “Annenberg”). I then move into the structure and aims of Annenberg. In seeking to answer this question, I quickly learned that Annenberg was not one initiative, but rather a diffuse and even contradictory set of initiatives. Indeed, this is a broadly voiced criticism of the program.

As a result, I center my investigation on Annenberg’s efforts in three cities: Los Angeles, Chicago, and Philadelphia. These cities constitute Annenberg’s largest investments, each at roughly \$50 million (New York followed at half that amount).^{vii} Each presents a strikingly different model of reform; together, they provide a useful snapshot of Annenberg’s efforts in the nation’s nineteen largest cities. A smaller portion of the Annenberg money was dedicated to nationwide arts programming, education reform groups, and rural education. These efforts mostly fall outside the scope of our inquiry.

I conclude with some interpretations of Annenberg’s legacy, the subsequent (and I surmise resulting) strategies of education philanthropists, and some speculation about what Annenberg may tell us about the staying power of contemporary reforms. The aim here is to consider not just Annenberg’s *direct* impact, i.e. its immediate effect on the cities it targeted, but also its *indirect* impact through its influence on current reformers. The distinction here is admittedly somewhat artificial but nonetheless useful for uncovering Annenberg’s broader legacy.

Background

The American school has a singular relationship to reform. Few institutions have garnered such persistent talk of change; and few have remained so fundamentally immovable. David Tyack

and Larry Cuban chronicle the twists and turns of education reform in their terrific *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform*, which should be required reading for every would-be reformer.^{viii}

School reform has rarely progressed beyond tinkering, as Tyack and Cuban's title suggests. Our schools have grown in the roughly century-and-a-half since they became truly public institutions. Very little else has moved in a linear fashion. Degree of individual school autonomy, structure of teachers' pay, and standardization of curriculum, to name just a few of the hottest topics in school reform, have churned through one cycle after another. The recent push for greater school autonomy follows decades of centralization. Merit (performance-based) pay had its first moment in the sun in the 1920's and again in the 1950's, only to fade from the national consciousness for a time.^{ix} The Common Core Curriculum Standards are the latest controversial promise to establish national curriculum standards. An earlier effort, in 1910, called for every public school graduate to read and write ancient Greek.^x

Some reforms did stick. The most persistent belong to what Tyack and Cuban refer to as the grammar of schooling. Our schools are divided into twelve grades, ordered by age, each comprising 180 days, lasting eight hours, and divided into distinct subjects taught in roughly one-hour blocks in self-contained classrooms. This structure has become deeply ingrained in our understanding of what a legitimate school looks like. The sheer ubiquity of the form is self-fulfilling. Nearly one in four Americans works in a school, either as a student or teacher. Even the smallest changes must move large numbers of people.^{xi}

Why don't most reforms stick? The ahistorical nature of reform talk ignores and consequently reinforces its cyclical nature. As Tyack and Cuban put it, the effect is "both a magnification of present defects in relation to the past and an understatement of the difficulty of changing the system."^{xii} These shortcomings have most often driven reformers to fail in one of two ways. First, reformers are too "intramural" in Lawrence Cremin's phrase, or, less diplomatically, too elitist. They concentrate on convincing their professional peers to the detriment of popular support. Second, reformers lack the stamina or the political longevity to see their ideas through.

For most of the 20th century, philanthropists and philanthropic foundations have largely focused their efforts on access to higher education. The introduction of Pell grants (first proposed by a Carnegie Corporation Commission) and establishment of some of the nation's preeminent historically black colleges and universities (the Rockefeller Foundation) are a testament to this work, but comprehensive interventions of this kind in public education remained rare.^{xiii}

I have uncovered just one example that truly shifted the groundwork, but it is a striking example. This is the construction of schools for African American children in the American south, driven by both Rockefeller's General Education Board and the Julius Rosenwald Fund.^{xiv} These initiatives demonstrate several elements of successful philanthropic investment in school reform. First and second, they avoided the two pitfalls previously mentioned. Third, they

tackled an area where the government proved itself unable (in this case unwilling) to shoulder full responsibility. In North Carolina, for instance, African American students received one third the funding of their white peers, on average. Fourth, they engaged the communities they hoped to serve, and used these relationships to leverage government resources. The Rockefeller initiative hired high school “representatives” to implement community organizing on behalf of school construction.¹ Both efforts are credited with lasting contributions to the educational progress of Southern Blacks.

As Rosenwald and Rockefeller made clear, public education was not immune to the aid of private wealth. But these initiatives mostly had the liberty of working outside the system. Building schools was a far simpler process than reforming an intricate urban school system. With the economic stagnation of American cities in the 1970s, however, urban education entered a time of actual and perceived crisis. The tipping point came with the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*, an alarmist manifesto issued by a Reagan-appointed committee, which warned that the U.S. schools were not producing the internationally competitive workforce the nation needed. Regardless of the report’s validity, it had a profound effect on federal policy.^{xv} Having entered office promising to shut down the federal Department of Education, President Reagan abruptly switched course.

The fallout from *A Nation at Risk* included the spread of market-based accountability, particularly government subsidization of private school attendance, as an increasingly popular mechanism for improving school performance. Minneapolis passed the nation’s first voucher law in 1989, and the idea caught on with urban business groups, which saw vouchers as a way of combatting the departure of white-collar employees.^{xvi} Despite a growing national economy, post-industrial cities such as Philadelphia, Chicago, and to a lesser extent Los Angeles remained mired in fiscal crisis. Over the course of the Reagan years, the five largest U.S. cities saw a 9 percent decrease in population alongside a 22 percent increase in the number of residents living in poverty.^{xvii} Now facing the threat of competition, school districts were open to exploring new modes of collaboration and seeking any chance to strengthen to their dwindling revenue.

What was the Annenberg Challenge?

Walter Annenberg was the product of privilege. His father was the rags-to-riches millionaire Moses Annenberg, publisher of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, among other influential papers. The son inherited his father’s business acumen before inheriting his wealth. By the time Annenberg graduated high school, he had turned his poker winnings into hundreds of thousands of dollars on the stock market. A few years later, he dropped out of Wharton to play the market at higher stakes, joining a Wall Street firm, earning over \$3 million, and losing it all in the Crash of ’29. He was 21 years old. Annenberg rebuilt his empire from scratch, founding *Seventeen Magazine* and then *TV Guide*. He parlayed his fortune into influence and proved adept at politics, serving as President Nixon’s ambassador to Britain, and then as a trusted advisor to President Reagan.^{xviii}

Annenberg's background and willingness to take bold steps informed his philanthropy. He founded two schools of communication, something quite new at the time (the first, in 1958, at the University of Pennsylvania and later, in 1971, at the University of Southern California). In 1989, he sold *TV Guide* to Rupert Murdoch and devoted himself to philanthropy full time. The exact genesis of Annenberg's commitment to education remains unclear. At the Rose Garden ceremony he suggested that he first became concerned with youth violence and saw education as the most promising solution. He also spoke in glowing terms about the power of education. "It makes me frightened for the future of my country," he said. "Education is the only answer. It's the glue that holds civilization together. Without it, we would go back to the Dark Ages."^{xix}

Annenberg's connection to the University of Pennsylvania had facilitated a friendship with Vartan Gregorian, who had served as dean and provost there before taking the helm at New York Public Library. Gregorian was a European and Middle Eastern historian by training, but he had developed a strong interest and expertise in public education during his time at Penn, which would later support his appointment as head of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Annenberg turned to Gregorian for advice. Gregorian brought on board David Kearns, a businessman turned education advocate who had served as education secretary under the first President Bush, and Ted Sizer, a professor of education at Brown University, author of *Horace's Dilemma* and founder of Essential Schools, a movement to maintain a commitment to deeper learning. Gregorian and Kearns identified partners in the target cities while Sizer and his newly endowed Annenberg School of Education at Brown led the evaluation.^{xx}

The resulting product held three significant differences from any previous philanthropic efforts. First, it was big. Funds went to cities and towns throughout the country, including \$285.6 million to the nine largest school systems, \$19.5 million to arts education, \$50 million to rural schools, \$12.5 million in "special opportunity grants" for innovative urban projects, and \$132.5 million to national school reform organizations. Over the course of its five-year cycle, from 1995 through 2000, the Annenberg Challenge ultimately sparked roughly \$1.2 billion of investment, dwarfing any previous contribution to education reform.^{xxi}

Second, the Annenberg Challenge was aimed at "systemic reform," changing the way public school systems operate. However, this aim may have been incompatible with its third distinction, which was deference to the aims of local communities.^{xxii} Gregorian and Kearns enlisted local universities in the task of identifying or initiating a local organization to apply for and manage the grant. Deference to local authority may have derived from a desire to find a third way beyond the two dominant reform ideas of the time—centralization of services and market-based accountability. Although he was a devoted Republican, Annenberg's education program was decidedly apolitical. In theory, the Challenge would combine the tactics of a community foundation with the spending power of a national player. In practice, neither funding nor oversight may have been adequate to achieve systemic reform.^{xxiii}

Los Angeles

Annenberg awarded \$53 million to support reform efforts comprising eleven of the eighteen districts in Los Angeles County, most notably the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD).

The Annenberg Challenge happened at a critical moment for Los Angeles. State legislation had recently lowered the cap on the number of students allowed in each classroom, an ill-fated move that left districts scrambling to acquire additional teachers. LAUSD was also reeling from a recent ballot initiative forbidding bilingual education. Amidst this turmoil, a coalition of local reform advocates calling themselves Los Angeles Educational Alliance for Restructuring Now (LEARN) pushed for greater decentralization of LA schools.

Into this mix came the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project (LAAMP), the Challenge's local manager, composed of USC and UCLA education experts, community advocates, and representatives from the business community. LAAMP began from the premise that the critical point was "instability in students' educational environments."^{xxiv} They believed this instability was rooted in "inconsistent policies for curricula, instruction, assessment, and discipline...the isolation of school staff from one another... and a high rate of student, teacher, and administrator transiency, especially in those schools serving the poorest students."^{xxv}

LAAMP's intervention rested on the new concept of the School Family, small networks designed to improve communication between and among schools. LAAMP established 28 school families, comprising 247 schools and 200,000 students. The program also expanded professional development opportunities, particularly for new and non-credentialed teachers, with the aim of reducing the negative effects of teacher turnover. Finally, LAAMP pushed for School Families to involve parents in new aspects of decision-making.

Despite these changes, LAAMP did not result in a statistically significant difference in test performance compared to non-LAAMP schools. Perhaps there were smaller victories. No doubt the program was popular among teachers and parents, though the official evaluation lacks survey data that might confirm this claim. Further, there may have been a lag to some benefits. As the report pointed out, many of the gains from new collaborative networks are delayed by the work of settling into the new infrastructure. The long-term benefits are difficult to assess but fruitful to contemplate. LAAMP's community engagement efforts seem to have been a success.^{xxvi} In the years since, Los Angeles has maintained an unusually broad base of support for its education initiative, a phenomenon Sarah Reckhow contrasts with New York City.^{xxvii} Perhaps this is an outgrowth of LAAMP's efforts.

Chicago

Chicago was reevaluating a redistricting initiative of its own. The 1989 Chicago School Reform decentralized power by relocating it from the city school board to localized school councils (LSCs). When the Annenberg Challenge was announced four years later, community members were much more engaged in the decision-making process, but there were few tangible measures of progress, and business leaders were growing impatient.^{xxviii}

Three local education activists saw the Annenberg Challenge announcement as an opportunity to breathe new life into Chicago's decentralized system. Immediately following the Rose Garden announcement, they began writing a proposal. Chicago's first steps here are better documented than many other cities' because one of the three leaders was Bill Ayers, a local education activist and former political radical who would later gain national attention for his

connections to then-presidential candidate Barack Obama. The proposal called for three broad reforms: 1) giving teachers more professional development and allowing them more time to prepare their lessons 2) decreasing isolation among and within schools, and 3) reducing school size.^{xxix}

The first two themes aligned roughly with Los Angeles's work, while the third echoed a then-popular view among scholars that small schools were inherently better learning environments. New York City's Challenge program was almost entirely devoted to the establishment of small schools. Collaboration was the heart of the reform. Ayers and his fellow authors convened a network of seventy local community and education advocates, then whittled it down to a thirty member working group for regular planning meetings.^{xxx}

The ad hoc group founded by Ayers and company succeeded in its efforts to secure funding and incorporated itself as a non-profit named the Chicago Annenberg Challenge. Barack Obama, then a 33-year-old civil rights lawyer, was its founding board chair.^{xxxi} Then the hard work started. The Chicago Challenge decided on a more broadly construed version of Los Angeles's School Family plan. Chicago's plan included not only schools but also social service agencies, community groups, universities, and cultural organizations. The Chicago Challenge put out a request for proposals (RFP) and local organizations applied. It was a bold and ambitious idea, but only half wrought. "We had a lot of forced marriages," admitted Ken Rolling, the eventual executive director of the Chicago Challenge. The process did not run as smoothly as the organizers might have hoped. Organizations came together to chase dollars, but many had no real plan for collaborating.^{xxxii} But some still regarded the process optimistically. "It kept the light of positive, progressive education shining ... Annenberg was really about investing in teaching, investing in schools working together, and trying to focus on educational improvement issues," said Anne Hallett, one of the initial organizers.^{xxxiii}

The matchmaking process was not far underway when everything got turned upside down. Frustrated with the condition of the schools, Mayor Daley seized control, relieving the LSCs of much of their authority. Suddenly the Chicago Challenge's embrace of decentralization became a political obstacle. The mayor replaced his former school district superintendent, a supporter of the Challenge, with his budget director, Paul Vallas, who immediately moved to take control of the Annenberg money. In this he did not succeed, but the city's schools soon found themselves caught in the crossfire between the Chicago School District and the Challenge. The former emphasized "control of spending and operations, rote education, and testing," while the latter stressed "innovation, networking and teacher skills."^{xxxiv} While schools may have preferred the Challenge approach, they knew on which side their bread was buttered. Any gains made by the Chicago Challenge in its initial efforts were quickly reversed.

The picture in Chicago looked entirely different from Los Angeles. Chicago's network was more involved, and more problematic. Both initiatives enjoyed broad community support, but the Challenge was stymied by opposition from the District, while LAAMP faced little. In the end, though, the academic results are the same. Chicago's Challenge schools improved their scores over the course of five years, but not at a significantly higher rate than comparable non-

Challenge schools. We now turn to Philadelphia, which offers a third model of district collaboration, in this case complete synchronicity, and a third route to disappointing results.

Philadelphia

As a splash-making article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* noted shortly after the Annenberg announcement, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) was “A District in Distress.”^{xxxv} Of the 220,000 students in Philadelphia’s schools, half came from families on welfare. On any given day, approximately 55,000, or one in four, were absent from school. Of those entering ninth grade, forty-nine percent failed to advance to tenth grade the next year. Over half the schools were severely segregated, with white upper-class residents clustering in the bucolic outskirts of the city. Overall, the district was funded far below the rate of its wealthy suburban counterparts. The official evaluation of Philadelphia’s Annenberg initiative admitted that “The annual fiscal crisis of the school district became one of the few constants” of the following years.^{xxxvi}

Into the mix stepped David Hornbeck, appointed by Mayor Ed Rendell as the new superintendent of SDP. Hornbeck arrived from his previous post in Kentucky with a reputation for commitment to results and a bold approach. It is no wonder that Walter Annenberg embraced Hornbeck’s reform plan. Like Annenberg, Hornbeck was a risk-taker. When the state declined to increase funding substantially, Hornbeck threatened to pass an unbalanced budget, which would have required Philadelphia schools to shut down before the end of the academic year.

Philadelphia’s Challenge dollars were managed by Greater Philadelphia First (GPF), a collaborative of business leaders who feared for the city’s economic future, but in truth Hornbeck called the shots. While the \$50 million from Annenberg represented a small part of the district’s \$1.45 billion operating budget, it was a crucial addition to discretionary spending, and Hornbeck intended to use every penny. As in Los Angeles and Chicago, reforms concentrated on decentralization and professional development, but here decentralization was meant to progress alongside greater district-wide coordination and focus on test performance. It was not a sustainable contradiction and perhaps constituted the fatal flaw of Children Achieving, as Hornbeck’s reforms were called.

Decentralization consisted of three main approaches. Like Los Angeles and Chicago, the district established smaller networks of schools. In Philadelphia twenty-two “clusters” were each aligned with a new office responsible for both administrative and curriculum support. Hornbeck regarded the clusters and their oversight bodies as “the engines of reform.”^{xxxvii} Within the clusters, local school councils (LSCs) incorporated parents in the apparatus of decision-making. Larger schools were divided into small learning communities, each overseeing approximately four hundred students, stressing teacher collaboration within these smaller units. However, as in Chicago, theory did not align with practice. The clusters were meant to empower individual schools, but there was wide variation in their preparedness and the strength of their support.

Children Achieving also incorporated increased professional development with the particular aim of combating high teacher turnover. A series of “summer institutes” organized by core subject area was widely regarded as a success and would not have happened without Challenge funding.^{xxxviii} Children Achieving included a district-wide curriculum initiative and an increased emphasis on testing results. These reforms were envisioned as the primary vehicles of a comprehensive strategy pursuing: 1) fair funding 2) standards 3) accountability 4) decentralization 5) leadership and support 6) better coordination of resources 7) civic and parent engagement, and 8) “doing it all at once,” meaning that all the reforms were meant to be pursued in concert.

The program’s official evaluation lists the last of these as its greatest flaw. “The urgency of ‘doing it all at once’ created pressure on central office staff simply to ‘roll out’ the reforms and move on to the next priority.”^{xxxix} The result was a bunch of hastily implemented reforms, few of which stuck after Hornbeck’s exit. Relatedly, the Children Achieving’s hasty implementation left little room to build broad coalitions of support, as in Los Angeles and Chicago. As a result

“the culture of the district, its history of reliance on line authority, and the relationship of the central administration with its potential partners, including the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, its own leaders, state officials, and the business community, all affected the supply of social capital.”^{xl}

Tack and Cuban’s concept of the grammar of schooling is helpful to keep in mind here. Faced with an overwhelming rush of reforms and a deficit of support, the people most critical to the plan’s implementation fell back on a more familiar set of structures and procedures. The report cites lack of teacher buy-in as the most crucial failure in coalition building.

The emphasis on testing was a third flaw. There is substantial evidence that Children Achieving increased test-focused instruction in a manner inconsistent with deeper learning. The plan also lacked flexibility. The district’s test scores did increase over the course of Children Achieving, but they began to taper off after the initial few years of higher stakes in testing. This pattern has been observed elsewhere when increased test-preparation was instituted and as a result part of Philadelphia’s testing gains have been written off.

Hornbeck and company underestimated the amount of time and support needed to implement the plan. An interesting case here concerns the LSCs. Under the plan, LSCs were intended to work closely with school principals, including advising on hiring and guiding alignment with new test performance-based metrics. This was a tall order for the new councils, which had little previous experience with these issues, but the district offered minimal training or other support. Even central office staff was often unclear about the plan’s requirements and their role amidst the dueling drives for decentralization and greater accountability. As a result, the effectiveness of LSCs varied widely and many principals kept them at arm’s length.

The fifth and final crucial flaw cited by the Children Achieving evaluation is the plan’s lack of flexibility. Hornbeck’s firm resolve, in particular his insistence on “do it all at once,” discouraged

intervention when the just-discussed flaws became clear. As a result, disenchantment with many of the plan's tenets only grew. When Hornbeck left office in 2000, resigning in protest over yet another state budget shortfall, Children Achieving effectively came to an end. Without a broad base of support, the reforms had little chance of survival when the governor took control of the school district the following year. The twenty-two clusters were disbanded that same year.

Despite its flaws, Children Achieving did show some short-term gains in test-performance. Gains were substantial for elementary schools, mixed for middle schools, and negligible for high schools. The evaluation's authors hypothesize that the initiative had stronger results in elementary schools because cluster-led professional development opportunities offered stronger support to elementary school teachers. As mentioned, focused test preparation may account for some of the testing gains, but some are real, particularly considering that Philadelphia expanded the number of students being tested during this period, including a higher number of disadvantaged and special education students. Professional development measures, in particular the summer learning institutes, were well received by teachers and also showed some results on student outcomes, particularly in schools where there was already a culture of collaboration. As the evaluation explains, "well-implemented small learning communities were connected with teacher reports of higher levels of professional community," which in turn were connected with student achievement in elementary schools.^{xli}

Thus, Philadelphia's Challenge reforms in some ways, particularly in their emphasis on decentralization and increased collaboration, paralleled other Annenberg-led initiatives in Chicago and Los Angeles. In other ways it was entirely the reverse. Where LAAMP and the Chicago Challenge existed alongside their districts, albeit with varying degrees of cooperation, Children Achieving was very much a product of the SDP and its superintendent. Where LAAMP and the Chicago Challenge enjoyed mostly broad-based support, Children Achieving was a top down measure. And while LAAMP and the Chicago Challenge showed negligible short term testing gains with potentially long term benefit to the policy-making apparatus, Philadelphia enjoyed short-term gains with little sustained impact.

Interpretations of the Annenberg Challenge

Most foundation professionals consider the Annenberg Challenge a failure. On *why* it failed, consensus is harder to find. Below are some of the most prevalent arguments explaining Annenberg's failure, and a few maintaining its success.

Interpretation 1: It Failed Because Philanthropy Can't Fix Schools

This is an extreme view but one worth considering. Perhaps the means for education reform is the free market. There is simply no scalable model, and passing the buck to districts won't help, because districts don't have the answer either.^{xlii}

Interpretation 2: It Failed Because It Had the Wrong "Theory of Action"

Theory of action was a fresh concept at the time of Annenberg's launch. The term is meant to signify the process by which a desired outcome can be achieved. Chester Finn and Marci

Kanstoroom, writing for the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, suggest the existence of theories of action for improving public school quality. First: districts and schools have the capacity to do a better job, but they need more money or flexibility. Second: districts are cash-adequate but innovation-poor. They need an infusion of expertise, usually more outside experts playing what Finn and Kanstoroom call “school doctor.” Third: districts underperform because our expectations of them are too low, or because they receive mixed messages from policymakers. The solution is higher standards, incorporating challenging curriculum requirements and/or test-based accountability. Fourth: enriching, enlightening, or even challenging districts won’t help because they are the problem, not the solution. More specifically, districts’ monopoly on education services precludes improved outcomes. The solution is market-based accountability, commonly referred to simply as “choice,” the most common vehicles of which are vouchers and charter schools.

The authors posit that the Annenberg Challenge failed because it mistakenly placed faith in theory two. The Fordham Foundation favors solutions three and four.

Interpretation 3: It Failed Because Annenberg Didn’t Have a Theory of Action

As Fleishman puts, the Challenge “was essentially a set of disjointed and inconsistent programs, guided by no overarching strategy, that produced outcomes that were mixed at best.”^{xliii} “It was a sad waste of resources, all resulting from plunging ahead in doing things before carefully thinking about what to do,” says William Damon, a professor of education at Stanford.^{xliiv}

Interpretation 4: It Failed Because its Implementation was Flawed

Perhaps Annenberg had the correct theory of action but failed to implement it correctly. There are several theories here.

- 1) Too diffuse. As Harold Williams, former president of the J. Paul Getty Trust and a board member of LAAMP puts it in the Los Angeles context “We spread ourselves too thin ... If we had taken on fewer school families and focused our dollars and human resources on those, we would have accomplished more.” Stakeholders in other cities agree that, while the Annenberg Challenge money was significant, it was quickly eaten up by a citywide effort.”^{xlv}
- 2) Not enough support. Related to the last point, this one holds that the grant managing process did not involve enough direct communication with organizations on the ground.^{xlvi}
- 3) Funding was consumed by districts. Annenberg’s gift was large, but compared to the budgets of the nation’s largest school districts, it was relatively insignificant. The grant became what Guilbert C. Hentschke, dean of the school of education at the University of Southern California (a beneficiary of the Annenberg family and key participant in the Los Angeles Challenge), calls “the classic definition of professional reform.” Hentschke means that the Annenberg money paid for something that would have happened

anyway. “The school districts and the schools gobbled up those grants like lunch, and they were ready for the next one.”^{xlvii}

- 4) Lack of oversight. While the Challenge’s deference to local authority was well intentioned and perhaps admirable, there is no denying that it lacked adequate oversight. Said Anne Hallett, one of the key players in Chicago, “ it was a lot of money with very few strings.”^{xlviii} Enacting lasting change does involve breaking some eggshells, something the Challenge proved unwilling to do. “Systemwide change is in the end political,” concluded Fordham, “and it requires political action. It is not collaborative. It is confrontational to a point and then negotiable.”^{xlix}

Interpretation 5: It Succeeded Because it Maintained School Autonomy

In all three of the cities we have considered, the Challenge to some extent slowed a push to centralize services. In some ways this paved the way for the spread of greater school autonomy through charter schools. As Hallett puts it, Annenberg “kept the flame alive for a decentralized, community based reform even as the system was moving in another direction.”^l

Interpretation 6: It Succeeded Because it Laid the Groundwork for Collaboration

Collaboration is a hard thing to measure, but there is no question that the Challenge established new connections where they would not otherwise exist. Many of the intermediary organizations created or bolstered by the Challenge still exist today, such as the Philadelphia Education Fund, and they prove essential pieces of the education policy machinery amidst an ever more intricate network of stakeholders.

Interpretation 7: It Succeeded Because it Drew Attention to Important Issues

The Annenberg Challenge both added to a growing national concern with educational outcomes and drew attention to some success stories in the nation’s schools. More compelling, though, it catalyzed powerful case studies and insightful scholarship. In addition to the funding going to Brown’s Annenberg Institute and other national research efforts, the Challenge funded a research evaluation of the program in every one of its participating cities, each led by a local research organization.

Improving a system as complex as the American school system requires controlled change and careful attention to its effects. The Challenge involved both. As the Annenberg Institute retrospective posits, while “the Annenberg challenge has neither created nor validated simple recipes for reform, the sites’ experiences are rich in lessons about both reform and research.”^{li}

Finally, the Annenberg Challenge constituted a call to action for philanthropic investment in public education. As I began this exploration by noting, education reform continues to suffer an Annenberg hangover, but it has also transformed the lessons and disappointments of Annenberg into a new view of reform. In the past decade, contributions by the Gates, Broad, and Walton foundations have incorporated their understanding of Annenberg’s shortfalls in their own strategy. In this regard, its impact should not be disregarded.

In Annenberg's Wake

Beyond Annenberg's example, the increasing influence of philanthropists in education reform can be traced to three forces: First, the implementation of test-based accountability nationwide has intensified the call to action. Second, the proliferation of charter schools has created new levers of accountability, to borrow Reckhow's phrase, for driving education policy. Third, extreme wealth has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small number of people, among whom there is a growing tendency to give, and to give during their lifetimes.ⁱⁱⁱ

The convergence of these trends has led philanthropists to play an ever greater part on the education reform stage. At the same time, these individuals and organizations have not been content simply to double up on Annenberg's efforts. Rather, they have made a concerted effort to avoid what they see as the mistakes of the Challenge. A full overview of contemporary education reform spending is outside the scope of this paper, but a few broad trends should be noted. Each can be seen in its own way as a reaction to the Challenge.

First, and perhaps most significant, reformers have focused their efforts. This does not mean they have eschewed national influence but rather that they have used concentrated efforts to catalyze broader change. The first of two predominant strategies in this regard is the use of city-level reforms to pilot new policies. One example is the introduction of new teacher evaluation systems in Washington, DC, and Newark. In both cases, controversial policy changes were incentivized by close to \$100 million in philanthropic funding, the former in 2010 from mainly the Walton Foundation and the latter in 2013 through Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. The second strategy is to use competitive grant making processes to incentivize the pursuit of desired policies. The Gates Foundation used this strategy during the federal Race to the Top application process by offering support, and a greater likelihood of increased federal funding, to states that met its requirements. These reforms can be seen as a clear reaction to Annenberg's diffuse approach.^{liii}

Second, the Gates Foundation in particular has exercised strict oversight of the organizations it funds. Indeed, grantees have often complained that Gates money comes with unclear expectations and too much red tape.^{liv} The big three (Gates, Broad, Walton) attempt to identify best practices and seek out organizations that will replicate them. The departure from Annenberg's approach is obvious.

Third, the top reform organizations have largely adopted mutually reinforcing agendas. In Chicago and Philadelphia, the Annenberg Challenge saw one vision of reform halfway implemented, only to be subverted by a competing vision. In Chicago, this competing vision came from the mayor's office; in Philadelphia from the governor's. As Sarah Reckhow convincingly demonstrates, philanthropic players are investing their dollars in the same coalitions and initiatives, ensuring that their visions will at least be aligned with one another.^{lv}

Overall, these strategies have allowed philanthropists to implement system-based change, which the Annenberg Challenge claimed to desire but failed to accomplish. Whether the *direction* of these reforms is the right one is of course a controversial matter. Reckhow provides

a helpful framework, pointing out that the same strategies that achieve immediate policy change may also give short shrift to community engagement. While this does not prevent rapid implementation, it does weaken “policy feedback.”^{lvi} This is the process through which policies build the groundwork for their own survival. Voting enfranchisement measures are a prime example of strong policy feedback, as once implemented they are mercifully hard to revoke.^{lvii} Comprehensive entitlement programs, such as Social Security, are another. Where these built-in mechanisms are lacking, there is no substitute for the hard work of sincere community engagement.

The question, then, is whether contemporary reforms will achieve a lasting impact or will flame out in the manner of Children Achieving. This is a question toward which observation and further research can be fruitfully directed. If nothing else, the Annenberg Challenge shows that systemic reform is a tricky process, and a hard one to measure. Or, as Chicago Challenge director Rollins put it, it is “a messy, democratic process.”^{lviii}

Conclusions

Over twenty years after its Rose Garden debut, the Annenberg Challenge remains a specter in education reform philanthropy. The Challenge was the first gift of its kind, over half a billion dollars for broad-based education reform. Philanthropists had dabbled in public education policy before, and the Rockefeller and Rosenwald rural school construction initiatives stood as a testament to the potential of private investment, but no one had ever tackled the problem at this scale.

Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Chicago were the project’s largest recipients, each receiving roughly \$50 million between 1995 and 2000. All three cities faced substantial challenges, but in each a different political landscape shaped the outcome. Los Angeles had broad-based community support but few tangible results. Chicago also had broad-based support, but it was frustrated by a clash with the political establishment. It also showed few measurable academic results. Philadelphia’s program was subsumed by a comprehensive district overhaul, which showed some promising results but was then overturned by new leadership.

In Chicago and Los Angeles, at least, the Annenberg Challenge invested in broad-based support. Whether the resulting policy feedback will pay off in the long run remains an open question. The history of education reform shows that the American school is a uniquely inflexible institution. Without strong policy feedback, contemporary reforms may be prone to just one or two turns on the education reform merry-go-round. Only time will tell.

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