



Developing Education Policy: A Cross-Stakeholder Effort

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New York City policy experts reflect on how they co-created policy recommendations that incorporated community expertise.

Public discourse about education can often be reduced to sound bites and silver bullets, ignoring decades of research on what actually works in schools. During the 2013 New York City mayoral race, the coalition A+ NYC – made up of community organizers, social service and advocacy groups, and other citywide and statewide groups – set out to ground the education conversation in research and proven practices. In a campaign called PS 2013, A+ NYC brought together education experts and practitioners as part of a “charrette” process that gathered input from a range of education stakeholders on what an education agenda for New York City should look like.

Even before the charrette process started, A+ NYC engaged policy and advocacy partners in creating an online “policy hub” – a collection of briefs summarizing research and best practices in two dozen key education policy topics – as a resource for reporters, elected officials, and advocates.¹ After the charrette workshops were completed, A+ NYC recruited a cross-sector design team of educational experts and charged them with blending the community expertise from the workshops with evidence-based research to create a set of education policy recommendations that reflected both community priorities

1 See <http://aplusnyc.org/policy-hub>.

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and evidence-based best practices. This first draft of solutions went on the road in an adapted school bus that toured the five boroughs of New York City to gather a second round of feedback, which the design team incorporated into a final “education roadmap.”²

All the design team members generously volunteered their time and worked closely with staff from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (AISR), which provided technical assistance to A+ NYC, to create final products that would contribute to shifting the narrative about public education citywide. Megan Hester, AISR’s principal associate for New York City organizing, interviewed four design team members to get their perspectives on this process for developing policy.

Phil Weinberg was recently appointed deputy chancellor for teaching and learning in the New York City Department of Education. Previously, he served for twelve years as principal of the High School of Telecommunication Arts and Technology (HSTAT), whose nearly 1,300 students come from all over Brooklyn and reflect the rich ethnic and socioeconomic mix of the borough. The school has consistently earned the highest marks on New York City’s school rating system and has been named a “High Achieving, Gap Closing” school by New York State. Mr. Weinberg has been an educator for twenty-eight years, including twenty-six at HSTAT. In 2012 he received the Fund for the City of New York’s Sloan Award for Public Service.

Kim Sweet directs Advocates for Children of New York, a not-for-profit organization that promotes access to quality education for all children in
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2 See Billy Easton’s and Fiorella Guevara’s articles in this issue of *VUE* for a detailed description of A+ NYC, the charrette process, the bus tour, and the education roadmap.

New York City’s schools. Previously, she served as associate general counsel for New York Lawyers for the Public Interest and taught for two years as an adjunct professor at the Urban Law Clinic of New York Law School.

Doug Israel is the director of research and policy with The Center for Arts Education in New York City, where he directs the organization’s strategic research, policy, and advocacy initiatives aimed at improving and expanding music, dance, theater, and visual arts instruction for public school students.

Liz Sullivan-Yuknis is the Human Right to Education Program director at the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, where she works with parents and advocates to promote policy change in public education to guarantee students’ right to dignity and a quality education. Her research has documented human rights violations in U.S. public schools and provided trainings to parents, youth, and organizers on incorporating human rights into their advocacy. She works with the Dignity in Schools Campaign to push back against zero-tolerance school discipline and promote alternative approaches that create positive school climates.

Q How did you and your organization contribute to policy development as part of the A+ NYC policy hub and the PS 2013 initiative?

A *Phil Weinberg*: I was very graciously asked to join the design team, and there were a bunch of smart people around the table looking carefully at what had happened over the last twelve years in New York City schools. It was really interesting to be able to triangulate their ideas with mine, to hear what they had noticed and seen, and just be part of what I thought was a fascinating discussion.

Kim Sweet: My organization was able to engage on many levels. We initially

agreed to co-host a charrette workshop, and we sent out ads about it to our mailing list. Although we're not a grassroots organization, we deal with thousands of parents every year. We co-hosted with The Center for Arts Education, which was a good partner, and we got a decent turnout. Before that, because we have expertise in a lot of the subject areas that were under consideration, we did five memos for the policy hub, which was a great way to get our information out there.

I was also on the design team trying to come up with the final recommendations. There was a lot of information coming in, first from the charrette and then from the bus, and the effort needed people to sift through that information and come up with positive recommendations.

Doug Israel: As an early participant in the PS 2013 process, The Center for Arts Education helped develop the arts education section of the A+ policy hub and played a role in shaping the overall policy priorities of the coalition. Our executive director Eric Pryor and I were also able to meet with candidates during the campaign season and discuss the priorities of the coalition. We have since developed an implementation plan for the arts education policy recommendations that outline steps the next mayor can take to improve and expand arts education in city schools.

I'd like to also add that over the course of the campaign season, members of the coalition have been supportive of our efforts, outside of the PS 2013 process, to advocate for expanded arts education for public school students, and we have supported efforts and campaigns of others as well.

Liz Sullivan-Yuknis: The National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI) and the Dignity in Schools Campaign-NY (DSC-NY) contributed policy questions and recommendations

for transforming school climate and discipline based on the policy goals developed by the students, parents, educators, and advocates in our coalition. DSC-NY has been working since 2010 to revise the New York City School Discipline Code and expand resources and training for educators in order to limit and reduce the use of suspensions and arrests and implement positive approaches to discipline, like restorative justice, counseling, and peer mediation. Through PS 2013, we worked with other allies and coalitions to combine the goals of DSC-NY, the Student Safety Coalition, and the New York City School Justice Partnership Task Force to present our new vision for school discipline and safety to the next mayor.

Q What did the policy hub add to the PS 2013 effort?

A *Kim Sweet:* The idea was that you needed a resource, so you have the incoming opinions and priorities from the communities, and you have the policy committee sifting through those priorities and coming up with more consolidated statements of what we want. But then you had to give policymakers and politicians who heard you some ammunition or some more background, and I think that's the role that the policy hub was intended to play. I don't know whether it was effective or not in that. But I think the idea of having ready materials there for someone who wants to support your position so that they can go in and have the ammunition to defend their views is important.

Q What was the value of having this policy development closely integrated with a community engagement process?

A *Phil Weinberg:* I found the discussions to inform each other in a very interesting way. The perspectives that people had who were not resident in schools were eye-open-

ing for me, in terms of how they saw the policies that had been enacted over the last twelve years playing out in the larger scope of New York City and their view of what was happening in schools and why some things were of value and some things weren't. People who are not in the schools have a broader perspective, because principals are so focused on the details – your job is to pay attention to everything that's happening in your building. But hearing other principals speak – and hearing the ways in which their experience with the Department of Education over the twelve years had been different from mine – was very interesting for me. I'm fascinated by the ways in which some principals love their network and find it of value. I hadn't heard that much. But I heard for the first time people saying that they were really being developed by their network in a way that was the design of the Klein administration. I don't think it's the norm, but I do think it was important for me to hear that perspective.

Kim Sweet: It was really essential. If we had all sat there without the public engagement process, it just would have been all of us around the table spouting our pet policy priorities. And this helped keep us grounded in what people out in the world were saying. So I think it made a real difference.

Doug Israel: The community engagement aspect of the effort was critical, as it gave “street cred” to our efforts because parents and members of the public were able to weigh in and help shape the overall direction of the work. At The Center for Arts Education we talk a lot about the importance of arts education from an equity and a research-based standpoint, but having parents and members of the public lead the chorus of voices calling for more arts and music in city schools has been invaluable and sends a powerful message to elected officials and

education decision-makers about priorities for improving public schools. It has also helped connect our organization to a base of parents and advocates who have had an impact on our work, from an advocacy and a programmatic perspective. We look forward to continuing to engage with these parents and work together to ensure that schools across the city are providing a broad-based education for all students.

Liz Sullivan-Yuknis: Through the community engagement process, we were able to share our concerns and solutions with others around the city and gather their input. At the same time that we were gathering research and writing our policy recommendations, DSC-NY member organizations were holding community workshops as part of the charrette process and gathering community votes on the bus tour. The community engagement process demonstrated that New Yorkers were in support of creating safe and nurturing environments for students, treating students fairly and with respect, replacing suspensions with constructive approaches that keep students in school, and reducing the role of NYPD in schools.

Q What was particularly challenging, unique, or positive about the PS 2013 effort? Have you been part of other such efforts before?

A *Phil Weinberg:* There was such a smart focus on the fact that there was going to be change coming, and we'd better get out in front of it. It was a very, very, very good idea. The last time there had been this kind of change, I was a brand new principal, so I wasn't included. It was really interesting for me to get to learn and participate in a conversation regarding the ways in which the school system had moved – because I do think the school system has moved some over the years – and the ways in which we

have fallen short on good ideas that just hadn't been enacted well, and the ways in which we have been wrong-headed. It was very good for me to hear other people both agree and disagree with me.

There were a lot of strong minds in one room. And so that sometimes became a little overwhelming. And I think sometimes voices got squashed. So there could be more efforts made to surface more thoughtful ideas if we weren't sitting at one big table going one after another.

Kim Sweet: My favorite thing about this effort was the grassroots emphasis. It was a very creative involvement of the very diverse communities throughout New York City. So, my favorite part of it was the bus. I actually thought that the idea of sitting outside schools and letting people come on and say in a very simple way what was important to them yielded really important information and also provided a potential model for non-election time organizing efforts and for ways to go out and connect with people who might not get involved in policy efforts or governance.

And what came out of that in terms of the priorities of the communities was probably pretty accurate, based on my sense of what people most care about – even though they weren't always my particular policy priorities. The challenge was, as the policy group, to remain true to those sentiments. Because there's a lot of temptation to bootstrap and to just throw in that little extra thing that you really hope happens even though nobody said it on the bus and nobody said it in the charrette.

So one of the things I tried to do as a member of that committee was to try to keep us focused on what we had actually gotten from the community because I thought that was what was unique and important about the effort.

Doug Israel: The integration of the policy work with the community engagement process was unique and something that should be built upon here in New York City and replicated elsewhere. I think some of the ways the coalition used social media and the community feedback they received were new and exciting and hopefully will continue to play a role in the education discussion moving forward.

Liz Sullivan-Yuknis: It was unique that we were able to bring together organizations working on so many different issues affecting New York City schools and develop a common vision for an education system where every student is treated as a whole child. It created a structure for communities to develop and present a collective vision to the next administration, one that we can keep using to hold mayors accountable.

Since education is a broad issue, I think the challenge was choosing priorities. Coalition members did a great job in coming together and addressing the concerns of New Yorkers. It is not an easy process to get communities from different sectors to participate in discussing such a level of details.

Q How do you think the policy recommendations that emerged from this effort have or will influence the next mayoral administration?

A *Kim Sweet:* I think there are a lot of good ideas in there, and I hope that the next administration looks at them seriously. I don't think they're going to do the entire thing. There are a lot of details there. But if the next administration wants to be responsive to community needs and desires and concerns then this provides a roadmap that attempts to do that work for them to some degree. So I think it could be helpful.

Phil Weinberg: One of the mistakes that was made in the years past was relying on market-driven philosophies

to set direction. I don't think those subscribing to these philosophies understood how schools ran, and they didn't understand that schools were not a for-profit venture. So a lot of the parts of the policy that really dominate in the school system now were derived from a misguided model about what schooling is and should be. And that came directly from the fact that the people who made the policy didn't understand schools.

A lot of smart recommendations came out of the PS 2013 effort, and after our process was done, other groups came out with similar key recommendations, such as: decisions need to be made by people who understand schools at a much closer level. And we have heard the mayor say more than once that he wants educators leading the school system, which is the most heartening thing of all that I've heard.

Doug Israel: We believe that the PS 2013 effort, and the A+ NYC coalition more broadly, can have a lasting impact on our public schools as we all work together to bring about the change we envision for our public schools. The process has helped illuminate many of the issues facing our schools and put forth many tangible and realistic solutions for addressing these challenges. There is now an opportunity, and responsibility, to work with the next mayor and administration, as well as parents and other stakeholders, to improve our city schools so that every child in New York City can attend a good school in their community. The education roadmap and the policy recommendations included within it are the starting points along that path.

Liz Sullivan-Yuknis: I think the administration will be much more open to creating a positive school climate and not relying on suspensions and overpolicing of New York City schools. We hope the new

administration will change the New York City school discipline code by implementing our school climate policy recommendations.

Q What are some of the lessons from PS 2013 that could be applied to other cities that are nearing elections?

A *Phil Weinberg:* It seems simple to say, but get some good minds who know how the schools work – who have a proven record of being able to succeed in helping kids learn – into a room to talk about what it is that we can do better and what it is that we need to continue to do well. That happens very rarely. The description of most organizations is very top down. I would like to believe that in our school I heard a lot from our teachers, but I don't think I heard as much as they'd like to be heard. And that's been a missed opportunity for me. For the school system, it's a missed opportunity when the school system doesn't hear from people who have dedicated much of their lives to helping kids learn and have shown some facility for doing so.

Kim Sweet: Get an accessible [to disabled people] bus!

One critique I have is I do think at times we strayed from the information that we were hearing from the communities. To have the most impact, if you hear three priorities from the field, your policy recommendations should go to town on those three priorities and really make a platform around them.

Also, the effort to bring in a big tent and to get everybody at the table has its merits, but there is some loss because what the A+ coalition stood for in terms of ultimate message got lost and ended up overlapping a lot with other coalitions.

Advocates for Children stayed at the table even though none of our pet projects was in the top three recom-

mentations. I know some other coalitions probably would not have. But even though our policy priorities are not, per se, arts education, reducing the testing burden, and school funding, they're certainly important to the communities we serve and so we stayed. And I think that's a real trick of organizing: How do you keep everybody at the table without making a laundry list of a zillion things that everybody wants to do?

The bus is a model. Having a mobile entity that goes to people where they are and just asks them what they care about is a great idea. That to me was the highlight: the mechanism for getting people to engage who don't usually engage and without requiring an ongoing engagement from them.

Doug Israel: For our issue area, the effort has shown us the importance of working in coalition to achieve mutual goals and advance a proactive agenda. Unfortunately, too often arts education is on the margins in both the education world and the arts world. PS 2013 highlighted how important it is for arts education to have a seat at the main table during education discussions. We found a tremendous area of common ground with allies working to improve struggling schools, increase graduation and attendance rates, reduce the emphasis on testing and test prep, and ensure educational equity for students from all communities. The model of bringing diverse organizations together to work towards a common goal is not new, but the A+ NYC effort was noteworthy for the impact it has had and the promise it can deliver.

Liz Sullivan-Yuknis: It was powerful that we were able to present policy recommendations in such visual and

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³ *Implementation plans* are recommendations on how the policy ideas in the road map should be implemented. As this issue of *VUE* goes to press, they have not yet been released.

creative ways through the bus tour and the final education roadmap. It was also effective that the process allowed us to both identify the key, top priority issues for the next mayor, while also creating spaces like the policy hub and implementation plans³ to provide more in-depth research and implementation guidelines on a wide range of educational issues.

Q Based on your experience with PS 2013, what opportunities and challenges do you see going forward?

A *Phil Weinberg:* We want to draw on our expertise and continue to do the things we know we can do well. And by bringing that group of people together, we were doing that. I wouldn't have known that until afterwards, but we made a recommendation to do what we were doing – bring together educators and stakeholders to assess and guide the school system – which is, I think, fascinating, and hugely valuable. I would hope that the next chancellor sets up an authentic group of practitioners and replicates what PS 2013 did on a regular basis so that voices from the field are regularly informing policy.

Kim Sweet: Organizing in New York City is particularly challenging because there are so many advocacy groups. How do you build true collaboration in a world where everybody is essentially funded to lead their own thing? And A+ did a good job of keeping everybody basically there. But that's just a challenge and I don't know that I have any prescription for it.

Going forward, a challenge for funders is: How do you fund an effort like this to keep people at the table and to keep them active and to keep them compromising? Maybe there is some creative funding strategy where you don't just fund the leaders, but you actually fund the soldiers, the participants who come to every meeting and write the stuff for the policy hub and man the bus. Because that would really help in terms of honing the issues and cementing the collaboration.