

# Introduction

## Institutional Change in Urban School Districts

WILLIAM LOWE BOYD

CHARLES TAYLOR KERCHNER

MARK BLYTH

### **AN INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON CHANGE**

This book argues that urban education reform can best be understood as a process of institutional change rather than a series of failed projects. More specifically, we argue that to understand such changes one needs to pay attention to the basic ideas and assumptions that underpin these institutions. Indeed, we argue that virtually all the Progressive Era assumptions that provided the underpinning for urban education have now been violated, and that a set of new underlying ideas is being “auditioned,” and in some cases “rehearsed,” as we transition to a new and more hybrid set of institutions.

As cases of institutional change, the five studies that form the body of the book examine large school districts that have received substantial academic and popular attention. Thus, in the New York case, the question we ask is not whether Mayor Michael Bloomberg was successful in gaining control over the city schools, or even whether test scores actually went up, but whether institutions of public education changed, and if so how they changed. In Los Angeles, we seek not to do a post mortem on the large-scale reforms of the 1990s but to illustrate how a forty-year sweep of events effectively dismantled the fundamental ideas of Progressive Era reform. In Philadelphia, we consider whether the 2001 state takeover catalyzed a lasting shift toward district collaboration with and dependence on private and non-profit providers. In Chicago and the District of Columbia, we ponder whether mayoral takeover leads to a reemergence of elite governance with minimal public involvement.

Our perspective on institutional change varies from the more common “project” perspective of examining a single reform effort or the leadership of a particular superintendent or ruling regime. The institutional vantage point recognizes that schools and districts are connected to organizations and agencies that support and govern them. It inquires into the relationships among schools and elected officials, administrative agencies, political party organizations, think tanks, unions, and a virtual industry of other organizations interested in school reform.<sup>1</sup> These differences are summarized in Table I-1.

Furthermore, just as the scope of our inquiry is different, so too is the time frame. Significant institutional change occurs infrequently, and the process takes longer than a single reform project. As Paul Pierson notes, “contemporary social scientists are strongly predisposed to focus on aspects of causal processes and outcomes that unfold very rapidly. Yet many things in the social world take a long time to happen.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, recognizing and understanding institutional change inherently requires a systemic perspective; seeing not simply that school districts exist within an active environment, but that governance has become federated or multilevel, with legitimate power and influence spread widely among several governments. Interest groups are a taken-for-granted part of the institution. And in addition to relationships with other governments, school districts are highly dependent on exchange relationships with firms and other private organizations.<sup>3</sup> Tests and texts, and much of the basic pedagogy, are the products of these relationships even in the most conventionally operated districts. In districts like Philadelphia, which have embraced a “diverse provider” model for school operations, exchange relationships are even more complex. An institutional perspective allows us the ability to examine the interrelationships among individuals, organizations, and an environment variously called a social system, a social field, or an industry.

In such an analysis, the processes of change and their analyses differ from those we identify from a project perspective. Most reform projects attempt structural reorganization within a school district, and often this is associated with regime change in the superintendency and in school governance. The expected pattern of change from projects is diffusion, what has become known as “going to scale,” from pilot project to district-wide implementation. Given the short attention span of education reformers and the even shorter attention span of the critical public, the time from project launch to the announcement of its demise is often measured in months and hardly ever in decades. In this context, it is easy to observe project failure. In Chi-

**TABLE I-1 Project and institutional perspectives on change:  
What are the differences?**

	<i>Project</i>	<i>Institutional</i>
Time frame	Years	Decades
Scope of change	School or district	System: classroom, school, district, state, national (public and private)
Process of change	Diffusion of innovation: pilot project and scale-up	Alternatives to replacing the existing system: Posit new ideas Delegitimize the old regime Establish and build support for an alternative
Nature of change	Problem-solving, innovation within existing structure	Changing structures and relationships: breakdown and reconstitution
Drivers of change	Local reformers and their projects	Crises and uncertainty Competing ideas and policy entrepreneurs
Strategies for change	Improvisational, local	Systemic: focused on ideas and a logic of the system

icago, the Local Site Councils were abandoned as incapable of quickly “turning around” the district’s schools. In Los Angeles, when former mayor Richard Riordan was told that we were studying the history of the Los Angeles Educational Alliance for Restructuring Now (LEARN), he replied, “That’s easy; LEARN failed.”<sup>4</sup> When policy scholars write about incrementalism or policy churn, the pervasiveness of the project view means that they are widely believed.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the nature of change is often simultaneously evolutionary and revolutionary. Instead of innovation within existing structures, institutional change is more likely to involve creative destruction, the breakdown of old authority and operating systems and their reconstruction or replacement. We see this in New York, where the decades-old system of decentralized districts was dismantled almost overnight, and in Philadelphia, where the state stripped the school board of its authority and replaced it with a School Reform Commission. The drivers of such dramatic institutional change are less likely to be local reformers, and their projects are more likely to be what John Kingdon called policy entrepreneurs proposing systemic solutions, seiz-

ing opportunities available during moments of uncertainty caused by perceived institutional crisis.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, in the model of institutional change developed by Mark Blyth, discussed in more detail below, institutional change is driven by ideas linked to moments of “crisis.” This approach helps explain “not only that ideas matter, but precisely when, why, and under what conditions they matter.”<sup>7</sup> The presence of a crisis, itself a particular political construction, allows challengers to the existing institution to bring forward an idea, one that both explains why the old institution is failing and points the way for its reconstruction. Such ideas serve as guides, organizing principles, political weapons, and during times of great uncertainty, when people literally do not know what to think or how to act, ideas provide certainty about how to act.

### **WHY AN INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE?**

We are attracted to the institutional perspective because we find it more satisfying and intellectually substantial than the project “rise and fall” story. This broader, longer-term perspective captures the accumulated changes we have observed and recognize as important. Like other scholars, we had seen continuing and apparently disjointed incrementalism, but to believe that the continuous improvisation argument was a permanent pattern requires us to ignore history. We knew that there had been times of significant institutional change and invention for public education, despite the current view that school districts are perpetually “spinning wheels” or “tinkering toward utopia.”<sup>8</sup> The Progressive Era in the early twentieth century offered a set of then-new ideas and operating principles that replaced old ones in a deliberate and designed way. Although interpretations of this period vary from heroic house history to critical deconstruction, there is no doubt that those ideas became normative. In some ways, they still are. For example, even as policy entrepreneurs gather around public education today, aspects of such Progressive Era ideas as graded classrooms are so much a part of “the grammar of schooling” that they remain in place without much question.<sup>9</sup>

We also noticed that the impacts of more recent changes in the institutionalized environment, particularly federal and state governments, were often glossed over or ignored when stories of project rise and fall were told, and that often the magnitude of changes in the demographic or legal and financial environments were not well recognized. School districts that were characterized as immutable were actually changing dramatically while scrambling to accommodate to drastic changes in their environments. These

were long, slow-moving processes of the type Pierson notes, whereas projects represented short-lived reforms. Perhaps, like others, we had been paying too much attention to the short change game and not enough attention to the long. As former President Bill Clinton put it, "There's a big difference between the trend lines and the headlines."<sup>10</sup>

Finally, to stick with the project rise-and-fall conclusion, we would have to believe that the people designing the reforms were either uncommonly venal or uncommonly stupid. If they were all simply economic rent seekers protecting slivers of privilege and position, they didn't appear to be very good at it.<sup>11</sup> For people who were characterized as the "blob,"<sup>12</sup> they seemed to be working terribly hard. When interviewed, they seemed lively, articulate, often witty, and introspective. They understood the environments in which they were operating and the long odds on getting the pieces of the system to line up. They knew that they were operating within what Hill and Celio describe as large "zones of wishful thinking."<sup>13</sup>

When we looked at the pattern of school reform, we saw the rise of new ideas within the context of an old system not built to accommodate them. Decentralization, for example, which was part of every reform effort in Los Angeles and many efforts in other cities, was at odds with the central idea of a well-managed public hierarchy, as were New York Mayor Bloomberg's market-based proposals of 2006. "High standards for all" offered a second example: it was at odds with the deeply imprinted bell curve that had been sorting students for different educational treatments, each according to his or her measured abilities, for more than 75 years. So, even when educators talked about reform ideas, we often found that the theory they espoused and the theory they acted upon were different. Reformers who argued that "all children can learn" rarely acknowledged that schools were not set up under the assumption that all or even most students would learn. In a final example, the most profound disconnection occurred over the Progressive Era bedrock of professional domination. Even as school districts engaged in desperate searches for hero-leaders, experienced school leaders were openly denigrated. Immediately on assuming office, the new hero-leaders became dependent on the cadre of these experienced administrators who had the craft knowledge of how the bureaucracy worked.

## **THE PROCESS OF INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE**

This book takes as its focus two models of institutional change. The first, derived from the work of Mark Blyth, views institutional change as a moment

when agency comes to the fore.<sup>14</sup> In this view, a critical factor in promoting institutional reform is the ability of agents to narrate a particular set of institutions as being in crisis by wielding reform ideas as political weapons. Moments of crisis, from this point of view, are not simple events that automatically signal to agents on the ground what has gone wrong and what to do about it. Rather, particular events—be they falling test scores, teacher militancy, or minority student underachievement—must be cast into a particular narrative of crisis that demands a particular intervention and response. Agents use ideas such as “accountability,” “marketization,” and “vouchers and charters” first to diagnose a set of institutions as being in crisis and then as institutional blueprints for new institutions.

From this perspective ideas are weapons in the hands of agents who are trying to effect change. By diagnosing a particular set of outcomes as being a crisis of type X, such ideas also argue for remedial policies of type X. For example, if the crisis of big city education is successfully narrated as one of accountability, then policies such as a state takeover become more, rather than less possible. If on the other hand such crisis definitions are successfully resisted, as they were in our Philadelphia case, then reformers must reach for new ideas both to justify and to enable their projects. Ideas and agents thus coexist in an evolving matrix of reform, contesting institutions and transforming them in the process.

This view of institutional change centers on the short term, as a way of abstracting from the particulars of each case to see the general dynamics at work. There is also, however, a longer-term view of institutional change associated with scholars such as Paul Pierson and Kathleen Thelen.<sup>15</sup> Rather than acting as agents wielding reform ideas as tools to define crises, fashion reform coalitions, and delegitimize existing institutions, these scholars focus on the longer-term, slow-moving processes of change. The central insight of this literature is that fundamental institutional change can be long term and incremental. Institutions are complex pieces of social architecture, linking together individuals, organizations, and wider sets of institutions. In such complex environments, reform processes are oftentimes slow moving insofar as the effects of one set of reforms are often not seen until much later than the reformers envisage. The effects also show up in unexpected parts of the institutional complex; such effects are not linear. Changes in policy X designed to bring about outcome X often yield not disappointing results, but *very different results* than originally envisaged. As institutions are stitched together in moments of reform, processes of path-dependent policy making, learning-by-doing, norms of appropriateness, and the like all act together to

channel reform efforts in unexpected ways, producing unexpected changes, and much later than envisaged.

We argue that by combining insights from both of these perspectives, we are able to account for both the short-term politics of crisis making and reform initiation and the longer-term view of institutional change. What we see through these institutional lenses are incomplete transformations. Different institutional starting points begat different crisis-defining ideas and reform coalitions. Though similar in their initial conditions, these big city education systems have undergone quite different institutional changes, such that while “where we are going” is certainly different from “where we started,” there is no one model of the new way of doing things to which all are gravitating. Rather, hybrid forms and incomplete transformations litter the landscape, but they can only be seen by embracing an institutional perspective.

### **READING THE BOOK**

This book begins and ends with discussions about institutional theory and change. In Chapter 1, Charles Kerchner, David Menefee-Libey, and Laura Mulfinger describe an old institution built around the assumption of apoliticity, local control, legitimate hierarchical leadership, and a high-trust, logic-of-confidence cultural and political environment. It is being replaced, they assert, by an institution built around pluralistic politics, federated governance with many levels of government sharing power, networks of experts, and a low-trust logic of consequences based on outcome specifications and inspections. Our authors then describe the process by which these changes take place: delegitimation of the old institution, exit, hollowing out of function, trial of new ideas, and turning point crises.

Jumping ahead, Mark Blyth concludes the book in Chapter 7 with commentary on studying educational systems with the tools of institutional theory, essential for understanding the “payoff” of this book, reflecting on the theoretical approaches taken in this book, drawing together the themes and conclusions reached in the cases, and describing and speculating in more detail on the emerging institution of urban education. Given the cases narratives, change process looks messier and more varied than might have been expected. Whereas it is clear that institutional change does not just happen, it is also true that how it happens and at what speed varies substantially. Sometimes the crisis looks permanent, as it lasts so much longer than the period of stability that preceded it. Sometimes, political control appears stuck

with strong continuities from one reform era and another, both anchored in the business community. But it is fair to conclude that through the organizational vehicles of big urban districts, the institution of education is in a process of coevolution in a complex adaptive system with lots of feedback loops and unintended consequences. We are not headed, the chapter argues, toward the disappearance of public education but rather toward multiple hybrid forms as each large system moves away from the Progressive Era ideal along similar but not converging tracks.

In Chapter 2, William Boyd, Jolley Christman, and Elizabeth Useem describe the movement of the School District of Philadelphia from a conventional public bureaucracy to an organization guided by a state takeover into what has been called a diverse provider model in which all schools, including charters, are governed by the district but operated by a wide variety of organizations. The local school board is replaced by an Education Reform Commission, which has about it elements of elite above-the-partisan-fray-politics but which was the result of a highly ideological, bear-knuckled compromise between state and local interests. During this period, Philadelphia is led by a highly controlling nontraditional superintendent, Paul Vallas, who had previously held the CEO position in Chicago. Yet, given the diverse provider model, elements of leadership and operations began to resemble a network more than a closed hierarchy.

In Chapter 3, Dorothy Shipp provides a sweeping historical view of Chicago and asks whether continuity is, in fact, more powerful than the winds of change. Through remarkable access to the archives of the Commercial Club of Chicago, she demonstrates the continuing influence of the city's business elite in reforms that, in essence, track the changes in managerial thinking over the past century. The Club both provides a civic imperative—being involved in education is one of the ways one enters the civic elite—and functions as a political actor that has proven more lasting and resilient than others, particularly the teachers union and grassroots organizations. In this way, Chicago contrasts substantially with some of the cities such as Los Angeles, where the involvement of the business elite is sporadic and ahistorical in its view, or New York, where the mayor, as a wildly successful business entrepreneur, embodies the business ethic himself.

In Chapter 4, Norm Fruchter sets Mayor Michael Bloomberg's reforms into context. He demonstrates how Bloomberg and his Chancellor Joel Klein were able to use the authority of a state takeover to wrench power from long-standing community control arrangements built around the Democratic Party and the teachers union. New York, in particular, shows the power of delegitima-



tion of prior reforms along with past regimes. Although it was generally conceded that very strong reforms were being developed in some of the community school districts, all of them were tarred with the brush of corruption and inefficiency and thus vulnerable to mayoral challenge. Bloomberg initially centralized control and operations as a means of grabbing the levers of control, but just as rapidly as he centralized, he appears to be reversing course and seeking to restructure the country's largest school district along highly decentralized lines and opening education provision to the market.

In Chapter 5, Jane Hannaway and Michael Usdan examine the takeover of Mayor Adrian Fenty and his superintendent Michelle Rhee. She, like Valles and Klein is not a career educator. The Fenty–Rhee takeover is the newest of any whose story is told here and exhibits the news-at-11 temporality even more than the other cases. Nothing is settled, certainly not the political dust. But a common pattern holds: the old district arrangement was delegitimated, a crisis was declared, extraordinary powers were gathered, and a new regime brought in. Outsiders gained substantial influence, and existing interest groups, including the central office and the teachers union, are put on the defensive.

In Chapter 6, David Menefee-Libey, Charles Kerchner, and Laura Mulfin-ger tell the story of four ideas that shaped Los Angeles educational reform efforts over forty years: universal standards and assessment, decentralization, enlarged voice for parents, and variety in educational provision linked with choice. These four ideas have been present in every educational plan that has been adopted in the city since 1967. The authors illustrate how these ideas have changed and become more sophisticated over the decades. At the same time, the Los Angeles Unified School District has not been greatly altered. Compared with the other districts chronicled in this book, it remains relatively unchanged; in L.A., it is the ideas that move forward from one audition to the next.