Education Reform from the Grassroots

How and When Parents Can Shape Policy

Michael Hartney

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Foreword

A heavily state and local affair, education politics is a unique area of American civic life. Entrenched interest groups tend to have an outsized impact on mayoral races and school board elections, which endows them with substantial control over what happens in schools and classrooms. And these elections are often less competitive and suffer from low rates of voter turnout. For school reformers seeking to improve the status quo by promoting standards and accountability, teacher effectiveness, or school choice policies, these political dynamics paint a bleak picture: powerful interests dominate local elections, and local elections dictate the direction of school policy.

Education reformers have long recognized these structural obstacles to change and have made real progress in building the political power necessary to persuade incumbents and to elect education reform champions at all levels of government. However, the movement has traditionally lacked significant grassroots support in the communities those grassroots organizations seek to help, leaving the organizations vulnerable to familiar charges of elitism and corporate reform.

But a new set of education reform advocacy organizations (ERAOs) is working to level the grassroots playing field by leveraging the unique position of an oft-marginalized constituency: public school parents. Over the past few years, these groups have burst onto the scene by credibly organizing and mobilizing parents to fight for reforms such as school choice, standards and accountability, and teacher tenure reform. The roster of ERAOs includes groups with national reach—such as Stand for Children (STAND), the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), and the 50-State Campaign for Achievement Now (50-CAN)—and many others with local focus.

Despite the growing import of ERAOs, to date, not much is known about their strategies, successes, challenges, or the lessons they are learning about mobilizing parents in search of policy change. AEI Education has been at the forefront of efforts to better understand this new phenomenon.

Two years ago I, along with Drew University political scientist Patrick McGuinn, released one of the first in-depth looks at parent organizing for education reform in Parent Power: Grass-Roots Activism and K–12 Education Reform. We found, among other things, that while parents who sent their children to schools of choice were ripe for mobilization, the mere act of choosing a school did not by itself make parents activists. Rather, ERAOs had to work to equip parents with the necessary tools and training to effectively lobby policymakers. We also found that many of the most prominent ERAOs were relatively young and had limited resources, begging questions of sustainability.

But ours was just the first look. To continue learning more about ERAOs and parent power, AEI Education will be releasing a slate of new research distilling lessons about what makes for effective recruitment, how groups train and mobilize parents, and how effective those groups are at sustaining parent engagement over time. In this first paper, Michael Hartney, professor of political science at Lake Forest College, starts with the most fundamental question regarding parent organizing: when and in what contexts can parent organizing successfully influence public policy?

Hartney first summarizes what existing political science literature on interest groups and advocacy might suggest about the potential avenues of influence parent organizing groups might have—for example, direct lobbying, grassroots organizing, and electioneering—and the conditions under which each approach may assist ERAO reform efforts the most. Using new data from a survey of school board members, Hartney then assesses how responsive local school board members are...
to parent demands. The study goes on to zero in on STAND, 50-CAN, and DFER and examines several real-world examples of ERAO advocacy to provide evidence of parent power. Among his findings:

- In both local and national politics, parent organizing can help guard ERAOs against criticisms of “Astroturf” lobbying (as opposed to more genuine grassroots efforts).

- School board members are less responsive to parent preferences than they are to the preferences of professional educators, suggesting a need for the kind of organizing that can unite parents and amplify their voices.

- However, parent organizing can help drive policy change when combined with elite-level tactics such as campaign donations to preferred candidates, direct lobbying, and mass media campaigns. However, parent organizing is unlikely to substitute for these elite tactics.

- In local school politics, parent organizing can be used to identify and support new candidates who will run against unsympathetic incumbents, often in low-turnout primary elections.

Hartney concludes that the rise of ERAOs and organized parent advocacy suggests that “school politics are increasingly operating like the politics that characterize other policy domains.” As ERAOs continue to grow and adapt in this new political environment, such research will be necessary to track their successes and learn from their struggles.

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Education Reform from the Grassroots: How and When Parents Can Shape Policy

One of the most influential applications of political science to our understanding of US public education is John Chubb and Terry Moe’s *Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools*. Though best remembered for its brazen proclamation that “[school] choice is a panacea,” the book’s most underappreciated insight has little to do with the policy of parental choice and everything to do with the status of parental voice in K–12 politics. Parents, Chubb and Moe reminded us, are a small constituency in the larger social and political institution that is public education:

The myth that the schools are somehow supposed to be what parents and students want them to be . . . is misleading. The proper constituency of even a single public school is a huge and heterogeneous one. Parents and students are but a small part of this constituency. [They] have a right to participate . . . but no right to win. In the end, they have to take what society gives them.¹

Recent changes in the education politics landscape are beginning to challenge our assumption that parents are destined to play a passive and peripheral role in school politics. In short, there has been a dramatic reconfiguration in the constellation of interest groups lobbying policymakers on K–12 issues.² A new breed of education interest groups—education reform advocacy organizations (ERAOs)—have begun organizing parents as part of their larger efforts to lobby policymakers on a host of school reforms.

While some researchers have examined the origins and policy aims of ERAOs, very little is known about the extent to which grassroots advocacy in general and parent activism in particular are central to the success of these organizations’ advocacy campaigns. To fill that void, this paper asks: when and where does parent organizing make a difference in education politics and policymaking? Drawing from political science research, quantitative and qualitative analyses of real-world ERAO policy campaigns, and an original survey experiment, I provide an overview of how grassroots efforts to mobilize parents fit into ERAO efforts to change policy.

First, I briefly review the objectives, strategies, and tactics most frequently employed by these nascent lobby groups.³ Next, I use existing research in political science to build a theoretical framework that outlines some conditions under which parent mobilization is more or less likely to enhance ERAO lobbying efforts. The third section of the paper puts this framework to the test by examining whether it can tell us anything about ERAO efforts to influence real-world education politics and policy. Finally, I conclude by summarizing the main findings and highlighting the strategies that ERAO campaigns may benefit from adopting in their lobbying.

ERAO Lobbying Efforts in Education

Before analyzing the importance of grassroots advocacy in ERAO lobbying efforts, it is important to outline what ERAOs are trying to accomplish and where they are trying to accomplish it.

Background on ERAO Activity. To conduct a study that was both generalizable and manageable, I limited my analysis to a subset of ERAOs that have chapters focused on reforming school policy within specific states: Stand for Children (STAND), 50-State Campaign for Achievement Now (50-CAN), and Democrats for Education Reform (DFER). While there are other state-specific ERAOs (such as Parent Revolution and Advance Illinois) and other large ERAOs that are active across multiple states (such as Students First and the Foundation for Educational Excellence), I focus on STAND, 50-CAN, and DFER because they have

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each had active state-level chapters in place for several years. This facilitates analyzing the effectiveness of their efforts to engage parents in state-specific advocacy campaigns, particularly when I set out to examine ERAOs’ pre-2011 efforts to influence Race to the Top (RTT). As of May 2014, STAND and DFER each had offices in 12 states, while 50-CAN is in 7 states.

**ERAOs’ Long-Term Policy Objectives.** While ERAOs can differ in their support for specific education reforms, they tend to share a philosophical commitment to expanding parental choice, bolstering school and teacher accountability, and increasing public transparency in education outcomes (for example, school report cards and teacher value-added data). That shared commitment has led groups like STAND, 50-CAN, and DFER to work on changing status quo state- and district-level schooling policies that have historically stood in the way of such goals.

For instance, ERAOs have been active in fighting against charter school caps and in favor of a larger and more diverse set of charter authorizers. In 2011, RI-CAN, the Rhode Island chapter of 50-CAN, waged a successful year-long campaign to expand charter school options in the Ocean State by lobbying state officials to bring Achievement First (a network of charter schools) to Providence.

ERAOs have also been highly active in lobbying state lawmakers to overhaul teacher evaluation systems and ensure that newly devised evaluation systems include some measure of student learning. For example, STAND, 50-CAN, and DFER were each involved in state-level advocacy campaigns to encourage elected officials to adopt the kind of tough-minded teacher evaluation reforms necessary to field a competitive RTT application.

**ERAO Strategies and Tactics.** Interest group scholars tend to identify two distinct strategies that make up pressure groups’ lobbying efforts: outside and inside lobbying. In general, an outside-lobbying strategy is characterized by its attempt to indirectly influence the policymaking process. This is often accomplished by mobilizing citizens who are outside the policymaking community to pressure public officials to support or oppose proposed legislation. By contrast, inside lobbying refers to the pressure that interest groups bring to bear on policymakers inside the governmental process. The inside strategy is most often associated with lobbying tactics such as campaign contributions, personal contact with legislators, and expert testimony and research.5

While the distinction between inside and outside lobbying is useful, most studies show that interest groups employ both strategies.6 As a rule of thumb, well-established groups are less reliant on outside lobbying because they already enjoy insider status. In fact, one prominent interest group scholar uses the National Education Association as a textbook example of an organization that already enjoys the sort of legitimacy inside the policymaking community to render outside lobbying less necessary.7

On the other hand, ERAOs that are not as well established may need to rely on outside lobbying to get their concerns on the policy agenda. To the extent that grassroots advocacy falls into the outside-lobbying category (a point elaborated later), parent organizing could be beneficial for newcomer ERAOs that are attempting to build their organizational credibility.

Finally, another important distinction that is easily obscured by the inside-outside dichotomy is the difference between lobbying tactics and strategies. As interest group scholars Frank Baumgartner and Beth Leech explain in their classic work *Basic Interest*, “Tactics describe the individual activities in which groups engage: meeting with legislators, filing suit, or mounting an advertising campaign.” By contrast, “strategies involve some particular combination of tactics and imply a mechanism by which influence is believed to be achieved.”8

This all leads to an obvious pair of questions: What blend of strategy and which specific tactics should we expect ERAOs to use in their lobbying efforts? Moreover, where should we expect to see parent organizing fit into these strategic and tactical efforts? Thus far, ERAO efforts to mobilize parents for grassroots advocacy have tended to occur on an ad hoc basis, and it is unclear how ERAOs see parent organizing fitting into their broader efforts to change policy.9

To answer these questions, it first makes sense to work backwards from the objectives ERAOs are seeking to accomplish. Earlier, I mentioned examples of the
long-term policy vision ERAOs share—accountability, teacher quality, and choice. Big policy goals are important, but so are the intermediate steps that drive policy change. How do groups lay the groundwork for their long-term policy goals, and where does grassroots activity fit into these efforts? In the next section, I outline four principal goals of ERAO lobbying: conversion, replacement, legislative subsidy, and reforms to the democratic process.

Potential Paths to Policy Influence. Like any interest group, ERAOs must rely on elected officials to represent their views in government and ultimately translate those ideas into actionable policy. There are two obvious ways to do this. First, ERAOs can focus on replacing unsympathetic politicians with reformers who support their agenda. Second, ERAOs can attempt to convert opponent legislators into allies.

A third intermediate goal is for ERAOs to assist incumbent policymakers who are sympathetic to their agenda by providing them with useful political information and policy expertise. Political scientists refer to this as legislative subsidy because interest groups provide “policy information, political intelligence, and labor to the enterprises of strategically selected legislators . . . not to change legislators’ minds but to assist natural allies in achieving their own, coincident objectives.”

Finally, ERAOs may consider reforming the democratic process to help achieve their long-term aims. Reforms to the democratic process might include changing the design of school governance, such as moving from elected to mayor-led school boards, revising electoral rules so school board elections occur on national election days instead of in off-years to ensure that the typical voter (which includes most parents) is on more equal footing with well-organized groups such as teachers unions, or developing new institutions such as the parent trigger or local school councils that aim to endow parents with more decision-making power.

In the third column of table 1, I situate each of the aforementioned intermediate objectives alongside the lobbying strategies and associated tactics (column 1) with which they most obviously connect. It bears reiterating that these are general tendencies and that all groups, ERAOs included, use a mix of inside and outside approaches. Moreover, the tactics that are associated with these strategies can and often are used interchangeably to pursue the same goal.

For example, media campaigns are generally considered an archetype of outside lobbying because they are designed to indirectly touch the incentives for incumbent legislators by, for example, stirring up public opinion to favor or oppose an issue. However, media campaigns are by definition a sophisticated tactic that is only loosely connected to grassroots pressure. While the content of a media campaign may rely on signaling broad grassroots support for a particular policy position, the media campaign itself is an elite-driven exercise.

Arguably, one of the novelties ERAOs bring to the changing landscape of education politics is their ability to precisely wage these sorts of highly sophisticated, well-funded, statewide media campaigns (outside lobbying) while simultaneously injecting huge sums of campaign cash into important political races (inside lobbying). For example, when many of the reforms that Rhode Island embraced on its way to an RTT grant were put in jeopardy of being overturned, RI-CAN launched a rapid media-response campaign, Super Leaders, which included commissioning a statewide poll to demonstrate mass support for the RTT reforms and to pressure Governor Lincoln Chafee to retain the state’s reform-minded superintendent, Deborah Gist.

As table 1 details, the sort of elite-focused tactics employed by RI-CAN in its Super Leaders campaign offer several advantages over more grassroots-focused approaches: the potential for an immediate policy victory (because of the rapid nature of the tactical response) and the ability for that victory to have a widespread impact (because the strategy can be implemented across an entire state at once). Although the role of parental activism is often less central in these sorts of media campaigns, ERAOs may be particularly successful if they can convincingly blend elite and grassroots tactics, especially when the desired outcome is conversion: persuading policymakers to change their position on an issue or (in this case) to stay the course on a policy when opposition forces are calling on policymakers to reverse course.

While insider strategies are more amenable to providing decision makers with immediate access to
information—such as polling data or research that can prove persuasive (conversion) or helpful to their own efforts (legislative subsidy)—there are limitations to elite tactics. For example, the more widespread and sophisticated a media campaign is, the more funds must be raised to wage it. Moreover, sophisticated tactics are often inversely related (at least perceptually) to grassroots involvement, opening the door for opponents to persuade policymakers that ERAOs using these tactics are running Astroturf campaigns—a pejorative label intended to convey that an advocacy group lacks any significant grassroots support for its position and is instead a special interest group funded by wealthy elites.

At the other end of the spectrum, ERAOs can employ lobbying tactics that put grassroots activism front and center: get out the vote (GOTV) activities, letter-writing campaigns, and public demonstrations and protests. While school choice advocates have for years sought to influence policymakers through the presence of marginalized parents and students at public rallies, ERAOs have begun to think more deliberately about the ways in which parent-led activism can complement their broader efforts to change policy. Such grassroots tactics are more suitable for replacing policymakers with whom ERAOs disagree than elite-oriented lobbying strategies, but even grassroots activities like parent protests can amount to legislative subsidy if they provide political cover to friendly incumbent lawmakers.

While replacement is an attractive goal for ERAOs, it comes with many additional hurdles. It takes time to build an organic grassroots advocacy campaign that bears lasting fruit. A broader coalition of stakeholders must be managed, and ERAOs must be prepared for disagreements among parents who might not share a unified vision of the policies and candidates they wish to support.

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### Table 1

**Linking Specific Lobbying Tactics to ERAOs’ Intermediate Outcome Goals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy and Tactics</th>
<th>Role of Grassroots</th>
<th>Desired Outcome(s)</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inside Lobbying</strong></td>
<td>Limited; parental mobilization is less important</td>
<td>Conversion</td>
<td>Potential for immediate policy victory with widespread impact</td>
<td>Requires money; Easily subjected to Astroturf criticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Campaign contributions</td>
<td></td>
<td>Legislative subsidy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Waging media campaigns</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reforms to the democratic process</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Research advocacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Issuing legislator scorecards</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Testifying before public officials</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Litigation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outside Lobbying</strong></td>
<td>Central; many of these tactics are reliant on grassroots support, especially from parents</td>
<td>Replacement</td>
<td>Organic and authentic</td>
<td>Requires time; Must manage a broader coalition of stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• GOTV (phone banking)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Legislative subsidy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Letter writing and petitions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Waging media campaigns</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Public demonstrations</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Public endorsements</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Monitoring public officials</td>
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</tbody>
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Source: The author

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Nonetheless, if done right, grassroots lobbying tactics are powerful because they leverage strength in numbers. In contexts where education politics is less competitive (for example, in off-cycle school board elections where voter turnout is low), organizing a group of parents around a plank of ERAO-endorsed candidates can pave the road to policy reform by helping obtain a big victory on Election Day.

Finally, there is the question of feasibility. Even when ERAOs wish to complement inside lobbying with grassroots advocacy, it can be difficult (even if worthwhile) to organize parents to partake in sustained activism. Summing up the perspective of many parents, Ben Austin, founder of the California-based ERAO Parent Revolution, explains, “At the end of the day, parents aren’t interested in running schools. . . . What parents want is a seat at the table.”

In light of the old adage among Washington lobbyists that “if you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu,” parents seemingly rely on ERAOs, and vice versa. However, parents (especially low-income parents) often lack the resources such as time, money, and civic skills that are necessary to organize themselves and wage an effective lobbying campaign. As political scientist Patrick J. McGuinn and education scholar Andrew P. Kelly have noted, these barriers often preclude low-income parents from becoming politically active, meaning ERAO grassroots efforts must level this playing field.

To the extent that ERAOs can play a role in providing ready-made opportunities for parent participation, there remains the possibility of a mutually beneficial relationship. As political scientists Sidney Verba, Henry Brady, and Kay Schlozman once explained, citizens forgo participating in politics “because they can’t, because they don’t want to, or because nobody asked.”

Consequently, many parents may respond to ERAO mobilization efforts, especially if they are concerned about the quality of their child’s school but unsure about how to get politically involved. ERAOs can provide the skills and resources parents need and the opportunities to use those assets. Moreover, if ERAOs can convince policymakers to make more systematic changes, such as reforms to the democratic process, parents may be more likely to gain that seat at the table alongside more established groups.

**Interest Group Influence: Lessons from Political Science**

Although journalists and the general public tend to assume that these lobbying activities allow interest groups to dominate the policymaking process, research examining the link between lobbying and influence—especially political action committee (PAC)—driven lobbying aimed at buying influence—paints a far more complicated picture. Consider the puzzle that economist Gordon Tullock posed nearly 30 years ago. When one considers the value of government policy (north of $500 billion in K–12 schooling alone) alongside the widely held belief that lobbyists buy influence with their campaign contributions, the question is not, “Why is there so much money in US politics?” but rather, “Why is there so little money in US politics?”

Although political scientists have not yet come up with a definitive answer to Tullock’s puzzle, most scholars tend to agree that popular accounts of influential lobbyists trading money for votes is largely a caricature of the lobbying process. Lobbying is more of a legislative subsidy that interest groups bestow on politicians with whom they already agree. These subsidies can be either informational or financial, but the idea is that they help already-sympathetic politicians do a more effective job promoting an agenda that is shared between the politician and interest group.

Case in point: most campaign contributions in American politics come from small individual donations rather than from massive PACs bankrolled by the likes of George Soros or the Koch brothers. What is more, interest groups often make their PAC contributions to their strongest supporters who are electorally safe rather than to vulnerable politicians or centrists whose allegiance they are hoping to buy.19 STAND and DFER are well resourced, but is this money being used to buy votes?

Even if one accepts the premise that lobbying is about gaining influence among uncommitted legislators, it is nonetheless difficult to identify whether lobbying directly influences policy. Linking lobbying to influence is complicated by the fact that policy adoption is often said to be overdetermined, meaning that many distinct influences help pass a new law, ranging from grassroots support to campaign contributions to
shifts in elite opinion. This commingling of influences makes it difficult to pinpoint the importance of one particular force.

Regardless of the difficulty of showing that interest group advocacy leads directly to policy change, we can still look at existing studies to glean a number of broad lessons about the conditions in which lobbying efforts—particularly, grassroots advocacy—are more or less likely to succeed. Next, I briefly outline the takeaways that emerge from this work.

**Takeaway #1.** The rules of the game matter. If ERAOs want to enhance their advocacy efforts by mobilizing parents, they first need to concern themselves with any structural barriers that limit parent participation. Reforms to the democratic process can help with this.

A large political science research agenda on policy feedback offers some broad lessons for ERAOs interested in making grassroots mobilization a key piece of their advocacy campaigns. The scholarly literature on policy feedback is best summed up by political scientist E. E. Schattschneider’s observation that “new policies create a new politics.”20 In lay terms, policy feedback refers to the way new public policies alter and then eventually restructure the type of politics surrounding a given policy domain. This insight has many implications for assessing parent activism in education politics.

In the game of politics, some groups are advantaged—from an organizing standpoint—over others based on policies that make it easier to mobilize their supporters for political action or harder for their opponents to do the same. For example, one of the reasons it is easier for teachers unions to mobilize teachers than ERAOs to mobilize parents relates directly to the fact that unions can often depend on advantageous public-sector labor laws that preclude teachers from free riding and also help subsidize union efforts to mobilize their supporters.21 Similarly, researchers have demonstrated that teacher groups are more influential at negotiating higher salaries in districts where school board members are elected in off-cycle elections that are held apart from major federal and state elections, since voter turnout is much lower.22

These are just two obvious examples that illustrate how policies influence the politics of who is mobilized in education politics. Since these policies are government creations, they are amenable to change. And because these rules can be important determinants of who gets involved in politics, ERAOs interested in ratcheting up parent mobilization as part of their advocacy campaigns may want to first take stock of whether policies in the states where ERAOs are active marginalize parents as political actors.

**Takeaway #2.** If 90 percent of success in life is based on showing up, then bringing parents to the table through an organized medium (ERAOs) can help alleviate the large representational biases that research shows exist in the lobbying space. Even the pluralists—stalwart defenders of interest group politics in the United States—acknowledged biases in the character and composition of who shows up to lobby government. As Schattschneider wrote, “The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent.”23

If anything, the composition of groups lobbying government on education issues is more likely to be biased in a direction that puts citizen groups and parents at the back of the line, and established interests at the front. In an analysis examining the characteristics of state-level education PACs in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Eugenia Toma and her colleagues found that, across the 50 states, 80 percent of all educational PACs represented teachers unions and associations.24 Policy-makers also perceive established interest groups such as teachers unions as being more active than others, which likely enhances their raw power.25

It is incredibly difficult to win a policy victory if your side does not show up to compete.

The fact that ERAOs are finally mobilizing parents should make a difference as the monolithic nature of the education establishment gives way to a more diverse set of players. On the other hand, the inherent difficulty of mobilizing busy parents, especially low-income parents, to participate in coordinated political activity renders these diversifying efforts difficult.26

**Takeaway #3.** Place matters. Mobilizing parents to influence policy can only succeed if policymakers at a particular level of government or political institution have strong incentives to respond to parents. When policymakers do not fear electoral defeat, replacement may be the only option.
Interest group scholars have long noted that the strategy a group emphasizes (inside versus outside lobbying, or a blend of the two approaches) and the tactics it employs (for example, sophisticated ad campaigns versus electioneering) are dependent on the resources available to it and the venue (such as level of government or type of governing institution) in which the group is lobbying. In short, success can be predicated on a group’s ability to formulate a strategy and deploy tactics at the right time and place in the policymaking process.

Suppose an ERO plans to engage in outside lobbying by organizing a large group of parents to attend a series of school board meetings, with the intention of pressuring board members to support a parent-preferred reform proposal. The key assumption in selecting this outside lobbying strategy is that school board members will be concerned enough with reelection—and the effect that parent activism might have on that goal—that they will respond to demands from their parent constituents.

Jeffrey Henig’s recent book on the changing nature of K–12 education politics can help illustrate how the argument that “place matters” is especially true for ERO efforts to influence schooling policy. In The End of Exceptionalism in American Education, Henig argues that three recent changes in the type of institutions that Americans use to govern their schools have significantly altered the political environment in which schooling policy is contested. Those changes are: the growing shift from public to private actors (such as school choice), the movement away from special-purpose to general-purpose governance (such as state takeovers and mayoral control), and greater centralization of policymaking authority (such as “education governors” and state accountability systems).

For example, the recent wave of robust mayoral, gubernatorial, and state-led education reform policymaking presents a challenge to the traditional model of school governance in which decentralized, special-purpose governments (school boards) are chiefly responsible for crafting education policy. Because the political incentives surrounding local school board members are so divergent from those surrounding, say, governors (in other words, nonpartisan versus partisan, sophisticated versus lay office-seekers, and broad constituencies versus narrow ones), this changing governance landscape means education interest groups will need to adjust their lobbying strategies to follow suit.

Classic works and new experimental studies in political science demonstrate that for mainstream partisan politicians representing large constituencies in general-purpose political institutions, reelection concerns are paramount. These politicians are motivated to respond to outside lobbying and constituent opinion when their electoral fortunes are at stake (in other words, when an issue is salient and there is a public consensus).

Consequently, when lobbying these sorts of policymakers (such as state-level elected officials), EROs may be able to leverage parental contact with legislators as a viable strategy for informing and ultimately converting elected officials to be attentive to favored policy concerns. However, for politicians who are insulated from “normal” politics—those who gain office through low-interest, low-turnout elections (such as school board members occupying special-purpose governing institutions)—grassroots advocacy may be less persuasive in the absence of democratic accountability.

Takeaway #4. Policy entrepreneurs inside and outside of government can help bolster ERO efforts to assemble broad coalitions that foster grassroots activity. If venue choice is an important strategic consideration for EROs, then building alliances with policy entrepreneurs and forming broader coalitions with existing interest groups will be an equally important component of EROs’ grassroots advocacy campaigns.

In explaining the growth of school choice policies across the states, political scientist Michael Mintrom found that a combination of policy entrepreneurship and strategic-venue shopping often resulted in policy victories for reformers. For example, cross-party alliances such as that which occurred in Milwaukee between Republican Governor Tommy Thompson and policy entrepreneur Annette “Polly” Williams led to the creation of a pilot voucher program that had far-reaching implications for the national school choice movement.

Policy entrepreneurs such as Gloria Romero (the Democratic state legislator who wrote California’s parent trigger law) and Virginia Walden (the parent activist behind Washington, DC’s Opportunity Scholarship Program) have been obvious allies on the sorts of policy

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issues that ERAO groups are interested in bringing to states and districts.\textsuperscript{33} Romero, who at one time led DFER's California chapter, is currently launching the Foundation for Parent Empowerment, a new ERAO focused exclusively on educating parents about laws that give them more control over their children's educational options.\textsuperscript{34}

**Takeaway #5.** Grassroots advocacy can provide an important signal to policymakers about the degree to which ERAOs' policy goals are popular and salient with voters, particularly parents. On the other hand, such advocacy can also provide legislative subsidy, or political cover, to policymakers already sympathetic to ERAO positions.

In *Outside Lobbying*, University of Michigan political scientist Ken Kollman finds that attempts to shape public policy by mobilizing citizens to contact and pressure elected officials can help signal to policymakers the level of public support on a given issue.\textsuperscript{35} Specifically, groups can use grassroots advocacy to signal the degree of salience an issue carries for voters, and the overall level of support for the interest group's position on the issue.

The most direct and obvious application of Kollman’s research to ERAO lobbying tactics is in the area of media (ad buys) and public demonstration campaigns (rallies and protests). ERAOs may benefit from incorporating grassroots advocacy into their policy campaigns, to the extent that ERAOs can use parent pressure to convey the popularity and salience of ERAO positions to lawmakers.

Despite union opposition to many choice and teacher accountability reform proposals, public opinion polls have consistently shown that the general populace is far more supportive of policies such as performance pay, greater accountability in teacher evaluation, and tougher tenure requirements.\textsuperscript{36} Consequently, ERAO efforts to lobby lawmakers on these issues should, if Kollman’s theory is correct, benefit from running broad public relations campaigns that include both ad buys and public rallies to demonstrate to lawmakers the widespread popularity of these sorts of reforms.\textsuperscript{37}

While the resources that ERAOs bring to the table—running media campaigns, making PAC contributions to state candidates, and conducting research advocacy—comprise the centerpiece of these efforts, grassroots advocacy also plays a role. In particular, parent activism may help signal to reelection-minded politicians in state government that a large group of voters—not simply ERAO lobbyists—are paying attention. If ERAOs can mobilize parents to signal those ERAOs' policy preferences and the salience of the issue to elected representatives, that combination of organizational resources and parent engagement may be quite persuasive.

In other cases, parental grassroots advocacy can itself provide a form of legislative subsidy for sympathetic politicians who are already committed to pursuing a policy agenda consistent with ERAO priorities. Consider the recent demonstrations led by charter advocates in New York City that drew front-page headlines when charter supporter Governor Andrew Cuomo met with parent protestors on the steps of the Albany capitol to reaffirm his support for their procharter agenda. While Cuomo’s presence was not by itself evidence for the power of grassroots parent activism, the governor was better positioned to enter into a public spat with fellow Democrat and New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio when Cuomo could credibly claim to represent the voice of low-income parent constituents clamoring for more choice in the schooling options available to their kids.

Because charter schools are far more popular with the public at large than with teachers (a huge DeBlasio constituency), ERAOs may benefit from using public advocacy that highlights parent salience and support on an issue such as public school choice. This public advocacy acts as a means of subsidizing the efforts of friendly incumbent legislators and signals to undecided lawmakers the depth of support for reform.\textsuperscript{38}

**A Framework for Assessing Parent Mobilization as an ERAO Lobbying Strategy**

Henig’s schematic overview of major institutional changes in education politics that have resulted in what he calls “the end of exceptionalism” is helpful in thinking about a framework for understanding ERAO lobbying goals and the role parent mobilization can play in achieving them. To conceptualize such a framework,
I overlaid a partial replication of Henig’s schematic overview onto the four specific paths to ERAO influence (conversion, replacement, legislative subsidy, and reforms to the democratic process). The framework that emerges is, like any model, a simplification that rests on some basic assumptions, yet it offers some elementary insights that we can test by examining the dynamics of real-world ERAO advocacy campaigns.

First, the framework hypothesizes that policymakers occupying special-purpose positions in local levels of government (for example, school board members) will be less receptive to conversion. The political life of the public officials who occupy these domains (low-interest, low-turnout elections) is less amenable to normal politics where lobbying pressure can threaten the reelection chances of an incumbent enough to compel him or her to adopt policy positions that align with public opinion.

Consequently, ERAO efforts to organize parents in these local contexts will, according to this hypothesis, work best when those efforts are focused on a different goal: electioneering with the intent of ousting unsympathetic incumbent politicians. Precisely because these offices are won in low-turnout, low-interest elections, it should theoretically be easier for ERAOs to organize parents for the purposes of recruiting, endorsing, and ultimately getting their favored candidates elected.

In contrast, the strategy of replacement costs more the higher up the political food chain one moves (such as from the school board to statehouse). For example, governors and state legislators are, according to the political science research referenced earlier, likely to be reelection minded and more sensitive to public opinion, particularly as an issue becomes more salient and the position of the average voter is made crystal clear. Special interests are simply less equipped to dominate when there is more transparency and when mainstream politicians fear that they will be punished at the polls.

Again, there are certainly exceptions to these general rules, but our hypothesis is that the difference in the type of incentives and priorities facing politicians at higher levels of government should result in ERAOs being more successful when their parent organizing is geared toward conversion. This should be especially true if ERAOs can marry outside-lobbying strategies with inside ones in which they demonstrate to incumbent state lawmakers the unpopularity of status quo education policies, while simultaneously leveraging parent activism (for example, contact with public officials or parent rallies) to emphasize among voters the salience of that discontent.39

Armed with a general framework outlining when parental mobilization may be more or less likely to “matter,” we can test some specific hypotheses by examining the dynamics of ERAO advocacy campaigns in a series of recent state- and district-level policy debates. While I have used the language of hypothesis-testing to describe the analyses that follow, teasing out whether and when advocacy directly influences policymaking is inherently difficult terrain, even under the best of circumstances.
As previously explained, a long line of political science research calls into question the common assumption that lobbying does indeed influence policy outcomes at all.\textsuperscript{40} And interest group scholars remain divided on whether lobbying should be understood as an effort to sway legislators’ votes or instead as an effort to subsidize politicians who are already sympathetic to the interest group’s concerns.\textsuperscript{41} Given all of this uncertainty, here I simply investigate whether there is an association between ERAO activism, parental mobilization, and policy reform activity. I do so by examining three different cases and datasets.

**ERAO Advocacy at the District Level.** Indeed, it is practically impossible to randomly assign varying rates of real-world grassroots parent activism to different school districts to estimate the true causal effect of parent-centric ERAO lobby efforts in school district politics. Nonetheless, I approximate this ideal research design by conducting a survey experiment on a large sample of school board members. Specifically, I examine whether school board member support for a controversial policy proposal increases when school board members learn that their parent constituents overwhelmingly support the policy proposal.

To examine the part that parent mobilization efforts might play in ERAO campaigns focused on persuading local education officials to adopt specific policy reforms, I turn to data from a recent survey of school board members in a Midwestern state with an active ERAO. The survey, which was part of a larger project examining democratic accountability in local education governance, included an experiment that was designed to test how responsive school board members are to various constituency groups such as parents and teachers. In the experiment, I randomly assigned board members to one of three (one baseline and two treatment) versions of a question asking members about their willingness to support a policy of transparency for teachers’ value-added test scores.

Board members who received the baseline (placebo) condition were simply asked whether they favored or opposed making information about a teacher’s impact on his or her students’ test scores available to parents and the general public. By contrast, board members who were assigned to one of the two treatment conditions were provided with an additional bit of information. The conditions were defined as follows:

1) **Baseline condition (placebo):** In some school districts, information about a teacher’s impact on his or her students’ test scores is made available to parents and the general public. What do you think about this idea? Would you be inclined to favor or oppose such a policy in your district?

2) **Parent treatment:** In some school districts, information about a teacher’s impact on his or her students’ test scores is made available to parents and the general public. According to a recent survey conducted by Harvard University researchers, 70 percent of parents nationally, including a majority of parents in [your state], support such a policy. What do you think about this idea? Would you be inclined to favor or oppose such a policy in your district?

3) **Teacher treatment:** In some school districts, information about a teacher’s impact on his or her students’ test scores is made available to parents and the general public. According to a recent survey conducted by Harvard University researchers, 70 percent of teachers nationally, including a majority of teachers in [your state], oppose such a policy. What do you think about this idea? Would you be inclined to favor or oppose such a policy in your district?

Because the version of the question that each board member received was chosen at random, any differences in board member responses (in other words, any difference in the support that board members voice for adopting this reform proposal for making teacher value-added performance data public) can be attributed directly to the treatment (the application of pressure from a specific constituency group).\textsuperscript{43} The treatments chosen appeal directly to the different constituencies that board members must represent: parents and teachers. The informational prompts also have the benefit of being factually true, meaning no deception was used in the experiment.\textsuperscript{44}
Recall that the framework I outlined hypothesized that mobilizing parents to persuade elected officials to support reform priorities was less likely to succeed at the local level. Unlike politicians who hold statewide office, local school board members operate in an atypical political environment that is characterized by oddly timed, low-turnout, low-interest elections. As such, I hypothesize that incumbent board members are less likely to respond to ERAO advocacy campaigns that employ traditional grassroots pressure tactics to convince those members to “fall in line.” Even if board members do feel some pressure to respond to outside lobbying, they are more likely to owe their presence on the board to groups that are well organized (such as district employee groups or teachers unions).

Figure 2 provides evidence to support this hypothesis. When school board members were asked whether they would be inclined to favor a policy of teacher value-added transparency for their district without any other information (placebo), a majority of them affirmed that they would (55.2 percent of the 143 surveyed). However, among the random subsample of board members who were told that a majority of parents favored the policy of value-added transparency, the average rate of support barely budged, increasing by just 2 percentage points over the control group (57 percent of the 128 surveyed).

What about teachers’ policy preferences? Do board members respond when told that teachers were overwhelmingly opposed to transparency about value-added test scores? Perhaps board members are already well informed about teachers’ positions, meaning additional information will not change opinions. After all, teachers are among the most active groups in local education politics, and their unions have been highly vocal in their opposition to publicizing teacher value-added performance. Informing board members about teachers’ opposition might not induce much attitude change. Yet as the far right bar in figure 3 shows, board members who were informed about teacher opposition to value-added transparency voiced far less support for the policy than their peers in the placebo group (those members who were given no information).

Compared to the placebo group where 55.2 percent supported value-added transparency, only 45.3 percent of the 139 surveyed board members who learned about teachers’ policy preferences supported the proposed reform, a statistically significant decline. The results suggest that ERAO efforts to use parent mobilization as a way to convert school board members will run into difficulties if educators are not also supportive of that policy. As such, ERAOs that wish to have an impact at the local level may do better to focus on the replacement of opponents through electioneering, as those opponents will be difficult to convert in the face of countervailing pressures.

Perhaps the reason why parent pressure in local education politics appears to have little influence on the preferences of school board members has to do with a lack of parent engagement. That is, given high rates of teacher activism in local school politics, board members located in districts with active parent groups may be more likely to respond to parents’ policy preferences.
In figure 3, I disaggregated the results of the experiment by looking at board member responses to constituency group preferences in districts where parents are highly active compared to districts where parents are not. Using another survey item that asked members how politically active parents were in their districts, we can see whether ERAOs might convert or persuade board members once they are able to make parent groups an active force in district elections. The results suggest that in the context of local education politics, parental activism does not appear to increase board members’ sensitivity to parental policy concerns.

In districts where board members perceive that parents are highly active, board members who are informed about parents’ support for value-added transparency are no more likely to support that policy than their peers who are uninformed about parental preferences (the insignificant difference actually goes against parents’ policy preferences). While ERAO groups might find these results depressing, the results are not on their own evidence that parent mobilization does not matter.

Rather, in keeping with the theoretical framework outlined previously, the results serve as a reminder that lobbying strategies are highly context dependent. In the case of local education politics, it would appear that the goals of replacement (throwing the bums out) and legislative subsidy to sympathetic policymakers are likely to bear more fruit than conversion (trying to win hearts and minds).

To the extent that ERAOs involve parents in their efforts to identify, field, and support new candidates to replace intransigent incumbents, efforts to organize parents can pay huge dividends. However, if the results of this survey experiment can be generalized into other policy contexts and geographic environments, ERAOs will have a harder time using parent mobilization to persuade public officials to embrace ERAO policy goals.

Closely related to the goal of replacement is an outcome raised earlier: reforms to the democratic process. Specifically, I argued that ERAOs seeking to elect allies who will be more responsive to parental interests require awareness of the institutional obstacles and disadvantages that the average voter, like parents, faces in education politics. For instance, oddly timed school elections favor organized interests such as teachers unions, which are better positioned to get out the vote for chosen candidates.

To test this proposition, I disaggregated my survey results by looking at board member responses to constituency group preferences in districts where board members were elected off cycle (in May) versus on cycle (in November). Based on theory and prior research, we would expect that board members elected in November (when the average voter, including parents, is more likely to be attentive) are less likely to heed the preferences of teacher groups to the exclusion of parents. The results (presented in figure 4) tepidly confirm this expectation about the importance of reforms to the democratic process.

Specifically, board members elected in off-cycle elections were more responsive to teacher pressure (support for value-added transparency dropped 11 points between treatment and control). In contrast,
board members elected in November were not statistically significantly more likely to relent to teacher pressure when informed about teacher opposition to value-added transparency. Still, board members were not highly responsive to parent views in either scenario, which suggests that reforms to the democratic process may be a necessary but insufficient condition for ERAOs to leverage parent pressure to promote local policy change.

As a matter of fact, in certain circumstances, ERAO efforts to replace school board opponents with sympathetic allies may become easier in low-turnout elections. In 2010, the DFER PAC affiliate Education Reform Now injected significant sums of money into Buffalo, New York, school board elections. Taking advantage of the oddly timed elections, Education Reform Now saw its favored candidate swept into office.49

The STAND Case Study. In 2009, STAND came to Colorado and immediately embarked upon an effort to increase the number of reform-minded politicians serving on the Denver Public Schools (DPS) Board of Education. CO-STAND’s roughly 100 members interviewed candidates for the three available board positions and then issued three separate endorsements in advance of the November election.50 Immediately, opponents labeled CO-STAND’s electioneering efforts in Denver a corporate-backed Astroturf campaign, claiming that the organization’s electioneering campaign lacked authentic grassroots support. What is more, CO-STAND drew the ire of local school officials when it appeared to be trying to use its insider relationship with a senior DPS administrator to get access to district principals in an effort to recruit parents to work on local political races.51

Although CO-STAND endorsed three candidates for the DPS Board of Education (one at-large and two district-based candidates), only one CO-STAND–backed candidate (the at-large candidate) earned a victory in the November 2009 election.52 While CO-STAND improved its batting average in the 2011 election cycle—with two of its three favored candidates winning a seat on the DPS board—by 2013, the organization had decided that it still needed to invest more effort in mobilizing parents to help elect reform-minded board members.53

In April 2013, CO-STAND began to employ a more grassroots-oriented set of tactics in its electioneering work. Rather than using the top-down approach that had brought it criticism and only limited electoral victories in 2009 and 2011, the organization put parent organizing front and center in its quest to strengthen the narrow four-to-three reform-minded coalition on the DPS Board.54
Specifically, CO-STAND created a new program called Very Informed Parents (VIP). VIP’s mission—to help parents acquire the necessary skills to influence public education in Denver—meant STAND was now making a concerted effort to mobilize parents in identifying, recruiting, and getting out the vote for STAND-endorsed board candidates. Rather than rely on an elite-focused endorsement process, this time STAND had its VIP committee lead the endorsement process, and it made parents its primary allies in key GOTV activities such as canvassing, phone banking, and voter registration.

In 2013, after implementing VIP, CO-STAND saw all four of its endorsed candidates win seats on the DPS board. Is there any evidence to suggest that the decision to make parent organizing a more central component of CO-STAND’s electioneering efforts actually made a difference?

To gain some leverage on this question, I examined the performance of CO-STAND–endorsed candidates in the 2009 and 2013 DPS elections. The DPS Board of Education is comprised of seven members: two are elected in at-large elections where participation is open to all of the city’s voters, while the other five board members are each elected to represent a specific district or geographic region of the larger city school system. For these district-based seats, only those voters who live within the district’s boundaries are eligible to vote.

According to Metro Field Director Mateos Alvar-rez, CO-STAND’s efforts to ratchet up grassroots outreach in the 2013 elections were focused on mobilizing parents and community members in the far-northeast and southwest sections of Denver. The district-based board seats that represent northeast and southwest Denver are districts 2 and 4.

Table 2 provides some suggestive evidence that CO-STAND’s emphasis on parent mobilization in districts 2 and 4 paid off. I first focus on the performance of district-based candidates in the 2009 and 2013 elections. As shown in the upper half of table 2, the district-based candidates endorsed by CO-STAND in 2009 (before the implementation of the VIP program) lost their races by 1 and 9 percentage points, respectively. By 2013, however, in precisely the two geographic areas of Denver that CO-STAND focused its mobilization efforts on—northeast (district 4) and southwest Denver (district 2)—CO-STAND’s endorsed district-level candidates won their seats by 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area (District)</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>CO-STAND Gain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*Southwest Denver (2)</td>
<td>–1.0</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>+24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Denver (3)</td>
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<td>14.1</td>
<td>**NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>+40.6</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area (District)</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>CO-STAND Gain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Denver (1)</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>–12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Southwest Denver (2)</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>19.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Central Denver (3)</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>–15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Northeast Denver (4)</td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>–12.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Northwest Denver (5)     | 35.4 | 11.8 | –23.6         

Source: Author’s analysis of election returns data from the Denver Post and the City of Denver’s election Clerk and Recorder Office. Notes: Cell entries represent the percentage of the vote won by CO-STAND’s endorsed candidate minus the percentage of the vote won by its opponent (in all but one case, CO-STAND’s opponent was backed by the Denver Classroom Teachers Association). To make valid comparisons across different races, if more than two candidates were competing for a single board seat, the vote share of the next-highest candidate (relative to the winning candidate) was used to calculate the margin of victory. *Denotes that CO-STAND is focused on increasing grassroots activism in this area of Denver; ** Denotes that in 2009, CO-STAND did not endorse a candidate in the district 3 election, as the union-backed incumbent ran unopposed.
margins of 23.7 and 31.6 percent, respectively. These victories represented a dramatic increase (since 2009) in support for CO-STAND’s favored candidates of 24.7 and 40.6 percent, respectively, over the leading opposition candidate backed by the Denver Classroom Teachers Association.

On the other hand, at first glance it appears CO-STAND did less well in mobilizing support for its preferred candidate in the 2013 at-large race, at least when compared to the performance of the at-large candidate that the organization supported in 2009. However, when I disaggregate the margin of victory for both at-large candidates (2009 and 2013) by geographic district, the evidence once again suggests that CO-STAND’s grassroots efforts in districts 2 and 4 helped move the needle.

Although the margin of victory for CO-STAND’s preferred at-large candidate dropped sharply in 2013 (compared to 2009), that decline occurred in every geographic ward of the city. Yet, the lower margin of victory posted by CO-STAND’s favored at-large candidate in 2013 was less pronounced in northeast and southwest Denver, where STAND had ramped up its grassroots mobilization. As shown in the bottom half of table 2, CO-STAND’s preferred at-large candidate saw a decrease in margin of victory of just 8 and 12.9 percent, respectively, among voters in the districts the organization blanketed with grassroots outreach. By comparison, CO-STAND’s favored at-large candidate performed 12, 15.2, and 23.6 percentage points worse in the three respective districts where the organization made less grassroots effort.

It is difficult to say why STAND fared better at organizing parents and other community members in district-based as opposed to at-large elections; however, these data offer at least suggestive evidence that STAND’s emphasis on grassroots advocacy was able to make a difference in certain precincts. In sum, this case provides some mixed qualitative evidence about the effect that parent-organizing efforts can have on local school board elections. In some places—such as Buffalo and Denver’s southwest and northeast quadrants—grassroots endorsement and GOTV campaigns may have sufficient power to elect reform champions. In other places, groups will find it more challenging.

**ERAO Advocacy and State Policies.** I conclude my analysis by examining the role of parent mobilizing in ERAO policy campaigns through two state policy lenses: the RTT competition and parent trigger laws.

**RTT.** Unlike most state-initiated reforms, the federal RTT competition occurred at a single point in time, providing state policymakers with a limited window in which to undertake reforms. Moreover, the Department of Education (DOE) retained direct control over the policy agenda of RTT, thus limiting the overall scope of reforms that states would be rewarded for adopting. Together, these two factors make an analysis of state responses to RTT less vulnerable to being overdetermined.

In other words, because the DOE was the first and primary mover in RTT, the underlying policymaking process is more comparable across states than would otherwise be the case were we to investigate ad hoc state-initiated reforms. Finally, and most importantly, there is widespread evidence that state-level ERAs—particularly DFER, 50-CAN, and STAND chapters—actively participated in lobbying governors and legislators to enact reform policies that would increase their states’ chances to secure RTT funds.

Consider the case of Connecticut. In 2010, Conn-CAN launched a public advocacy campaign called Our Race to the Top to persuade state lawmakers that a rapid overhaul of Connecticut’s teacher workforce policies was necessary for the Nutmeg State to garner a slice of the federal RTT pie. Former Conn-CAN CEO Alex Johnston put it this way: “Connecticut is like a C student applying early admission to Yale. We have three months during the upcoming state legislative session to get our education reform grades up before the final application deadline in June.”

Central to Johnson’s and Conn-CAN’s efforts to move state lawmakers to action was a public relations campaign aimed at illuminating the inadequacies of the state’s phase-one application. In February 2010, with just three months remaining in the state’s legislative session, the organization released its report *Race to the Top Round 1: Leaving It Blank*, which drew attention to what Conn-CAN identified as 120 missed opportunities to earn points in Connecticut’s RTT application. While ERAs gained a reputation for actively lobbying
state officials during the RTT policymaking process, it is less clear what role, if any, grassroots mobilization played in ERAO campaigns.

One way to explore whether parent activism can bolster ERAO advocacy campaigns is to examine whether those states where ERAOs lobbied state policymakers to adopt RTT reforms were more likely to change policies when the advocacy efforts featured high levels of parent activism. To measure each state’s level of policymaking reform in the run-up to RTT, I gathered data from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) Education Bill Tracking Database, a database that includes all K–12 education legislation enacted by the 50 states from 2008 to present. NCSL’s database tracks each piece of enacted legislation by topical category, one of which is “Race to the Top.”

In total, 23 different states enacted at least one bill explicitly crafted to address DOE’s policy priorities under phases one and two of RTT (for example, teacher quality reforms and expanding choice through charter schools). As one example, in 2010, Colorado lawmakers enacted the Ensuring Quality Instruction through Educator Effectiveness Act, which significantly reformed the way school districts evaluate teachers across the state, introducing a performance-based component to the process, as called for by RTT.

I confined my analysis to the big three ERAOs in RTT advocacy: STAND, 50-CAN, and DFER. Because DFER is a partisan organization that is qualitatively different in mission and approach from 50-CAN and STAND, I created a separate dummy variable that measures the presence of DFER (1=yes and 0=no) in a given state. Because I was interested in relating the presence of ERAO-led advocacy campaigns to RTT-initiated reform policymaking, I only coded states as having an active ERAO if the ERAO chapter was founded before 2011. Only chapters that existed before this time period could have played a role in lobbying state policymakers to adopt legislation around RTT, since phase-two applications were due in August 2010.

Before undertaking a more rigorous analysis of the relationship between state RTT law adoptions and ERAO advocacy, it is useful to examine the basic relationships that emerge from these data. Among the 23 states that adopted RTT legislation, 7 had an active STAND or 50-CAN chapter, and 9 had a DFER branch. At first glance, there does appear to be a strong correlation between the presence of one of the big-three ERAO groups and the extent to which state lawmakers were ambitious reformers in the run-up to RTT.

For example, among the eight states that had a 50-CAN or STAND chapter in place before 2011, seven of them (or 87.5 percent) enacted an RTT-specific reform law during the course of the competition. Of the 10 states with an active DFER chapter at the time, 9 (or 90 percent) enacted a reform law to bolster their state’s chance at an RTT grant. While the descriptive evidence suggests that ERAO presence was related to greater RTT policymaking, is there any direct evidence to suggest that grassroots advocacy bolstered ERAOs’ RTT campaigns?

Although no data exists that measure the rate of ERAO-generated parent activism across the states, I was able to construct a state-level measure of parental activism in school politics using data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Studies (CCES). In 2008 and 2010, the CCES solicited the opinions of just over 88,000 Americans on a wide array of topics including citizens’ participation in local politics. The question that I drew on asked respondents whether they had attended a local political meeting within the past year (the survey specifically references school board meetings).

While the question is imperfect (it asks about local school politics as opposed to state political activism), it provides the most useful metric available for a cross-state comparison of the rate of parent participation on schooling. The large number of survey responses and the fact that CCES identifies the state and parental status of respondents further recommended it as a way to measure cross-state differences in parental activism.

To generate my measure of parental activism, I simply combined the number of parents in each state who reported having attended a board meeting in 2008 and 2010 and divided that by the total number of parents who answered the survey item (leaving me with a percentage of parents who were active for each state). Descriptively, parent engagement varies across states, with a high of 37 percent of parents reporting attendance at school meetings in Utah and a low of 10 percent in Montana.

Using this cross-state measure of parent activism, I was able to examine whether ERAO efforts to shape
RTT were more or less successful in states where such activism was high. To that end, I estimated a cross-state regression model where the outcome of interest (the dependent variable) is a binary variable indicating the adoption of an RTT reform law (1=yes and 0=no) and the predictors (explanatory variables) are state-level factors that we might expect to influence the likelihood that policymakers adopted an RTT reform law (for example, union activism and Democratic control of state government).

Figures 5a and 5b provide a descriptive snapshot of the relationship between parental activism, ERAO presence, and states’ RTT reform policymaking. Specifically, figure 5a displays the percentage of states that adopted RTT laws by level of parental activism within a state and the presence of a 50-CAN or STAND chapter. Figure 5b shows the same relationship but instead focuses on whether a DFER branch was active during phases one and two of the RTT competition.

Although the sample sizes are small and the data merely descriptive, a few noticeable patterns stand out. First, although the small sample size precludes drawing any firm conclusions about cause and effect, states that enacted RTT legislative reforms in the run-up to the federal grant competition were descriptively more likely to have an active 50-CAN or STAND chapter and to have parents who were at least somewhat active in school politics. Conversely, the rate at which DFER branches appear to secure RTT reforms for their states does not seem to be connected to grassroots activism, a finding that seems consistent (at least anecdotally) with the tactical differences among these organizations (in other words, DFER’s advocacy efforts are more elite- and resource-driven, while STAND and 50-CAN’s were mass- and message-driven).

The second pattern that stands out is the fact that a high rate of parental activism is not in and of itself...
a sufficient driver of policymaking reform. Rather, it appears that parental activism is associated with policy victories (at least in the context of RTT) when an ERAO, especially a 50-CAN or STAND chapter, is present to give a formal organizational voice to that activism through a structured lobbying campaign.

In states where a 50-CAN or STAND chapter was present, an RTT reform law was adopted 100 percent of the time when parents were at least somewhat active. Conversely, less than 20 percent of the 12 states that had highly active parents and nonetheless lacked a STAND or 50-CAN chapter adopted an RTT reform policy during phases one and two of the competition.\(^{58}\)

To more rigorously evaluate these descriptive relationships, I performed a regression analysis predicting states’ RTT responses (see table 3). The first column of table 3 presents the results of a cross-state regression model for a sample of 49 states (Nebraska was excluded from the analysis because it has a nonpartisan legislature), where the outcome of interest is a binary variable indicating the adoption of an RTT reform law (1=yes and 0=no) and the predictors (explanatory variables) are other state-level factors that we would expect to influence RTT reform policymaking in a state.

The main variables of interest in table 3 are the two bolded interaction terms, which measure the conditional relationship between parent activism and a state-level ERAO on the propensity of a state to adopt RTT reforms. (In other words, how much does parent activism enhance the likelihood that an ERAO lobbying presence is associated with a state undertaking RTT policy reforms?) The positive and statistically significant coefficient shown in the first column, first row suggests the presence of exactly the sort of conditional relationship that was shown in

### Table 3

**Predicting States’ RTT and Parent Trigger Policymaking as a Function of Parental Activism and ERAO Lobbying**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanatory variable</th>
<th>RTT law</th>
<th>Parent trigger law</th>
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<tr>
<td>50-CAN or STAND x active parents</td>
<td>11.217*</td>
<td>6.888</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5.970)</td>
<td>(4.486)</td>
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<tr>
<td>50-CAN or STAND</td>
<td>-1.910</td>
<td>-1.227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.284)</td>
<td>(0.935)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DFER x active parents</td>
<td>-4.841*</td>
<td>-10.917*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(7.440)</td>
<td>(5.511)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DFER</td>
<td>1.581</td>
<td>2.093*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.552)</td>
<td>(1.133)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active parents</td>
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<td>-0.503</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(1.520)</td>
<td>(1.248)</td>
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<td>Active teachers union ($)</td>
<td>-0.059</td>
<td>0.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.071)</td>
<td>(0.057)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic governor</td>
<td>-0.172</td>
<td>-0.198*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.129)</td>
<td>(0.103)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic statehouse</td>
<td>0.157</td>
<td>0.025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.146)</td>
<td>(0.126)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.696*</td>
<td>0.277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.364)</td>
<td>(0.302)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Author’s analysis of data from the National Conference of State Legislatures Education Bill Tracking Database and of data from the 2008 and 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Studies

Notes: Dependent variable: 0-1 measure indicating that the state enacted the law denoted in the top column. Cell entries are ordinary least squares (OLS) regression coefficients with robust standard errors reported beneath in parentheses. OLS are presented for ease of interpretation; however, substantively similar results were uncovered when using a probit (logistic regression) estimator. * p<0.10, using a two-tailed test.
figures 5a and 5b. In short, the combination of active parents and a 50-CAN or STAND chapter was significantly associated with RTT policymaking reform across states. Conversely, no conditional relationship between a DFER chapter and parent activism appears to exist.

**Parent Trigger Laws.** In an effort to determine whether the combination of an ERAO lobbying campaign and active parents is associated with greater policymaking activity on a non-RTT-related item, I carried out a similar analysis of parent trigger laws. According to NCSL, seven states adopted some version of parent trigger since California became the first state to do so in 2010. In the second column of table 3, I carry out the same model specification used to predict the likelihood of a state passing an RTT reform, but instead aim to predict the adoption of a parent trigger law. Although the main variable of interest—the interaction term of parents active in 50-CAN or STAND—does not achieve statistical significance, it is signed in the expected direction and is just shy of reaching significance (p=.12).

Interestingly, states with active parents and a DFER branch are less likely to have passed a parent trigger law. It is somewhat difficult to read too much into this analysis given that only 7 out of 50 states have passed trigger laws (leaving little variation to be explained). However, the finding is realistic given that DFER faces a more complicated political environment on issues such as parent trigger and union rights, because of the organization’s partisan identity. Moreover, the control variables perform more or less as expected. For instance, states with Democratic governors were significantly less likely to adopt a parent trigger law, which reflects the fact that voting on trigger bills largely (though not, for example, in California) split along party lines, with Republicans being more supportive.

Earlier, I speculated that ERAO lobbying efforts at the state level would be more likely to make a difference when they focused on running informational advocacy campaigns designed to change hearts and minds by converting policymakers to embrace ERAO priorities. That hypothesis was grounded in the observation that political scientists have made about the major differences between general and special-purpose governments and between centralized and decentralized policymaking institutions.

As opposed to special-purpose, decentralized policymaking bodies such as school boards, governors and state legislators have greater electoral incentives to heed public opinion on schooling policy. Specifically, state policymakers are more subject to democratic accountability because they serve a wider electorate, operate in a more visible capacity, and occupy a political position that is more sought after (and thus more likely to be competitive). The evidence presented here does suggest that persuasion may be a viable strategy for ERAOs at the state level, at least not in the context of a salient policy issue such as RTT.

However, even if ERAO lobbying campaigns did little to convert state policymakers to adopt reforms around RTT, the patterns uncovered here are consistent with a story of ERAOs shaping policy via legislative subsidy. In other words, ERAOs and parent activism might have assisted existing pro-reform state lawmakers in their ongoing efforts to draw attention to the importance of RTT issues by providing those lawmakers with information and, especially for Democrats, political cover.

In sum, it appears that state-level ERAO advocacy may be particularly effective in states with high levels of parental activism, at least in the context of advocacy campaigns that are focused on salient policy issues. It is more difficult to determine whether grassroots mobilization was central to ERAO efforts to sway state policy, but 30,000-foot, cross-state comparisons suggest that policymakers were more active on the school reform front when their lawmaker occurred in an environment marked by high levels of parental activism and by the presence of an ERAO.

That said, one must exercise caution in interpreting these results, particularly in teasing out the directions of these relationships. For one thing, it could be that ERAOs tend to set up shop in states where they know in advance that enough friendly legislators occupy important positions in government to ensure that their organizations will make policy headway. If states are selected based on their reform environment, then these associations between ERAO presence and policy reform would clearly not be causal. However, even if the relationships are not causal—in the sense that ERAOs’ efforts to mobilize parents cause lawmakers to change their minds about schooling policy—ERAOs...
may, as noted earlier, still be having influence via legislative subsidy.

**Conclusion**

In the concluding chapter of his 1999 book *Interest Groups, Lobbying, and Participation in America*, University of Wisconsin–Madison political scientist Kenneth Goldstein introduces his readers to an anonymous trade association executive who is all too eager to share how the interest group community feels about the role of grassroots mobilization in lobbying campaigns. “Grass roots mobilization,” the anonymous executive explains, “is used for one purpose, period—to influence legislative policy. It’s not about getting more Americans involved. It’s not about educating people on the issues. It’s not about making Americans feel good about their political system.”

While education reform advocates might well believe that parental voice is an important end in and of itself, today’s education politics are a rough-and-tumble business where the views of Goldstein’s anonymous lobbyist hold sway. The myth that schools are apolitical has given way to recognition that school politics are increasingly operating like the politics that characterize other policy domains.

Recalling Henig’s vernacular, the end of exceptionalism in American education is rapidly underway. But a host of questions remain: What role will parents play in this new brand of education politics characterized by greater salience and more interest among politicians at the state and federal levels? And, of immediate concern, when should we expect ERAOs’ parent-organizing efforts to influence education reform debates in this new landscape of “normal” education politics?

While it is far too early to provide a definitive answer to these questions (after all, the ERAO movement is not yet a decade old), the analyses presented in this paper provide some suggestive answers. In short, parent mobilization can be a significant complement to ERAO advocacy efforts. Depending on the level of government (state versus local), grassroots advocacy—and parent activism in particular—appears to be associated with the extent to which policymakers undertake bolder reforms. However, other evidence suggests that parent activism will be hard pressed to convert incumbent school board members to their cause or, in some cases, to muster sufficient electoral power to replace those who oppose them. The resulting picture is one where authentic grassroots activism may indeed be necessary to pursue policy goals and guard against charges of elitism, but one that will rarely be sufficient to drive policy change. My key findings:

- Parent mobilization can complement ERAO advocacy efforts, but it cannot replace many of the important elite-level (inside-lobbying) tactics ERAOs are using in their advocacy campaigns (media campaigns, research advocacy, and campaign contributions).
- In local school politics, parent organizing can be used to identify, recruit, and support new candidates who can replace incumbents unwilling to support ERAO-favored reforms.
- In state politics and other contexts where policy goals are salient, ERAOs may be able to use parent organizing to pressure incumbents, persuading them to support ERAO-favored reforms.
- Even when they are not working toward goals like replacement and conversion, ERAOs can use parental activism as an outside-lobbying legislative subsidy that offers sympathetic, reform-minded incumbent lawmakers political cover. These informational subsidies may be especially helpful when they are given to reform-minded Democrats who face cross-pressure from public employee unions that have traditionally been a core piece of the party’s electoral coalition.
- In both state and local politics, parent organizing can help inoculate ERAOs against charges of Astroturf lobbying. For example, ERAO endorsements in a local school board contest are more likely to result in electoral victories when parents are authentically involved and share ownership of the process.
- ERAOs can and should advocate for an equal playing field for parents. They can do so by lobbying
for reforms to democratic processes that currently marginalize busy parents (such as election timing).

In closing, it is worth returning to Chubb and Moe’s *Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools*, from which an obvious question emerges: can ERAOs’ efforts to organize parents in education politics lead to sustained successes? There are good reasons to be skeptical. As Chubb and Moe explain:

A frequent complaint is that parents and students are not well enough organized to be very powerful. . . . They tend to be far outweighed by teachers’ unions, professional organizations, and other entrenched interests that, in practice, have traditionally dominated the politics of education. This is true enough. But what it implies is that parents and students would get the kind of schools they wanted if they could somehow gain “appropriate” clout—if democracy, in other words, were less imperfect and did a better job of reflecting their interests. This is simply not the case.61

Today, ERAOs are putting Chubb and Moe’s argument to the test, seeking to organize parents by putting them on an equal playing field with the established interests that have dominated education politics for half a century. It remains to be seen whether they will succeed in the long run. In the short term, this paper has offered some preliminary bits of evidence for the conditions under which grassroots-oriented tactics are likely to enhance ERAO advocacy campaigns.

**Notes**


9. Patrick McGuinn, “Mobilizing Mom and Dad: Engaging Parents Behind Systemic School Reform,” in *Parent Power: Grass-Roote activism and K–12 Education Reform*. For some organizations, parent organizing is at the core of what they do (STAND); for others, it plays more of a peripheral role (50-CAN and DFER).


18. Ibid., 107–08.

19. Hall and Deardorff, “Lobbying As Legislative Subsidy.”


21. Mancur Olson, The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965); and Daniel DiSalvo, “The Trouble with Public Sector Unions,” National Affairs, no. 5 (Fall 2010): 3–19. For example, the ubiquitous practice of automated dues and PAC contribution payroll deductions ensures a steady cash flow for the teachers union. Moreover, dues deductions are typically carried out by the school district’s payroll office, which has the effect of drastically reducing the union’s administrative costs. Instead of having to devote considerable time and resources going from member to member to collect dues and PAC contributions (like any other interest group must do), teachers unions can often rely on the government to perform this task. As a result, teachers unions are ensured a reliable revenue stream and have their resources freed up for other uses, both of which make organizing and mobilizing teachers to political action much easier.


27. Baumgartner and Lecce, Basic Interests: The Importance of Groups in Politics and Political Science.


31. There are a variety of reasons to suspect that, in practice, local education policymaking suffers from a lack of democratic accountability. Most notably, the widespread use of oddly timed (off-cycle), nonpartisan, and staggered school board elections tends to insulate local education policymakers from voters in ways that most conventional state and federal politicians are not insulated; but see Michael, B. Berkman and Eric Plutzer, Ten Thousand Democracies: Politics and Public Opinion in America’s School Districts (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005). One likely consequence of these insular electoral arrangements is minimal participation in local education politics with average voter turnout in school board elections pegged at roughly 15 percent. Theoretically, it becomes more difficult to keep school board members responsive to community concerns when the average voter is trapped in a low-visibility environment (such as off-cycle
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35. Kollman, Outside Lobbying.


38. Ibid.


40. Ansolabehere, de Figueiredo, and Snyder Jr., “Why Is There So Little Money?”


42. Response categories were: completely favor, somewhat favor, neither favor nor oppose, somewhat oppose, and completely oppose. For all analyses presented in this chapter, categories were collapsed such that 1=somewhat favor or completely favor and 0=all other responses. When the “neither favor nor oppose” category is instead coded as missing, the results presented in this paper become even stronger.

43. To ensure this is the case, the author carried out an analysis testing for balance between the treatment and control groups on a variety of individual characteristics (such as gender, race, and partisanship) and district-level characteristics (such as partisanship, poverty, and size). In no case were there statistically significant differences between board members or board members’ districts in the treatment and control categories (for interested readers, this balancing analysis is available upon request).

44. To supply information on teacher versus parent preferences for this particular policy issue, I drew on question 27b in the 2012 Education Next/Harvard PEPG Survey. The full PEPG survey is available at http://educationnext.org/files/EN_PEPG_Survey_2012_Tables1.pdf.


46. See Hess and Leal, “School House Politics.” The specific policy reform that board members were asked to support or oppose was selected on the basis of its salience and because the debate over teacher value-added transparency is new enough to make the treatment information (constituency opinion) plausibly “useful” for board members who would rely, at least in part, on their constituents’ opinions when deciding whether to support or oppose a policy proposal. Additionally, because teacher groups have taken visible stances against teacher value-added transparency in real-world policy debates (such as New York City and the Los Angeles Unified School Districts), school board members are more likely to know (before the administration of my experiment) where teachers stand on this issue. By contrast, board members who are randomly supplied with information about where parent constituents stand on this issue are more likely to find that information useful on account of its novelty. Therefore, parent pressure should, in theory, be the potentially more powerful of the two treatments here.

47. Specifically, I asked these school board members the following question: “From attending board meetings to participating in school elections, many different groups are involved in local education politics. Generally speaking, how politically active are each of the following groups in your school district?” Seventy-six percent responded that teacher groups are either very active or somewhat active. Parents came in second with
69 percent of board members labeling parent groups very or somewhat active. Still, only 23 percent of board members classified parents as “very active” in their districts, whereas 31 percent gave teacher groups this most-active designation.


53. Poppen, Leadership Changes at Stand for Children.


55. Poppen, Leadership Changes at Stand for Children.


57. The number of parent respondents per state ranged from a low of 31 in Wyoming to a high of 1252 in California. The mean number of parent-respondents per state was 265.

58. Only two observations (states) exist where a STAND or 50-CAN chapter was present and parents reported the lowest level of engagement in school politics. Given the small number of observations in this category, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the relationship between ERAO lobbying on RTT in the absence of parent activism.


61. Chubb and Moe, Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools, 31–32.