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McDonald, J., & Cities and Schools Research Group. (2014). *American School Reform: What Works, What Fails, and Why*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

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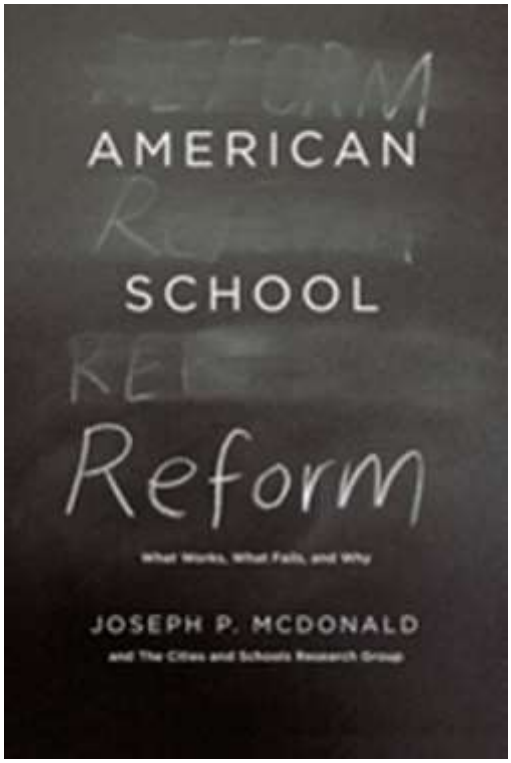
Reviewed by Sissi Dinh O'Reilly
University of Texas, Austin
United States



American School Reform: What Works, What Fails, and Why provides an in-depth analysis of school reform implementation at Annenberg Challenge schools in Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and San Francisco using the theory of action space through investigations of professional capacity, civic capacity and funding. In studying these cases of various outcomes and political narratives of school reform efforts, Joseph McDonald and the Cities and Schools Research Group, debate the impact of development and reform implementation in these spaces to inform future practice. The importance of professional capacity, civic capacity, and funding is reiterated throughout the text and visually represented as a triad, as they present case studies focused on the social-political framing by reformers, the influences on the city and district level leadership and the outcomes of those efforts. This is accomplished through an explicit

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deconstruction of the belief systems and arguments that support and refute events and decisions within a theoretical action space (McDonald et al., 2014, p. 19-22). Using the theories of urban school reform that investigate civic capacities within communities, economic and fiscal contributions of federal funds, and professional effectiveness of leadership, McDonald et al. weigh the effects of belief systems, political influences, and cultural influences on the inputs, throughputs, and outputs, and eventual collapse, of the school reform efforts on schools and districts.

McDonald et al. examine the events and effects of the action space of school reform in Chicago through analysis of emerging centralized systems and emergent business models for operations and reform management. According to their case study, Chicago under Mayor Daley emphasized the development of accountability systems that valued the ideologies of business systems, instead of traditional school management of local control. Similarly, under CEO Paul Vallas, the increase of programs that supported human capital systems gained traction, and under CEO Arne Duncan, the schools were reformed through the implementation of business models in school operations and turnaround efforts. These decentralized initiatives, as shared by McDonald et al., manifested in Chicago as incentivized accountability with high stakes testing, a "portfolio approach" to school governance in the form of the new-schools initiatives, and the development of small-schools through Gates Foundation funding (p. 37-38). This action space of human capital strategy continued in Chicago under Ron Huberman with a focus on quality teacher and administrator training and retention as well as more "data-focused" school management.

The text continues this examination of business-influenced management of schools in action space through its narrative on New York's decentralization of schools, increase in human capital and talent management systems, and curricular and instructional autonomies in exchange for free-market incentives, all under the leadership of Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein. New York City, in its school reform action space as described by McDonald et al. (2014) placed emphasis on localized empowerment, more portfolio schools, and increased choice systems that required "the encouraging belief that business acumen can show the way in education reform" (p. 53). More interestingly, many of the reforms discussed in these action spaces are connected to several foundations, venture philanthropists, and non-profits that support decentralization, increased choice and privatization of schooling. McDonald et al. view these entities as important partners with influential networks to bring the civic capacities and money to the reform action space. In contrast, these venture philanthropists can also be viewed as political actors that utilize public-private partnerships to enact agendas, influence policy makers, and shape urban education reform. (Lipman, 2011).

The discussion of action space in Philadelphia is centered on the significance of fair funding, efficient school finance, and market-based schooling (p. 55-58). Although there was "civic dissent" and "resistance to school 'privatization'" in Philadelphia, under Paul Vallas's leadership, the city adopted a "diverse-providers" model with educational management organizations and created the largest privately managed schooling system (McDonald et al., 2014, p. 59). These schools, like those in Chicago and New York, produced a portfolio of schools and school assignments; however, they were not implemented in a choice system. Interestingly, the influence of these private actors and influencers in this action space created a large public-private partnership instead of the expected emergence of privatization in public schooling; yet, its creation prompted the development of

portfolio management of schools in New Orleans (McDonald et al., 2014,p. 62). Also noted by the authors, researchers did not find statistically significant effects in English and Math in the EMO schools, and they did not reflect any significant increase in student achievement. Furthermore, the dissipation of the urban core and the neighborhood effect on Chicago as described by Sampson (2012) incurred mounting costs for the school system, increased aggressive school closures, and increased costs for operational improvements (McDonald et al., 2014, p. 66).

Action space in the Bay Area of California (San Francisco, San Jose, and Oakland) is described by McDonald et al. as having considerably different characteristics given the education policies in California, school finance formulas, and governance distribution of districts. Therefore, the study focused on the Bay Area as a whole through the reform work of an intermediary: the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), with its focus on professional capacities and civic capacities. According to McDonald et al., this action space, unlike the other three in the study, consists of leveraging capacity building through cycles of inquiry in leadership schools, increasing efficiency in schools, and systematic use of data without any permanent links to a district or school system. BASRC eventually dissolved and transitioned into a not-for-profit company Pivot Learning Partners that is still involved in professional capacity building at school districts through consulting, coaching, and professional development (McDonald et al., 2014, p. 79).

In an analysis of the "collapses" of reform in the text, McDonald et al. acknowledge the problems of decentralization of the systems in Chicago and New York as well as implementation issues in system wide reforms in Philadelphia. In Philadelphia, issues arose from the early implementation of accountability systems, adoption of standards, inconsistencies in teacher participation, heavy reliance on principal leadership, miscommunication regarding the role of the central office, and the aggressive implementation of all reforms strategies at once (McDonald et al., 2014, p. 82 -91). Although the reforms sought to support change in a school system wrought with economic inequality and racial discrimination, they underestimated the need for better collaboration and more resources in the low-income neighborhoods that yearned for improved systems, more access, and reduced racial and economic stratification (Sharkey, 2013). In Chicago, the results of the school reform actions space were considered negligible, as the improvements were similar to those in other Chicago schools with similar demographics: "the CAC [Chicago Annenberg Challenge] impact was also negligible with respect to school improvement: the quality of classroom instruction, student learning climate, school leadership, teacher professional community, parent and community support, instructional coherence, and relational trust" (McDonald et al., 2014, p.100). The significance of Chicago, according to McDonald et al., is that the action space itself and the lessons learned from the process provided a strong research base and case study for other school reform that was utilized by the Chicago Consortium on School Research. The importance of the community context in conjunction with school site essential supports for professional and civic capacities became apparent in this case, as the CCSR researchers identified the need for more instructional coherence, recognition of differentiated outcomes, and relational trust with the surrounding community and its social capital (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). McDonald et al. (2014) present the collapse of the New York Bloomberg-Klein action space as inevitable given the dynamics of "*scale, partnership,* and *attitude*" (p. 107). In New York, the collapse was attributed to the size and scale of reform in such a large, multi-dimensional metropolitan; the complex nature of partnerships, partnership agendas,

and the level and quality of funding that these partners were able to bring and sustain; and the power differentials and relational dynamics of the actors within this action space. They acknowledge the influence of venture philanthropy and monetary partnerships as well as the need to create functional relationships with teacher communities, grassroots community organizations, and unions.

The implications for reform practice, as recommended by McDonald et al. (2014) are: 1) change the constitution of American school systems by involving more choice structures in the form of vouchers and design-based networks of schools, and 2) take into great consideration the impact of poverty and economic inequality in schools to formulate the theories of action (p. 141 -143). They reemphasize their ideas around reframing beliefs and arguments in developing action space and connecting them to school community reform efforts. Overall, the text successfully deconstructs the events and political influences of school reform efforts in the four Annenberg Challenge regions. The conception of action space with the various influencers and actors, in conjunction with their theoretical beliefs and arguments for reform efforts, is useful in understanding the complexity of school reform efforts and the players that are involved. However, the case studies do not take into account the complexities of the regional policies that affect the community and student populations such as access to resources such as housing, transportation, healthcare. Overall, the text is successful in debating the various trends of reform encouraged by the Annenberg Challenge and the development of politically popular accountability systems and school constitutions.

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About the Reviewer

Sissi Dinh O'Reilly is a doctoral student in the Education Policy and Planning Program at the University of Texas, Austin. Her research interests are in school reform policy and implementation for high-need schools and diverse student populations through a leadership and practitioner lens. Formerly a teacher and school principal, Sissi is focused on researching and developing solutions for effective student-centered practices and community centered educational policies.

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