

## Keeping Policy Churn Off the Agenda: Urban Education and Civic Capacity

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*Building on the conceptual framework developed by the Civic Capacity and Urban Education Project, we investigate why sustained reform is so difficult in urban school systems. Our study addresses two questions: How does the concept of civic capacity relate to the policy change process and how do its various components relate to each other? And to what extent does civic capacity foster agenda consensus in the context of urban education reform? To address these questions we focus on the connection between problems and solutions and deal directly with the question of how mayoral leadership impacts this process. Using the Project's survey of key stakeholders and independent indicators of agenda setting and stakeholder support/opposition culled from media coverage in 11 large U.S. cities, we find considerable variation in levels of civic capacity, particularly low levels of stakeholder agreement on reform solutions, but also convincing evidence that strong mayoral leadership may indeed play an important role in fostering greater agenda consensus.*

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### Introduction

Urban politics literature is replete with examples of how local growth coalitions (Logan & Molotch, 1987; Swanstrom, 1985) or urban regimes (Elkin, 1987; Stone, 1989), composed of downtown business elites, developers, local media, and local politicians, have managed to govern cities informally and pursue policies of growth and development while keeping policies devoted to the redistribution of local resources largely off the agenda.<sup>1</sup> This partly explains why the politics of economic development is typically characterized as consensual and also why it tends to dominate the local policy agenda. When it comes to other policy areas, particularly redistributive policies such as public housing or social welfare, extant research finds that they are typically much lower on the policy agenda and are usually associated with much less support among local stakeholders (Peterson, 1981).

Interestingly, education policy, especially in large central cities, seems to be situated somewhere in between these two extremes. On the one hand, the reform of urban public school systems is almost always on the local policy agenda. Indeed, the last two decades have witnessed a flurry of new reform efforts aimed at correcting urban school failure (Elmore, 1990; Hess, 1999; U.S. Department of

Education, 1991). On the other hand, despite increasing attention by local governments and state and federal governments as well, the issue of how to reform urban school systems continues to be elusive. Not only is there considerable disagreement about which educational reforms are appropriate for the problem at hand, but there are also very few success stories from which to draw inferences.

Part of the problem appears to be the very fact that districts continually pursue new solutions in a start-and-stop, chaotic fashion rather than committing to a multifaceted, integrated approach (Hess, 1999). A number of recent studies (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Orr, 1999; Rich, 1996) have identified the governing arrangements of local school systems as the primary culprit. The myriad stakeholders—from students and parents to teachers' unions to elected officials—suggest that each player will have selective incentives to protect their interests. Moreover, this arrangement provides strong incentives for members to protect the status quo rather than support reform solutions that would require one or more groups to give up benefits they are accustomed to receiving. In other words, researchers have posited that it is the structure of urban education governance and administration that tends to produce conflictual, rather than consensual, politics.

Finally, we also seek to better understand the conditions under which urban school systems are more likely to avoid “policy churn” (Hess, 1999) and instead be characterized by policy agendas that are clear and consistent. We do this by using independent indicators of agenda setting and stakeholder support/opposition culled from media coverage in the eleven cities. In addition, we look explicitly at mayoral leadership as one potential mechanism by which stakeholders overcome their differential interests.<sup>1</sup> While our findings are admittedly preliminary, they add to the conceptual power of civic capacity and begin to unravel the puzzle of agenda setting around urban education reform.

This paper proceeds in four sections. First, we examine the concept of civic capacity, both as described by the CCUEP, and embedded within the broader literature on urban politics, collective action and policy entrepreneurs. Next, we discuss our approach to operationalizing and measuring the components of civic capacity, and then analyze empirically not only how civic capacity around education reform manifests itself in the eleven cities sampled, but also the extent to which these indicators are related to each other empirically. Our main empirical power comes from the unique CCUEP dataset that allows us to tap into how stakeholders in American cities conceptualize their role in the policy process and the extent of their agreement on school reform problems and solutions. Lastly, we compare these data with newspaper accounts of education reform efforts to ascertain how well they correspond with our stakeholder accounts. More generally, these independent measures provide us additional leverage with which to investigate the extent of agenda clarity, consistency, and consensus across the eleven cities.

Perhaps the most comprehensive study of the political processes underlying urban education reform has been the Civic Capacity and Urban Education Project (CCUEP). This project examined the extent to which *civic capacity*, the mobilization of various stakeholders in support of a community wide cause, drove educational reform and thereby directed which problems were tackled and which solutions were

proposed in a sample of eleven cities (Henig et al., 1999; Stone et al., 1998, 2001; Portz et al., 1999). By emphasizing informal governing arrangements and the importance of key local stakeholders in shaping the policy agenda (see also Elkin, 1987; Stone, 1989), the CCUEP made a significant contribution to our understanding urban education reform.

The present research builds on the conceptual framework laid out by the CCUEP researchers, but situates their theory of civic capacity more explicitly within the broader literature on policy change and political entrepreneurs in order to investigate why sustained and successful school reform is so difficult in urban school systems. In our study we seek to not only unlock the mechanism of civic capacity, but to also investigate the nature civic capacity as it relates to agenda setting and stakeholder support for urban education reform. Our analysis thus addresses two questions in particular: How does the concept of civic capacity relate to the policy change process and how do its various components relate to each other? And, to what extent does civic capacity foster agenda consensus and policy change in the context of urban education reform? To address these questions we focus more attention on the connection *between* problems and solutions and deal more directly with the question of *how* educational stakeholders, which include a large and diverse set of interests, are able to overcome the problems of collective action in order to work together in a cooperative and sustained fashion.

### Conceptualizing Civic Capacity

Stone et al. (2001, 75) define civic capacity as the ability of communities to interject new ways of thinking about education and to bring together diverse interests from a broad segment of the community to solve problems collectively. Conceptually, this definition rests on two building blocks: the extent to which various sectors of a community have developed formal and informal means to identify common objectives (*issue definition*) and pursue common goals (*civic mobilization*). Thus civic capacity incorporates the ability of stakeholders to both recognize a problem and make efforts to come to a shared understanding about this problem (Stone et al., 2001, 75, 101).<sup>2</sup> Again, the emphasis is on stakeholder consensus across various sectors of the urban community—the building of a governing coalition.

The concept of civic capacity fits neatly within the agenda-setting literature, since issue definition is similar to problem definition, and civic mobilization implies a solution to the collective action problem (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1995; Schlager & Blomquist, 1996; True, Jones, & Baumgartner, 1999). Yet, beyond these two building blocks, the agenda-setting literature emphasizes problem-solution agreement (based on the problem, which reform should we mobilize around?),<sup>3</sup> stakeholder consensus as to who are the important decision makers (who makes key decisions regarding education in this city?), and the role of policy leaders (who are the entrepreneurs who can frame the problems and solutions and link them together?). To uncover the answers to these questions, we turn to the policy change literature. Building specifically on collective action literature and research on policy entrepreneurs, we are able to more fully specify the concept of civic capacity and the

ways in which it should impact urban education reform. As we explain later, the politics and institutions of urban education hinder the emergence of civic capacity because of the diverse interests represented, the difficulty in identifying and employing appropriate selective incentives, and the limited role of policy entrepreneurs.

### *Collective Action Problems*

At the local level, the choice between policy options entails a basic collective action problem. In other words, deciding how to spend city monies, determining which policy among several is most effective (or efficient, or provides the most desired outcome), determining who will benefit—all of these activities require the coming together of diverse actors with diverse goals and agreeing to a set of actions. Indeed, overcoming collective action problems is a fact of all governing decisions. However, the nature of both local politics and urban school systems makes this problem especially salient. Specifically, the stakeholders involved and their varied goals lead to seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Who should be involved in decisions regarding urban education? Or, perhaps more important, who should *not* be involved in decisions regarding urban education? Unlike economic development issues, in which the stakeholders consist mainly of downtown business elites and local elected officials (Stone, 1989), urban education stakeholders also include parents, school administrators and educators, and community groups. The concept of civic capacity requires that within these groups, key decision makers: (1) recognize their role as an agent of policy change, and (2) become visible and identifiable to other stakeholders. Whether it is achieving a specific educational objective, such as improving reading scores, or instituting a comprehensive school reform program, informal relationships and a foundation of support and cooperation among key stakeholders—or members of the *governing coalition*—are vitally important for education reform. However, given that education is a complex, multifaceted policy arena, this first step will be far from easy.

Even if key stakeholders recognize their position, their interests may be at odds, which would lead to an inability to come to a *shared agreement* about the problem and solutions (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1995). In the terms of collective action, educational stakeholders have different selective interests in the institution of education, and these are often viewed as incompatible. These differences lead to divergent definitions of what constitutes the problem of education, and the best solution to that problem. For example, parents and students are most interested in reforms like school-based choice, in which the decision making is decentralized to the parental level (Moe, 2001; Rose & Gallup, 1999). On the other hand, the economic significance of school politics has produced what Rich (1996, 5) refers to as a cartel-like governing entity, or what Orr (1999) labels an “employment regime”—a coalition of professional administrators, school activists, and union leaders who maintain control over school policy so as to promote their own interests and protect their status and perks.

The inability of different stakeholders to come to a shared agreement about how to define the education problem hampers the agenda setting and policy implemen-

tation process, often stalling education reform (Smith & O'Day, 1993). Moreover, when policies are passed that do not satisfy the interests of all stakeholders, we find ourselves in what Hess (1999) calls the "policy churn" of educational reform—the adoption of a policy by a new set of stakeholders, and then subsequent readoption of newer reforms (advocated by another set of stakeholders) at a dizzying pace, without any long-term success.

Hence the crux of the problem—in cities where diverse groups do not have a history of successful cooperation and where the policy issue lends itself to diverse interests and goals, the task of developing necessary cross-sector cooperation and trust so as to overcome self-interest is much greater (see, e.g., Axelrod, 1984; Ostrom, 1990; Stone, 1989). Given the complexity of urban education reform, the larger number of potential stakeholders, and the diverse incentives, we should not be surprised that overcoming the collective action problem has been difficult.

### *Leadership and Entrepreneurs*

As previous research has found (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1995; Polsby, 1984), leadership is key to moving the policy process along. Agenda-setting literature suggests that *policy entrepreneurs*, individuals who seek to initiate dynamic policy change, use several activities to promote their ideas: shaping the policy discussion to promote specific problem and solution definitions, networking and creating civic alliances, and infusing institutions with the resources and purpose to address major policy concerns (Dahl, 1961; Mintrom, 1997). Thus, the task of coming to consensus around reform solutions requires more than defining the reform solution as worthy of effort—it needs the additional support of a policy entrepreneur or leader to move the governing regime to policy action (see also Milward & Laird, 1990; Mintrom, 2000; Schneider, Teske, & Mintrom, 1995). The fundamental challenge facing these policy entrepreneurs or leaders is the collective action problem of creating and maintaining organization. As Schneider and Teske (1992, 741) note, in addition to the problems of group formation and maintenance, this involves the "biases in the distribution of resources and the generation of selective incentives necessary to create new alliances in local politics."

Traditionally, educational leadership in urban school systems has focused on two main actors—the superintendent and the mayor. However, in the urban setting and in the context of school reform, the role of the superintendent has waned (see, e.g., Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Hess, 1999; Johnson, 1996). At the same time, increasing mayoral involvement in school politics and policy has been a trend in recent decades (Rich, 1996).<sup>4</sup> In fact, since the early 1990s, a growing number of the nation's largest, urban school districts—including Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and New York—have shifted from elected to mayoral-appointed school boards (see, e.g., Wong & Shen, 2003). This power gives municipal governments more access to the development of school policies, confirming Dahl's (1961, 204) observation that mayors may be the only leaders within a city that have both the breadth and depth of leadership to significantly influence the educational reform process.

Recent literature also supports the contention that mayors are often key educational stakeholders and policy entrepreneurs in urban school politics. This is not only because their leadership position in city politics gives them substantial leverage in building governing coalitions and garnering constituency support within the educational arena but also because mayors are often voting members of the school board and, increasingly, also have the power to actually appoint school board members (Kirst, 2002; Meier, 2004; Shipps, 2004). Moreover, research has indicated that mayors tend to have stronger constituency relationships that last a considerable amount of time (Meier, 2004; Stein, 1990), which could assist them in avoiding the policy churn phenomenon that affects many school systems (Hess, 1999).

In sum, whereas Stone et al. (2001) defined civic capacity as a function of shared agreement and civic mobilization, we have developed a more detailed definition that builds on the policy change literature. We believe that this definition allows us to more explicitly examine the relationship between civic capacity and agenda setting.

### Research Hypotheses and Analytic Approach

We posit that civic capacity is a function of the development of a governing coalition, stakeholder agreement about core problems and solutions, and mayoral leadership. Previous research has shown that each of the components of civic capacity we have identified *individually* impacts agenda setting in a positive way; each leads to more clarity and consistency. Theoretically, we therefore have two expectations: First, each of these components works in concert—a city's civic capacity will grow as it adds each additional building block; second, cities with higher levels of civic capacity will have clearer and more consistent policy agendas.

Our strategy for testing these hypotheses is two-fold. First, we rely on data originally compiled by the *Civic Capacity and Urban Education Project* (CCUEP), which involved the in-depth analysis of 11 American cities during the early 1990s (Stone et al., 2001). In each city, a team of researchers compiled historical and archival data, implemented a common field-research protocol, and conducted interviews with a set of educational stakeholders from different positions in the local (and in some cases state or federal) jurisdiction (see Appendix A for a complete description of the protocol). While the sample of 11 cities was not randomly selected, it does capture considerable variation in the geographic location, demographic characteristics, and political and economic development of U.S. cities. In all, 516 interviews were completed and coded, ranging from 26 respondents in Houston to 63 respondents in Detroit (the mean number of respondents per city was 48.7). In Table 1 we report the list of 11 cities and descriptive information on the institutional and demographic characteristics of the cities and school systems.

The second component of our strategy relied on media reports of educational reform activities within the 11 cities during the period of the CCUEP study. Our objectives were (1) to corroborate the evidence from the surveys as to which problems and solutions were on the agenda, (2) to independently measure levels of stakeholder support for proposed educational solutions, and (3) to examine the rela-

Table 1. School District Institutional and Demographic Characteristics (1995)

City	SB Size	Board Selection	Minority SB	Black Mayor	Fiscally Independent	Total Students	Total Schools	Total Teachers	Median Pupil-Teacher Ratio	% Free Lunch	% Minority Students
Atlanta	9	Elected (Mixed)	11%	Yes	No	60,209	102	2,175	16.3	72%	93.4%
Baltimore	9	Appointed (Mayor)	0	Yes	No	109,980	180	6,291	18.9	62%	85.7%
Boston	7	Appointed (Mayor)	0	No	No	63,293	123	4,080	Na	73%	82.8%
Denver	7	Elected (Mixed)	14%	No	No	64,322	112	3,271	20.1	58%	72.9%
Detroit	11	Elected (Mixed)	100%	Yes	No	173,750	268	7,687	24.9	72%	94.3%
Houston	9	Elected (District)	100%	No	Yes	206,704	272	11,935	17.2	63%	88.5%
Los Angeles	7	Elected (District)	28%	Yes	No	647,612	642	26,438	25.1	72%	88.7%
Pittsburgh	9	Elected (District)	22%	No	Yes	40,181	79	1,199	16.4	59%	53.6%
St. Louis	7	Elected (At Large)	28%	No	Yes	61,889	111	2,972	22.4	76%	86.9%
San Francisco	7	Elected (At Large)	28%	No	No	46,128	129	2,479	13.6	52%	79.0%
Washington	11	Elected (Mixed)	73%	Yes	No	79,802	186	5,305	20.4	67%	96.0%

Sources: Council of Great City School. (1999). *National Urban Education Goals: 1994-1995 Indicators Report—District Profiles*; Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. (1995). *Black Elected Officials*. Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, Washington, DC.

tionship between mayoral leadership and agenda consensus. Our media measures were culled from the leading newspapers in each city for 1993 and 1994, and were coded using Stone et al.'s original problem and solution categories (see Appendix A for original codes, and Appendix B for additional details and descriptive statistics for the content analysis). Using the data garnered from the content analysis of newspaper articles, we are able to independently corroborate the stakeholders' assessments of leadership and educational problems/solutions, identify which educational reforms were actually on the policy agenda in these cities, and independently assess the extent of conflict or consensus surrounding these reforms.

### Analysis and Findings

In order to assess the extent of stakeholder agreement about education problems and solutions, we need to first identify who the stakeholders in each city are and determine the extent to which this collection of individuals constitutes a cohesive body (i.e., a governing coalition). In other words, do the survey respondents in the CCUEP sample see themselves and each other as stakeholders? Do they agree on who the key actors are when it comes to educational decision making in their city?

To measure the extent to which stakeholders form an established recognizable decision-making body, we examined the CCUEP interview questions that asked respondents to identify up to five educational stakeholders in their city. Using the coding scheme devised by Stone et al. (2001), we collapsed the original 22 stakeholder categories into eight more general groups that correspond to the primary sectors of society (see Appendix A). Based on the percentage of *all* city respondents who identified each of the eight groups, we found that only four predominant stakeholder groups were identified in each city.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, the CCUEP survey revealed that school administrators, business, local government, and community groups dominated the list of educational stakeholders.<sup>6</sup> Next, looking only at the respondents representing each of these four groups, we computed the percentage who indicated that their own group was a key educational stakeholder and then averaged across the four groups. These percentages are reported in the first column of Table 2.

The logic here is that self-identification provides a means of confirming that stakeholders representing these most frequently mentioned groups agree with everyone else that they are important decision makers in the education arena. Further, the group-based measurement strategy allows us to tap consistency within and across groups. A higher percentage indicates widespread agreement among members of the four groups that they view themselves as stakeholders. Thus, self-identification, acknowledgement, and high levels of intragroup agreement provide stronger evidence that the collection of stakeholders constitutes a stable, durable, and visible collaboration—or in other words a governing coalition.

Based on the overall agreement score, there are six cities where at least three-fourths of stakeholders agreed that their group was a key stakeholder in educational decision making: Detroit, Baltimore, Denver, Los Angeles, Boston, and San Francisco. For the other five cities, the results indicate confusion as to who is responsi-



Table 2. Civic Capacity Indicators: Agreement among Stakeholders

City (overall ranking)	Governing Coalition	Problem Agreement	Solution Agreement	Mayoral Leadership	Average Ranking
1. Baltimore (n = 23)	81.0%	<b>82.7%</b>	65.7%	68.0%	2
2. Detroit (n = 24)	<b>82.5%</b>	80.4%	60.8%	45.0%	4
3. Boston (n = 21)	76.6%	82.5%	39.8%	<b>78.0%</b>	4.5
4. Pittsburgh (n = 24)	62.0%	73.2%	67.8%	53.0%	5.25
5. Atlanta (n = 22)	69.5%	74.4%	63.3%	32.0%	5.5
6. San Francisco (n = 22)	75.5%	50.2%	<b>68.6%</b>	36.0%	5.75
6. Denver (n = 25)	79.5%	75.4%	49.0%	45.0%	5.75
7. DC (n = 29)	64.0%	72.6%	55.5%	65.0%	6.5
8. Los Angeles (n = 27)	79.5%	57.3%	59.0%	32.0%	6.75
9. St. Louis (n = 30)	57.5%	64.4%	60.5%	47.0%	7
10. Houston (n = 12)	52.3%	40.0%	61.7%	23.0%	8.5

Note: Entries are computed as percent of respondents' agreement within the four stakeholder groups (i.e., governing regime), averaged across all four groups. Entries in bold have the highest level of stakeholder agreement for that indicator.

ble for educational reform. Although we are confident that multiple stakeholders are perceived as important in these cities, the lack of consensus about who is responsible for educational decision making should be correlated with lower levels of agreement about educational problems and solutions and thus create more difficulty when it comes to achieving agenda consensus.

Next, we sought to measure the degree to which these stakeholders agreed about the key educational problems facing their city and the policy solutions most appropriate for improving education. In our analysis we focus not on the most commonly cited problems and solutions but, rather, on the extent of stakeholder *agreement* about these educational problems and solutions, since agreement is what really matters for civic capacity. We computed the percentage of respondents who cited each of the four problems (solutions) to education *within* each stakeholder group and then computed the average across all four groups (i.e., the governing coalition) for each *education problem (education solution)*. Responses for both of these measures are reported Table 2.

As these data suggest, the mean level of intragroup agreement is relatively high across most cities for the most frequently cited problem and generally lower when it comes to the most frequently identified solution. Table 2 illustrates that for seven of the cities in our sample, there was greater than 70% agreement among stakeholders about the most pressing educational problem. For the remaining four cities

(Houston, Los Angeles, St. Louis, and San Francisco), however, levels of agreement were relatively low. On the other hand, no city had more than 70% agreement about which solution was most appropriate. Consistent with the “policy churn” idea presented earlier, cities appear to be more adept at distinguishing which specific educational problem they want to tackle, but when posed with the question of how to actually tackle this problem, they are much less clear. Agenda-setting literature predicts that in the absence of agreement about which solution to pursue, cities will have a more difficult time implementing consistent and sustained reforms.

Finally, given the important leadership role that top public officials play in creating civic alliances and infusing institutions with the resources and purpose to address major policy concerns (see, e.g., Henig & Rich, 2004; Portz, Stein, & Jones, 1999), we investigated how often stakeholders in the 11 cities cited either their school superintendent or mayor as a key decision maker in the educational arena. In fact, superintendents were very rarely considered to be among the most important stakeholders in urban school systems: The highest endorsement came from San Francisco respondents with 25%, and in one city—Detroit—not a single respondent cited the superintendent as a key local stakeholder. In contrast to superintendents, our data suggest that mayors clearly are providing an important leadership role in school reform—at least in some cities. As the last column of Table 2 demonstrates, in Baltimore, Boston, and Washington, DC, more than two-thirds of respondents indicated that the mayor was a key educational stakeholder. On the other hand, in seven cities, less than half of respondents identified the mayor as an important stakeholder. Thus, although the mayor clearly plays a more central role than the superintendent, considerable variation exists across the 11 cities with regard to just how much agreement there was among stakeholders as to the mayor’s role in educational policy and reform.

#### *Evidence of Civic Capacity*

Our conceptualization of civic capacity depends on the *levels of agreement* between stakeholders as to (1) who the main decision makers in educational reform are, (2) what the key challenges facing the city are, (3) how these challenges would best be met, and (4) if the mayor is a key leader in the educational reform process. To provide some idea of how cities compared across the four different indicators, in Table 2 we not only listed them according to their overall ranking but also included a column that reports their average ranking across the cooperation measures. While there is clearly a pattern with regard to levels of agreement among stakeholders across the four indicators, there is also considerable variation. For example, Baltimore has the highest levels of agreement on three of the four indicators, with at least two-thirds of stakeholder in agreement, and Houston has the lowest levels of agreement on three of the four indicators with less than 50% agreement on two of these. On the other hand, Atlanta, San Francisco, and Los Angeles each had agreement levels ranging from more than 74% percent to less than 36%, indicating a rather substantial range of agreement depending on the indicator in question.

**Table 3.** Pairwise Pearson Correlations between Civic Capacity Indicators

	Mayor Key Stakeholder	Governing Coalition	Problem Agreement	Solution Agreement
Mayor key stakeholder	1.00			
Governing coalition	0.253 p = 0.452	1.00		
Problem agreement	0.740*** p = 0.009	0.512 p = 0.108	1.00	
Solution agreement	-0.477 p = 0.137	-0.215 p = 0.525	-0.357 p = 0.281	1.00

N = 11.

Clearly these findings raise questions as to whether the four indicators of civic capacity should be weighted equally, whether they are indeed internally consistent, and whether each is a necessary for policy change. Given the small number of cases in our study, we cannot fully answer these questions in the present analysis. However, in Table 3 we report the Pearson’s correlation coefficients for each pair of indicators in order to shed some light on how this set of indicators is related in our sample.

As these correlation coefficients illustrate, the only significant correlation is between the leadership variable (*mayor key stakeholder*) and *problem agreement*. This relationship concurs with our previous discussion about the importance of a strong leader in the policymaking process. The correlations also indicate that while not significantly related, established and recognizable governing coalitions are positively related to both mayoral leadership and problem agreement. On the other hand, the correlations reported in Table 3 suggest that the relationship between solution agreement and the other three indicators is negative. Given the lack of statistical significance and the small number cases available for analysis, these findings should obviously be interpreted with caution. However, they seem to suggest that although not all indicators of civic capacity tap the same thing, agreement on what the major causes of educational problems are is associated with a strong leader and governing coalitions that are more identifiable, but this alone does not appear to guarantee agreement upon the preferred solution.

### **Linking Civic Capacity to Agenda Setting: Corroboration from Newspaper Sources**

We turn next to media indicators to both independently corroborate findings from the CCUEP survey and assess how levels of civic capacity are related to agenda clarity and consistency. Do newspaper articles in cities with higher levels of civic capacity report on the same problems and solutions mentioned by stakeholders? Is there a greater correspondence between stakeholders’ views and newspaper accounts regarding the key educational problems and solutions in cities that evinced higher levels of civic capacity? To answer these questions we content-analyzed newspaper articles to get measures of the frequency with which the set of educational problems and solutions included in the CCUEP survey were cited in each of

**Table 4.** Comparison of Key Problem and Solution Across Survey and Media Sources

City	Problem-Problem Match	Solution-Solution Match
Baltimore	X	X
Detroit	X	X
Boston	Political/Governance	Decentralization
Pittsburgh	Political/Governance	X
Denver	X	X
Atlanta	X	Redistribute Resources
San Francisco	Political/Governance	Redistribute Resources
Washington	Political/Governance	Decentralization
St. Louis	School/Education	X
Los Angeles	X	X
Houston	Political/Governance	X

*Note:* Cities listed in order based on their mean civic capacity ranking in Table 2. "X" indicates no agreement between survey and media sources.

the 11 cities.<sup>7</sup> We then compared the frequencies of the most commonly cited problem and solution across the media and survey measures to determine whether stakeholder opinions about what was on the educational policy agenda in their cities were consistent with what the local newspaper reported as the most salient educational problem and solution. In other words, the two possible matches, *Problem-Problem* and *Solution-Solution* (survey-media), measure consistency in the identification of problems and solutions across the two sources. The outcome of this comparison is reported in Table 4.

Corroborating our findings from the survey, we again discover greater consensus among stakeholders on the most salient education problem and greater conflict as to which solution is most appropriate. Indeed, in over half of the cities, the stakeholders' views, as reported in the CCUEP survey, matched the media accounts. On the other hand, in only four cities did we find consensus around solution, and in only three cities did we find consensus about problems and solutions—Boston, San Francisco, and Washington. The story thus far begins to illustrate how urban education reform falls somewhere *in between* consensual and conflictual politics. Specifically, our findings have shown that agreement as to *who* the key stakeholders are and *why* the educational system needs reforming is relatively high. However, when it comes to *how* reform should occur, rather than consensus, we see a considerable degree of conflict. This inability to move beyond problem agreement appears to at least partly explain the "policy churn" witnessed in big cities. In particular, it appears that because each educational problem has numerous possible solutions, and because stakeholders cannot agree on which one would be best, each of them gets applied at some point in time. Given the difficulty in agreeing on reform solutions, is it possible for cities to overcome policy churn?

#### *Agenda Consensus and Mayoral Leadership—Revisited*

The pattern of results presented thus far support both the policy churn phenomenon and Kingdon's (1995) notion of policy streams. According to his theory of

Table 5. Linking Mayoral Leadership with Agenda Consensus

City	Problem-Solution Match	Level of Conflict for Preferred Solution		Mayoral Leadership
		For Reform	Against Reform	
Boston	Yes	Groups: 4 Mentions: 58	Groups: 2 Mentions: 10	78.0%
Baltimore	No	Groups: 2 Mentions: 3	Groups: 5 Mentions: 6	68.0%
Washington	Yes	Groups: 5 Mentions: 44	Groups: 4 Mentions: 25	65.0%
Pittsburgh	No	Groups: 5 Mentions: 66	Groups: 3 Mentions: 4	53.0%
Los Angeles	No	Groups: 2 Mentions: 6	Groups: 2 Mentions: 9	47.0%
San Francisco	Yes	Groups: 4 Mentions: 32	Groups: 5 Mentions: 17	45.0%
Detroit	No	Groups: 3 Mentions: 46	Groups: 2 Mentions: 4	45.0%
Atlanta	No	Groups: 2 Mentions: 14	0	36.0%
Denver	No	Groups: 4 Mentions: 5	Groups: 2 Mentions: 5	32.0%
St. Louis	No	Groups: 5 Mentions: 29	0	32.0%
Houston	No	Groups: 4 Mentions: 23	Groups: 2 Mentions: 6	23.0%

Note: Problem-Solution match indicates whether media and survey sources matched for both problem and solution (from Table 4). Mayoral leadership figures from Table 2.

agenda setting, problem and solution definitions are completely independent processes. It is policy entrepreneurs (and a wide variety of external factors) that bring the policy problem and solution together (opening a policy window). We investigate this possibility by exploring how mayoral leadership is associated with the breadth and depth of stakeholder support for educational solutions using our newspaper accounts of education reform, and looking once again at the match between problems and solutions across our survey and media sources.

In Table 5 we combine data from both our survey and media sources to gain a better picture of the extent of agenda consensus in each of the 11 cities. Specifically, the second column of Table 5 indicates whether or not survey and media accounts for both educational problem *and* solution matched (i.e., two matches in Table 4), while the third column provides the number of different stakeholder groups mentioned in the newspaper articles as well as the number of times they were mentioned in association with each city’s most preferred solution. The fourth column reports the same information; however, in the case of opposition to the city’s most preferred solution. Finally, we also report the mayoral leadership figures from Table 2.

We believe that greater agenda consensus is indicated by agreement on both the top educational problem *and* solution, by a larger number of stakeholders groups identified as supporting the top educational reform, and by more frequent references to these stakeholders in newspaper accounts of education reform in the city. Examining our survey indicator of mayoral leadership across this set of indicators,

we find that two of the three cities with consensus on both problems and solutions from Table 4 (Boston and Washington) also had high levels of mayoral leadership around educational reform, and a large number of stakeholders mentioned in association with the most popular reform solution. The third city, San Francisco, ranked somewhat lower on mayoral leadership, but nevertheless, had four different stakeholder groups in support of the top solution and a large number of newspaper accounts referencing these groups. In fact, the relationship between mayoral leadership and levels of support for the most preferred solution is consistent across nearly all cities (Baltimore and Los Angeles are notable exceptions). Specifically, the evidence presented in Table 5 suggests that cities where mayors are identified as key stakeholders in education policy have more breadth and depth in the extent of stakeholder support for the most preferred educational solution and greater consensus between newspaper and survey accounts of what problem and solution are on the agenda.

It appears, then, that strong mayoral leadership may indeed play an important role in fostering greater agenda consensus. In addition, this evidence suggests that mayors might be one of the crucial components needed to move cities from conflictual to consensual politics within the domain of education policy.

Overall, the findings from our research reaffirm the CCUEP conclusion that there is considerable variation in levels of civic capacity across the 11 cities in our sample, particularly when examined from the lens of stakeholders in these cities. For instance, based on the CCUEP survey items we found that whereas stakeholder agreement in some cities (Baltimore, Detroit and Boston) approached 70% across all four indicators of civic capacity, in other cities (Houston, St. Louis, and Los Angeles) it was substantially lower, often failing to reach 50%. In addition, our empirical analyses consistently suggest that getting stakeholders to agree about which solutions are most appropriate for the educational problem at hand is an especially difficult enterprise. This pattern was corroborated with our media accounts, which found greater consensus on problems than solutions. However, when we move beyond our survey indicators and looked explicitly at the levels of support (and opposition) for the most preferred reform solution, we find that agenda consensus appears to be greater in cities with stronger mayoral leadership and where there is consensus on key educational problems *and* solutions.

## Conclusion

Building on the foundation set forth by the Civic Capacity and Urban Education Project, we believe the present study adds to the theory of civic capacity in three important respects. First, by expanding the concept of civic capacity to include the policy change literature, our research makes an important contribution to understanding why “policy churn” is so prevalent in urban school reform. Because educational reform potentially involves diverse interests with incongruent incentives for cooperation, we find more consensus among stakeholders around the need to change the system, but conflict as to the best route of action. The second contribution relates to our understanding of how cities begin to break out of this cycle. Our

focus on the relationship between civic capacity and agenda setting uncovered additional evidence demonstrating that cohesive policy agendas are more likely to exist in cities where stakeholders are more active, visible, and supportive of the key reform initiative. While we expected the complexity of diverse interests represented by urban school systems to render collective action difficult, our analysis supports the importance of a *governing regime* for policy change. In other words, although diverse interests lead to a higher likelihood of policy churn, agenda cohesiveness, and clarity around a complex policy like education reform requires input from these diverse interests.

Third, our more explicit attention to mayoral leadership uncovers one possible mechanism whereby stakeholders may overcome these differential interests. Recent literature supports the contention that mayors are often key educational stakeholders and policy entrepreneurs in urban school politics, not only because their leadership position in city politics gives them substantial leverage in building governing coalitions and garnering constituency support within the educational arena but also because mayors are often voting members of the school board and, increasingly, also have the power to actually appoint school board members (Kirst, 2002; Meier, 2004). In addition, mayoral terms in large U.S. cities are usually four years, and many big city mayors serve more than one term. This longer time frame allows mayors to forge and sustain relationships over a considerable amount of time (Stein, 1990) and gives them some leverage to steer governing coalitions away from the policy churn phenomenon that affects so many school systems (Hess, 1999).

In sum, looking at both survey responses from educational stakeholders and newspapers accounts of education reform in the 11 cities, our study underscores the inherent complexities involved both in effectively supplying education in big cities and in reforming urban school systems. While our study provides new empirical insights and contributes to the theory of civic capacity and urban education reform, it also acknowledges the need for further work. Specifically, we believe that future research into civic capacity, policy change, and the politics of urban education reform could fruitfully proceed by examining more carefully the relationship between agenda consensus and policy implementation, the role of mayors in facilitating consensual politics around education reform, and the actual process and outcomes of policy implementation.

### Appendix A: Description of Data and Survey Questions

Using a common field research guide, the CCUEP researchers in each city completed in-depth interviews with a set of respondents representing three different spheres of influence: (1) *general influentials*, respondents deemed as important actors in local decision-making across a range of policy issues not limited to education; (2) *community-based representatives*, or individuals active in organizations ranging from children's advocacy groups, minority organizations, neighborhood associations, religious organizations, and PTAs; and (3) *education specialists*, persons especially knowledgeable about the implementation of school system policies and programs.

### *Governing Coalition*

To assess the key players in the governance in the CCUEP sample cities, we relied on interview questions that asked respondents to identify up to five educational stakeholders in their city. Using the coding scheme devised by Stone et al. (2001) we collapsed the original 22 stakeholder categories into 8 more general categories. These categories and the stakeholders they represent include the following:

- *School Administration/Bureaucracy*: school board, school superintendent, educators, unions dealing with schools
- *Local Government*: mayor/county executor, city government in general, city council
- *Community Groups*: university community, community groups, nonprofit community, ethnic groups, neighborhood citizen groups, church groups/leaders
- *Business Groups*: chamber of commerce, business community (specific businesses, corporations, or general mention of business community)
- *Parents*: parent organizations
- *State Government*: state government, state courts
- *Federal Government*: federal government
- *External Groups*: media, labor, political parties

### *Education Problems*

In interviews conducted by the CCUEP team, respondents were asked what they saw as the major challenges in the area of children and youth, especially in education. Respondents were allowed to give up to three responses. In the original survey data, these responses were coded according to 14 categories, which we then grouped these responses into four more general categories. From the original data, *Social problems* included the following responses: (1) lack of workforce preparedness by students; (2) low self-esteem of students/lack of community involvement; (3) health and social issues; (4) crime and drug issues; (7) social service problems; (8) before/after school problems. *School/educational problems* included: (12) inadequate school resources (poor buildings, teachers' salaries, lack of books and equipment); (14) poor quality of teaching (curriculum and school organization). *Economic/financial problems*: (9) finances. *Political/governance problems*: (5) school board problems; (6) city government problems; (10) minority relations; (11) union conflict.

### *Education Solutions*

In a similar set of questions, respondents were asked to list up to three things they believed would enable their city to make greater efforts in the area of education. We again collapsed the original (12) coded responses into four more general



categories to measure the degree of stakeholder agreement educational reforms. *Improve administrative bureaucracy* included the following responses: (4) cut central bureaucracy; (6) more capable school board. *Increase administrative centralization* included (3) stronger superintendent; (7) more control to school board; (10) more involvement by unions (dealing with schools). *Decrease administrative centralization*: (8) more control to individual schools; (9) more motivation/ control to parents. *Redistribute educational resources*: (5) redistribute resources. Note, three other responses were coded in the original data: (1) Government bureaucracy better able to deal with financial, social, and educational issues; (11) achievement of agenda status by educational issues (systemic agenda), and (12) creation of agenda by those involved in education policy (governmental agenda). Because these responses are vague, do not imply any specific policy solutions, and few respondents actually cited them (less than 15%), we do not include them in this analysis.

## Appendix B: Newspaper Coding

### *Content Analysis*

For each city, the major newspaper was chosen for content analysis. Coders utilized either Lexis-Nexis or Newsbank (except for Baltimore and Los Angeles; see below), and searched the following terms: “school reform,” “public schools,” and “[city] public school district.” Articles were then screened to eliminate news stories that did not deal with reform issues (i.e. awards given to teachers, sports achievement, etc.). Table A lists the number of articles retrieved for both 1993 and 1994. Baltimore and Los Angeles posed a problem—neither newspaper was available through free electronic resources. However, their respective newspaper websites did allow for archival searches that provided summaries of the article. Thus, for both Baltimore and Los Angeles, coding was based on summaries, and not full articles.

**Table A.** Newspaper Sources for Content Analysis

City	Newspaper	# 1993 Articles	# 1994 Articles
Atlanta	Atlanta Constitution	45	24
Baltimore	Baltimore Sun	16	17
Boston	Boston Globe	65	58
Denver	Denver Post	15	15
Detroit	Detroit Free Press	47	52
Houston	Houston Chronicle	69	23
Los Angeles	Los Angeles Times	40	72
Pittsburgh	Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	42	48
St. Louis	St. Louis Post-Dispatch	46	16
San Francisco	San Francisco Chronicle	20	32
Washington DC	Washington Post	25	31

### *Coding*

The codesheet developed matched the categories used by Stone et al. (2001) in their interviews of stakeholders. For each of the problems, coders indicated whether the article mentioned that problem as being related to educational problems in the city (1); otherwise coded it as (0). For the solutions, (1) indicated the article mentioned the solution, but didn't elaborate if there should be more or less; (2) indicated that one or more groups advocated *for* this reform; (3) indicated that one or more groups advocated *against* this reform; and (0) no mention. In addition, coders detailed who was speaking about the particular reform, using the grouping identified in Appendix A (see above).

Approximately 10% of the articles (n = 79) were also used to test intercoder reliability. To calculate this correlation, we recoded all entries for those 79 articles as either 0 (not mentioned), or 1 (mentioned), and calculated the number of discrepancies between the coders. Our results indicate intercoder reliability of 93.9%.

### *Computation of Most Frequently Cited Problem/Solution and Groups Mentioned*

Tables 4 and 5 summarize the findings from the content analysis. In table 4, we calculated the most frequently cited problem/solution as the number of times the problem/solution was mentioned divided by the total of articles that mentioned any problem/solution. Table 5 provides more detailed information about the preferred solution. Groups mentioned and number of mentions are simple counts for the most preferred solution.

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### Notes

1. The authors thank John Higginbothom, Shannon Smittick, Ellie Quartel, Michelle Orchard, Nicole Orchard and Kenneth Orchard for research assistance with content analysis, coding, and data entry.
2. Stone et al. (2001) suggested further research into the role of mayoral leadership, noting that the "question is not mayoral leadership or not. The real question is whether the mayor's leadership is part of a substantial civic coalition" (164).
3. The CCUEP discuss variation in problem noted and solutions noted for each city as a measure of elite consensus (Stone et al., 2001, 120) but do not specifically investigate the relationship between problem cited and solution offered.
4. Zeigler (1972) offers four reasons for this: (1) increasing citizen concern over the quality of public schools; (2) growing interaction between the school system and other departments and agencies of city government; (3) the interrelationship between the educational system and other city problems—including conditions facing the mayor; (4) intervention by the federal government in local school affairs through the courts and federal and social educational programs (see also Rich, 1996, 133–34).
5. The average response for these four groups was the following: Business (70%), Local Government (81%), Community Groups (61%), and School Administrators (46%). For the remaining four groups,

the average response was: Parents (12%), State Government (20%) External Groups (9%), Federal Government (4%).

6. There were two exceptions: More respondents in Boston identified State Government than School Administrators, and more Detroit respondents identified External Groups than School Administrators. We therefore use these groups (and respondents) in our analysis for these two cities.
7. Actually, in every city in our sample, the most frequently cited problem was social problems. This is, of course, not surprising given the social and economic context in which urban schools are situated (see Table 1). However, the source of these problems is largely outside the scope of school policy and administration. To meaningfully address these social problems would require cooperation and involvement from not only educational stakeholders but also city, state, and perhaps federal governments. For this reason, and because the reform solutions included in the original CCUEP survey do not correspond directly to these problems, we chose not to analyze them in Tables 4 and 5. Instead, we focused on the remaining set of problems that were more narrowly related to schooling and education.

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