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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1835q59q>

Journal

Berkeley Review of Education, 9(1)

Author

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Publication Date

2019

DOI

10.5070/B89146419

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In North Carolina, Education Activists Face an Uphill Battle

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Out of all the states that have struggled to provide a quality public education over the past decade, perhaps none have seen as precipitous a decline as North Carolina. Once seen as a regional model of progressive education policy, a succession of unfortunate occurrences has severely damaged our public education system. Activists now fight against difficult odds for the change students need most.

Shift of Political Power to Republicans and Impact on North Carolina Education Policy

Like many states, North Carolina was hit hard by the Great Recession and saw funding cuts that greatly impacted our schools. However, the nightmare for our public schools began in earnest in November 2010 when the Republican Party won control of both the Senate and the House of Representatives (Mildwurf & Browder, 2010) in North Carolina's state legislature. The following year, Republicans gerrymandered electoral districts (Ballotpedia, n.d.a) to ensure they'd be able to hold onto power for the next decade and then set their veto-proof majority to work passing regressive education policies with no opposition.

The policies included significant de-professionalization of the teaching profession in North Carolina through revoking career status protection (Public Schools First NC, 2017) for teachers, terminating advanced degree compensation (Kiley, 2013), and eliminating retiree health care benefits (Bonner, 2017). The GOP majority lifted the cap (Leslie, 2011) on charter schools, worsening economic and racial segregation across the state given that charters serve an increasingly white population (Nordstrom, 2018). The legislature directed a billion dollars (Wagner, 2019) over a decade to voucher programs, despite the fact that the schools participating in the program were not required to report on student achievement (Public Schools First NC, 2019). Additionally, the legislature cut thousands of teacher assistants (Campbell & Bonner, 2015) and created a school report card system, in which school ratings were highly correlated with levels of poverty (Henkel, 2016). Finally, state legislators passed a K–3 reading initiative (North Carolina

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Department of Public Instruction, n.d.), which promised to improve results through increasing assessment volume and threatening our most vulnerable students with grade retention. And when K–3 reading achievement got worse, legislators added financial pay-for-performance incentives (Clark, 2016) based on questionable value-added data.

Many of these harmful initiatives were passed in budget bills rather than being moved through deliberative committee processes, eliminating the debate and public input so essential to the creation of effective policy. In addition to promoting a neoliberal education reform agenda, North Carolina’s lawmakers passed massive tax cuts favoring corporations and wealthy individuals, which have taken \$3.6 billion in potential annual revenue (Sirota, 2019) off the table, all but ensuring schools will struggle for adequate resources for the foreseeable future.

In North Carolina’s 2016 general election, Republican Mark Johnson eked out a 1% victory (Ballotpedia, n.d.b) for the state superintendency—the first time in more than 100 years the office had been won by a Republican. State legislators immediately moved to transfer power away from newly elected Democratic Governor Roy Cooper and the State Board of Education and give Superintendent Johnson unprecedented control of North Carolina’s public school system (North Carolina General Assembly, 2016).

Unchecked Accountability

Superintendent Johnson brought little relevant experience to the position, having taught only two years with Teach for America before leaving education to become an attorney (Hinchcliffe, 2016). He also lacked—and continues to lack—the political will to advocate for the kind of legislative change North Carolina’s schools need in the face of the onslaught of harmful education policy detailed above. Desperate for change and emboldened by the wave of teacher strikes sweeping the nation, North Carolina educators held a Day of Action on May 16, 2018, which closed schools for more than one million public school students. An estimated 20,000 educators filled the streets of Raleigh and marched to the state legislature, demanding better funding for public education. Superintendent Johnson did not attend the rally and was critical of the decision to hold it during school hours (Hui, 2018a)—although he had been happy to serve as keynote speaker at a school-choice rally during school hours just a few months prior (Seward, 2018). When another Day of Action was called for May 2019, Johnson was again unsupportive (Childress, 2019), calling on teachers to consider protesting during spring break or summer vacation instead.

As a teacher and education activist in North Carolina, I chose to more or less suffer the superintendent’s poor leadership in silence for a time—perhaps due to some vague notion that a worker should never openly criticize his boss. But as I witnessed Superintendent Johnson’s lack of support for teachers over and over, his unwillingness to stand up to harmful legislation, and, increasingly, the pursuit of his own policies (Hui, 2018b) that negatively impacted our children, I came to realize that educators were better positioned than anyone to speak to the issues at hand.

Then came the *Istation* fiasco.

On June 7, 2019, the last day of school for many North Carolina schools, Superintendent Johnson announced that he was awarding the contract for a K–3 reading assessment to a company called *Istation*. Effective immediately, students would take

reading assessments alone on a computer rather than reading to a human teacher. Many of North Carolina's elementary educators were shocked and dismayed (Hui, 2019a) by the news.

Two days later, former Director of Integrated Academic and Behavior Systems, Amy Jablonski, who had worked at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI) under Superintendent Johnson through December 2018, revealed on social media (Amy J for NC, 2019) that the decision to award the contract to Istation directly contradicted the advice of a recommendation committee.

I spoke to Jablonski to get more details about what had happened. It turned out that she had managed the procurement process from its inception. A broad evaluation committee of DPI employees, educators, and various subject-matter experts had been assembled under her leadership to inform the process of choosing a reading assessment. The committee painstakingly reviewed four vendors, and then met to discuss their findings, rank the choices, and come up with an overall recommendation to present to Superintendent Johnson. Members of the committee had voiced concerns about Istation's developmental appropriateness and its shortcomings as a screener for dyslexia, among other things. The committee had unanimously selected an assessment that requires the student to read aloud to the teacher (i.e., Amplify's mCLASS tool), which was the same tool that North Carolina's schools had been using since 2013. Four people had presented that recommendation to the superintendent in December of 2018.

To raise public awareness, I wrote a blog post about the issue (Parmenter, 2019a), which was shared more than 15,000 times. As public outrage began to build about Johnson's dismissal of the broad consensus reached by an experienced team of professional educators in making his unilateral decision, both DPI Director of Communications Graham Wilson (Hinchcliff, 2019a) and Superintendent Johnson (2019) stated the claims were false and the committee had made no recommendation. In an email to the North Carolina State Superintendents' Association, Johnson also warned (Parmenter, 2019b) that those involved in the procurement process had signed non-disclosure agreements and "are not to share any information about the process with anyone outside the team." (Johnson, 2019, para. 7). Copies of those agreements soon surfaced, which clearly stated that details "shall remain confidential until successful completion of the procurement process" (Amy J for NC, 2019b, para. 1).

In an effort to shed light on a matter of legitimate public concern, I filed a public records request for documents related to the procurement process and encouraged others to do the same. Many members of the media, educators, and public school parents filed their own requests. North Carolina's public records law is clear that public records and public information are "the property of the people" (Public Records Law, para. 2) but provides no time limit for compliance with requests. As the days turned into weeks, with no sign of the requested records, education activists increased public pressure (e.g., Chimpsea, 2019) on the superintendent to comply with state law.

The overwhelming pressure eventually bore fruit. In mid-July, the DPI released 166 pages of documents related to the procurement process and contract award. The documents clearly showed (Hui, 2019b) that the evaluation committee working under Jablonski's direction had overwhelmingly recommended Amplify's mClass to the superintendent. Meeting details included in the records also noted a speech that Johnson

Parmenter

gave to the evaluation team after reviewing their recommendation, in which it appeared that he had unsuccessfully tried to get them to change their decision (Parmenter, 2019c). Johnson later canceled the procurement process and created a new evaluation committee almost entirely devoid of educators or subject-matter experts, which, eventually, recommended Istation.

Education Advocates Face an Uphill Battle

Around the same time the records were released, Istation's North Carolina attorneys threatened me and two other advocates with legal action, accusing me of making defamatory statements (Shanahan, 2019). It was the first time I'd been threatened with a lawsuit, and the idea of facing a \$100 million corporation (Hall, 2018) in court certainly gave me pause. After securing legal representation through my educator association, I stepped back and took a critical look at all the work I'd done on Istation. What I saw was my strong desire for truth and transparency in government and a system where our education policies are informed by the consensus of the people who are most knowledgeable about how they will affect our children. That desire led me to devote countless hours to researching the matter, speaking with dozens of people who were deeply invested in education and government in North Carolina, and learning about everything from dyslexia to procurement rules. In sharing information that I felt would be helpful to the public, not one time had I stated anything that I did not understand to be absolutely true. So, with a continued eye toward truth and accuracy, I followed the advice of a trusted friend and "kept cooking."

Public education activism in North Carolina can be exhausting. Educators who advocate for positive change in our state often feel like they're engaged in a perpetual game of whack-a-mole, in which the moles are tremendously wealthy and powerful and sometimes willing to fight dirty to preserve the system. For example, in July 2019, Superintendent Johnson denied Amplify's protest of his contract award to Istation (Hinchcliffe, 2019a). Amplify appealed the decision (Hinchcliffe, 2019b) to the North Carolina Department of Information Technology, which approved a motion to stay the Istation contract to allow for a review of the path Johnson followed in awarding it. Since then, Johnson has essentially defied the Department of Information Technology's ruling (Parmenter, 2019c) arranging for Istation to provide its product at no charge during the review and continue its use. Nevertheless, we continue to agitate for progress, deeply believing the old adage that our kids are worth whatever it takes.

Author Biography

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IN NORTH CAROLINA

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