

2015 Reflections: Governance Summit Synthesis

In December 2015, the Donnell-Kay Foundation, Gates Family Foundation, and Bellwether Education Partners convened two dozen researchers, policy experts, funders and system leaders who are focused on increasing equity and excellence in education through governance reform, to the Education Governance Summit in Denver, Colorado. It was two days of deep conversation and ideation about the current state and future possibilities for structuring and managing our public education systems across the country.

The purpose of the summit was to:

- Share emergent new education governance models:
 - ReSchool Colorado (Donnell Kay Foundation)
 - The Urban School System of the Future (Bellwether Education Partners)
 - Democratic Constitution for Public Education (Center for Reinventing Public Education)
- Understand how alternative governance systems are playing out in the following regions, including past lessons, current challenges, and plans for the future:
 - Detroit
 - Empower Schools (Springfield, MA)
 - New Orleans RSD
 - Tennessee ASD
 - Washington DC
- Provide an opportunity to learn, deepen relationships and connect with others to help advance our individual and collective efforts.

Those who attended the summit had the chance to influence current governance reform efforts nationwide and gain important insights to inform governance-related work in their respective communities. However, we recognize the limitations of our physical space did not allow for all the people working on and thinking about these issues to join us; for that reason, we are sharing this brief summary of the meeting with links to some of the materials shared over the course of the two days.

The State of Education Governance in the U.S.

The summit began with a presentation by Jason Weeby of Bellwether Education Partners highlighting the evolution of governance in education and the recent trends and future directions where it may be headed. Jason argues governance is important to our work because it creates the conditions for school improvement but leaves the management and innovation up to individuals and organizations. In his opinion, small alterations in governance can have profound positive or negative impact on the whole system. For more detail and slides from Jason's presentation, read his blog post "Six Factors Pushing Education Governance into the Reform Spotlight" on Ahead of the Heard.

6 Factors Pushing Governance Change

- ◆ Charter Sector Maturation ◆ Intellectual Capital ◆ Personalized Learning ◆
- ◆ Districts in Distress ◆ Achievement School Districts ◆ Decline of Silver Bullet Mentality ◆

Recent Trends

- Local governance is getting more varied and complex
- The locus of power is shifting from the federal to the state level
- The political environment (two-party system) is getting more polarized and challenging to navigate

What's Next?

- More parallel systems with a growing need for equity across sectors (enrollment, SPED, discipline)
- Questions of "capture" and a move to separate the functions of operation and regulation
- Layered functions of government and multi-faceted delineations between district, city, state, federal
- Tension between fidelity to a specific model and requiring all learning opportunities to serve all kids

Case Studies & Consultancies

The summit featured two different groups of presenters: the “dreamers,” or groups of education thought leaders imagining and designing future governance models, and the “change-makers,” or representatives from cities and states around the country currently implementing alternative governance models. Although the current and future models vary significantly in structures, roles, and their political implications, there emerged common themes that all participants could relate to, and highlighted both the challenges and opportunities of governance reform as a lever for change.

Key Themes

1. *Politics & Principles*

- Governance is essential but insufficient, and must be driven by principles rather than mechanics.
 - What are the outcomes we’re trying to achieve? Who are the consumers of those outcomes?
 - What can be pragmatically achieved now, without waiting for political will to compromise?
 - What’s key to the next phase of a harmonious approach to change? Who else can participate?

2. *Equity & Community*

- We face a fundamental question on whether learning opportunities should serve every single student’s needs, or whether it’s acceptable to have high impact models that only serve specific subsets of students.
- As we strive to enable more choice for families, we also must be comfortable with the choices families make; choice with an agenda is not the same as choice for the sake of agency and empowerment. And, in light of recent focus on the integration of schools as a goal in and of itself, we must actively make space for user-driven definitions of community to influence the strategy and evolution of new governance models.

3. *Context & Behavior*

- Most cities with alternative governance models adopted them in times of failure, crisis, or charter market saturation. Very few cities have done so because they recognize governance as a lever for innovation. How can we promote governance restructuring with urgency given the lack of a catalyst? How can we affect change in institutions that operate on predictability and longevity?
- To the best of our ability, we must articulate clarity of roles, create incentives for people to act rationally and in their best interest, and incorporate community participation (non-profits, industry).
- We must root our work in conversations with kids, families, and communities, and understand their cultural attachment to the desired outcomes and whether the strategies are relevant to their needs.

4. *Role of Philanthropy*

- Be more risk tolerant, and channel resources to explore innovative solutions.
- Recognize learning is not always linear, metric-driven, and timely.

5. *Future Areas of Exploration*

- Solving challenges to the pipeline of operators and talent, and diverse representation in leadership. Ensuring authentic community engagement in new system design.

Next Steps

It was clear from the energy and engagement in the room that these conversations felt timely and valuable to our group, and we were thrilled by the vigor with which the participants dug into tough issues. We have surveyed those in attendance to gather input about how to move these conversations forward, as we left many topics untouched and more models will continue to emerge. We also wonder who else should be a part of this conversation, and ask you to reach out to us (reschool@dkfoundation.org) if there is someone we should connect with on the overall topic of the summit or on ReSchool’s governance ideas specifically.