

REFORM DESPITE THE ODDS: IMPROVING QUALITY IN EDUCATION

*Reforma a pesar de su improbabilidad:
mejorando la calidad en educación*

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Abstract

The article analyzes educational reform episodes –defined by public policies in the 90s– in Bolivia, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua and the Minas Gerais State in Brazil. Focusing upon how policies are formulated, negotiated, communicated and implemented, as well as on their underlying analytical frame, the core question to ask is how can we account for education policies which succeed despite having strong political factors against them. A distinction is made between politically attractive reforms; i.e. ‘of access’ and those politically contentious; namely, ‘of quality’. Interest conflicts and institutional biases are examined as relevant when interpreting the final outcome of policies but they are insufficient as explanatory factors. It is essential to explore how changes are introduced, approved and implemented; likewise, how actors promoting the reform may manage the overall process through out time.

Key words: *education policy, educational reform process, interests, institutions, strategy*

Resumen

El artículo analiza episodios de reforma educacional definidos por políticas públicas durante la década de los Noventa en cinco países latinoamericanos: Bolivia, Ecuador, México, Nicaragua y el Estado de Minas Gerais en Brasil. El foco es puesto en los procesos de formulación, negociación, comunicación e implementación de políticas en educación, a los que se aplica un marco analítico que evalúa intereses, instituciones, estrategias y procesos. La interrogante central es ¿cómo podemos dar cuenta de iniciativas de política educacional que tienen éxito a pesar de tener en contra factores políticos de peso? Se distingue entre reformas “de acceso”, que son políticamente atractivas, de las “de calidad”, que son políticamente contenciosas. El análisis examina los conflictos de interés y los sesgos institucionales, como factores importantes a la hora de interpretar la suerte de las políticas, pero concluye que éstos no son suficientes para explicar sus resultados. Importa decisivamente examinar cómo son introducidos, aprobados e implementados los cambios y cómo los actores que impulsan la reforma gestionan el conjunto del proceso en el tiempo.

Palabras clave: *política educacional, proceso de reforma educacional, intereses, instituciones, estrategia*

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How can we account for policy reform initiatives that succeed even when the political cards are stacked against them? In recent years, political opposition characterized most efforts to improve the quality of education in Latin America. In such initiatives, diverse interests of winners and losers and shifting burdens of responsibility and accountability brought reformers, politicians, teachers' unions, education administrators, governors, mayors, and others into conflict over the nature and scope of policy. In these situations, the lineup of anti-reform forces was almost always imposing; support for change was often lukewarm; and political institutions tended regularly to be unfriendly to initiatives to alter the *status quo*.

Conflicting interests and institutional biases are important factors in understanding the destiny of efforts to change policy. But neither interests nor institutions fully account for policy reforms that occur despite the political odds. In such cases, it matters a great deal how policy changes are introduced, approved, and implemented and how reformers manage this process as it unfolds over time. Often, the policy process introduces opportunities to alter the political equations and institutional constraints that constrain change. In fact, utilizing such opportunities, education policy reformers in several Latin American countries have worked to create more supportive conditions for introducing new policies, even when they found political and bureaucratic environments to be rife with opposition to change.

This article indicates that reform initiatives are dynamic political processes that unfold over time, as complex chains of decisions subject to the interaction of reform advocates and opponents in particular institutional contexts that are sometimes subject to alteration. In the following pages, I use a basic framework for assessing interests, institutions, strategies, and process to understand the political dynamics of education policy reform. This framework poses four questions: What are the important interests (the "actors") involved in reform initiatives? What are the institutional constraints (the "rules of the game") that affect the allocation of power in decision making and implementation? What strategic actions can be taken by reformers to alter the perspectives or power of opposing interests and the status quo orientation of institutions? How does the policy process aid and hinder those who wish to bring about new policies?

To find responses to these questions, I investigated five cases of education reform that unfolded in the 1990s in Latin America. These cases demonstrate how the strategic choices of reform advocates and opponents, interacting over time, can shape the outcome of contentious policies. Policy reform episodes in Bolivia, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, and the state of Minas Gerais in Brazil were "reconstructed" through extensive interviews with a variety of participants, documentary evidence, and the scholarly record.

In each case, reformers had different motivations and the contexts in which the reforms played out were also distinct, as were the size of the countries and the composi-

tion of their economies and societies. Yet the reforms were alike in that they all could claim high level reform leadership, they all sought to improve the quality of education provided, and they all involved significant conflict over their design, approval, and implementation. In terms of their content, each sought to increase organizational efficiency, teacher accountability, and decentralized decision making. Four of the reforms were successfully introduced and at least partially implemented; one failed, but for reasons that had more to do with a more general political and economic crisis than they did with education *per se*.¹ Table 1 provides a brief description of the five reform initiatives—their location, dates, lead reformers, and content.

Table 1
FIVE CASES OF EDUCATION REFORM IN THE 1990S

Case	Year*	Lead Reformer	Most Important Content
Minas Gerais	1991	Minister	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decentralization (school autonomy) • Teacher/director professionalization • Local councils • Testing
Mexico	1992	President	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decentralization (states) • Teacher professionalization • Curriculum/pedagogy
Nicaragua	1993	Minister	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decentralization (school autonomy) • Local councils/parental fees • Curriculum/pedagogy
Bolivia	1994	Minister and President	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decentralization (municipalities) • Teacher professionalization • Curriculum/pedagogy • Testing
Ecuador	1999	Minister	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decentralization • Teacher professionalization • Social protection

* Refers to the year in which the reform was approved; in many cases, many years of prior initiative preceded this date.

¹ I use the term “success” to refer to policy reforms that became part of national policy agendas, that were designed to introduce significant change in education, that were approved by political authorities and translated into law or administrative decree, and that were at least partially implemented. The term does not refer to the ability to produce results in terms of better educated students, but only to its “success” in passing political and bureaucratic hurdles to become official policy.

The next section of this article indicates why quality-enhancing reforms in education are contentious. It makes a distinction between the political attractiveness of “access” reforms and the tensions created by “quality” reforms. Then, the following section summarizes the findings of the case studies in terms of the interests, the institutions, the strategies, and the process involved in efforts to change education policy. The process that led to individual reforms is not described here in detail; rather, the article focuses on the findings of the research. Those who wish a deeper analysis of the individual cases should consult the author’s book, published in 2004, *Despite the Odds: The Contentious Politics of Education Reform*².

Promoting Quality in Education

Throughout Latin America in the 1990s, advocates of change argued that better education was critical if countries were to wage effective battles against endemic poverty and inequality, if they were to gain advantages from rapid globalization, and if they were to build and sustain democratic citizenship and institutions³. Increasingly, experts were worried by evidence that the quality of education was low, even abysmal: many children attended school but learned little; an alarming number of them repeated grades; and dropping out of school with only a few years of education was the most frequent response to classroom failure and household economic need. Latin America’s children did poorly on assessments of their accomplishments, and research systematically revealed differences between rural and urban schools and public and private ones⁴. Increasingly, education experts asked if these children were going to have anything but marginal futures in an increasingly competitive global labor market.

Thus, many education reform proposals of the 1990s centered on improving educational quality⁵. Quality-enhancement in the region’s educational systems generally meant improving management, addressing organizational and financial inefficiencies, increasing accountability, reallocating responsibilities, and improving the performance of administrators, teachers, and students⁶. In the most ambitious reforms, states, municipalities, school directors, or local school boards were to be given responsibilities

² See Grindle (2004).

³ See, for examples of such arguments, Birdsall, Ross, and Sabot (1995); Grindle (2000) (Social Agenda in Tulchin); Hardy (2002); Navarro, Carnoy, and de Moura Castro (2000); and Reimers (2000).

⁴ See, for evidence, IDB (1998); UNESCO (2000); World Bank (1998); Reimers (2000).

⁵ I identified major education reform initiatives in 17 countries during the 1990s. In some countries, there were multiple initiatives to improve education. See Grindle (2004: 9-10).

⁶ On quality-enhancing reforms, see de Moura Castro and Verdisco (202); Gajardo 1999; Navarro, Carnoy, and de Moura Castro (n.d.); Puryear (1997).

for hiring, promoting, disciplining, and firing teachers; national ministries were to be restructured and assigned normative rather than operational roles. New initiatives would include efforts to reduce repetition and drop out rates by altering curricula and changing pedagogy. More attention to teacher training and monitoring often went hand-in-hand with proposals to tie salaries to performance and to more accountability to supervisors or local communities. National standards were an important ingredient of reform ideas in several countries and reform advocates supported regular examinations of students and teachers.

These kinds of reform proposals introduced significant tensions into education policy-making and implementation. In earlier periods, many Latin American countries pursued policies to increase access to education and, during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, schooling was expanded to many rural areas and to poor children in mushrooming urban squatter settlements⁷. At the center of access policies were efforts to increase education budgets, train and hire more teachers, build more schools, distribute more textbooks, and administer more programs. In general, these kinds of reforms are politically popular. Although they cost money and require administrative capacity, access reforms provide citizens with visible benefits and politicians with tangible resources to distribute to their constituencies. They create more jobs for teachers, administrators, service personnel, construction workers and firms, and textbook and school equipment manufacturers. They increase the size and power of teachers' unions and education bureaucracies. In fact, unions are often among the principal advocates for broader access to public education. Given these characteristics, such reforms are "easy" from a political economy perspective, in the sense that developing support for them is not generally problematic.

This could not be said of most of the 1990s initiatives in education. As indicated in Table 2, quality-enhancing reforms generally involve the potential for lost jobs, and lost control over budgets, people, and decisions. They expose students, teachers, and supervisors to new pressures and expectations. Teachers' unions often charge that they destroy long-existing rights and career tracts. Bureaucrats charge that they give authority to those who "know nothing about education". Governors and mayors frequently do not want the new responsibilities they are to be given⁸. Parents may not understand the reforms, and may defer to professionals in making judgments about educational quality. Although public opinion generally singles out education as a critically important

⁷ Theoretically, there is no necessary tension between access and quality reforms; many social sector policies seek to achieve both. Nevertheless, in practice, it is easier to build new schools than to train teachers well, more politically popular to hire more administrators than to insist that they administer effectively.

⁸ Often, such officials are not eager to take on responsibility of dealing with powerful teachers' unions and may resist having to manage large, usually entrenched, bureaucracies that they can't necessarily control.

problem, and reform advocates are frequently eloquent in promoting new initiatives, the politics of putting them in place and implementing them are contentious and difficult, a far cry from the situation faced by promoters of access-type reforms.

Quality-enhancing policies also require long chains of implementation activities and decisions. Ultimately, changes have to be adopted at the classroom level if they are to improve the extent to which children learn critical skills and abilities; this means that multiple layers of implementers need to buy in to the new initiatives. At any point in a long chain of decision-making responsibilities, reform activities can fall victim to sloth, political contention, mistaken judgement, organizational jealousies, and logistical tangles. Moreover, these changes mean that governors, mayors, bureaucrats, teachers, students, parents, and communities need to adopt new ways of thinking and behaving and accept being accountable in multiple new ways. And, to add to the complexity, the benefits of these reforms will become evident only over the long term, when students begin to demonstrate that their lives are more productive and that they have expanded choices about their economic and social destinies. Generating and sustaining interest in these reforms is therefore an additional challenge.

Interests, Institutions, Strategy, and Process in Education Reform

Given the general characteristics of quality enhancing reforms, under what conditions do they emerge? In the five episodes of education reform considered here, initiatives were not systematically associated with particular economic conditions or with particular characteristics of party systems, governing coalitions, or electoral cycles. Rather, the emergence of reform initiatives could be clearly traced to the interests and actions of political executives or those closely associated with them; their concern to improve education was part of broader political and policy agendas they espoused. But these leaders faced significant political and institutional obstacles in their efforts to champion change in the sector. As indicated below, they attempted to alter unfavorable political and institutional contexts through specific strategies; their capacity to lead reform initiatives rose and fell in relation to an ongoing process of agenda setting, design, decision making, and implementation.

The Power of Interests in Reform Initiatives. In the five case studies, the principal interests arrayed against education policy reform were the teachers' unions and the education bureaucracies. The unions were particularly powerful players. The structure of their organizations differed from country to country, but most were highly centralized organizations that had the capacity to exert considerable influence in the sector and in politics. Whether in Minas Gerais, Mexico, Nicaragua, Bolivia, or Ecuador, they had good reason to oppose reform. Their power was threatened by initiatives to decentralize

Table 2
THE POLITICS OF ACCESS AND QUALITY REFORMS:
A Comparison

	Access Reforms	Quality-Enhancing Reforms
Typical actions to carry out such reforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build infrastructure • Expand bureaucracies • Increase budgets • Hire administrators • Hire service providers • Buy equipment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve management • Increase efficiency • Alter rules/behavior of personnel • Improve accountability • Improve performance • Strengthen local control
Typical political implications of such reforms	<p>Creation of benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jobs • Construction and provisioning contracts • Increased budgets • Increased power for ministries and managers 	<p>Imposition of costs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of jobs • Loss of decision making power for some • New demands, expectations, responsibilities for others
Typical political response to such reforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unions of providers welcome reforms and collaborate with them • Politicians welcome tangible benefits to distribute to constituencies • Communities are pleased to receive benefits • Voters support changes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unions of providers resist reforms • Administrators seek to ignore or sabotage change • Many politicians wish to avoid promoting reforms • Many voters are unaware of changes (at least in the short term)

control over personnel policy and reward systems and their hold over ministries of education would be undermined. Even their claims to represent teachers were challenged, as reformers empowered new organizations and attacked the integrity of the old ones. In Bolivia, reformers went so far as to propose that union membership be voluntary and that unions no longer receive dues through automatic deductions from teacher salaries.

More broadly, the unions were marginalized from the process of designing the reforms and often treated with scant respect in negotiations or confrontations about proposed changes. They were usually targeted as the enemy of progress and modernization and were those most frequently criticized for what was seen as a cynical preference for a broken *status quo* over the promise of change.

In response to these charges, the unions decried a hidden agenda that they believed was about saving money, cutting jobs, and replacing public services with market-driven

solutions that would only benefit the better off. Across countries, their grievances were similar—they argued that they were paid little, that their demands were not respected, that they did not participate in the design of new policies, and that the reformers were attempting to undermine national political commitments to free public education for all children. Economic interests divided reformers from the unions, but their conflicts were also about participation in the process of reform and differences in the values they held. The discourse between reformers and unions was often shrill, and almost always confrontational. There was, then, an “us vs. them” character to the conflict over education reform in Latin America.

But the politics of union opposition to reform played out differently. Union structures and strength do not provide much insight into why this was so. Mexico, Nicaragua, and Ecuador had single, centralized unions, and in Mexico and Ecuador, these organizations had long histories of defeating prior reformist initiatives. In Bolivia, two unions represented the teachers. In Minas Gerais, while there was a single union, there was also a competing professional association representing teachers. Although structures differed, only in Ecuador was the union able to defeat the initiation of reform. Moreover, the power of the unions—very strong in Mexico, moderately strong in Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Ecuador, and weak in Minas Gerais—did not predict how reformers would deal with them. In the cases with the strongest and weakest unions, Mexico and Minas Gerais, the reforms were negotiated with the unions; the Bolivian reform involved major confrontations with the unions; in Nicaragua, reformers found ways to marginalize the union without directly confronting it, and in Ecuador, both negotiation and confrontation characterized the interaction.

Analysis of the unions indicated that while all opposed reforms, they differed in their relationships with governments, ministries, and political parties and this affected the way reformers dealt with them. In Mexico, for example, the union, the government, the ministry, and the then dominant political party had long been joined at the hip in mutually supportive alliances, despite disagreements in the 1980s. In Nicaragua, a similar kind of relationship existed until 1990 when a new government replaced the revolutionary Sandinista government; overnight, relations between the teachers’ union and the government became hostile, and the party link became a hindrance to union interactions with the ministry. In Bolivia and Ecuador, union and government interactions were always hostile and confrontational because of union ties to left-wing fringe parties, while at the same time the unions had “colonized” the ministries with their supporters. In Minas Gerais, the union had a less than cordial relationship with the government and the ministry, although its alliance with a party of the democratic left meant that it shared some objectives with the promoters of reform. This case also differed from others in that those who were able to use jobs in the ministry for patronage opportunities were elected politicians, not the union leadership.

The major import of these relationships was to open up or close off options for reformers seeking to undermine the power of the unions. In Mexico, for example, the close association between the union and the dominant party regime meant that confronting or ignoring the union in the decentralization initiative was a virtual non-starter. In Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua, intransigent opposition to government reduced opportunities for negotiating effectively with the unions. In Minas Gerais, the relationship with the government and the ministry and its alliance with an opposition party were not so extreme, giving reformers more options about how to deal with conflict. The unions, as major interests in the reform process, thus set constraints on how the reformers pursued their goals, but did not have the capacity to halt their initiatives, except in the case of Ecuador, where broader economic and political contexts conspired with union opposition to defeat change proposals.

As interests opposed to reform, ministry bureaucracies took a back seat to the unions. Nevertheless, they were important as part of the political landscape that reformers faced. In Mexico, for example, the union had colonized the ministry of education and reform could only proceed when the minister had “re-colonized” its high level positions with supporters of change. In Bolivia, the ministry’s opposition and its connections to the unions encouraged reformers to set up shop in another ministry, a factor that facilitated their early activities but that also encouraged alliances among the opposition. In Nicaragua and Ecuador, reformers initially had to proceed largely without any support or assistance in the ministry. Eventually, they controlled only enclaves within these organizations. In Minas Gerais, reformers found like-minded people in the ministry and recruited them to be part of the reform team, even while many other bureaucrats were sidelined in the process. Most important, the obstacle of bureaucratic opposition became a critical issue when reform initiatives were implemented.

With the exception of Mexico, international development agencies were also important players in the reform initiatives. In Bolivia and Ecuador, reforms would not have been designed had it not been for the funding provided by these organizations. In Nicaragua, they were particularly important in supporting initiatives aimed at undermining Sandinista content and structures in education. In Minas Gerais, they supported specific objectives of an autonomous school initiative. In all four cases, international agencies influenced design teams through their ideas how to improve education and how other countries had dealt with similar problems. The aspects of the reforms that perhaps had the most impact on decision making about education–decentralization and school autonomy–were an important part of the toolkit that international agencies brought to problems of education in the 1990s.

Yet these organizations did not dominate the process of change. They were not active in initiating reform projects, although they may have helped reformers by rais-

ing the profile of education in international dialogues and disseminating data about the importance of education and the low performance of many Latin American countries⁹. The case studies indicate that these institutions were most influential when they worked directly with design teams, providing funds and ideas as officials sought to hammer out the content of reform proposals. At the same time, international actors were largely absent in the approval process, except in the rhetoric of reform opponents who often demonized new initiatives as neoliberal impositions of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. They reemerged as important in implementing change initiatives, largely through funding of specific aspects of the reforms.

At times, other interests were engaged, but they tended to be marginal to the conflicts that emerged. In Bolivia, the Catholic Church became an ally of the unions and the ministry in proposing an alternative to the reformist initiative. In Minas Gerais, the school director's association and other organizations joined in debates about the costs and benefits of the reform. In some cases, think tank and university-based education experts helped in the analysis and design of the projects or were appointed to high level positions within ministries as supporters of reform leaders. Yet, with the exception of Minas Gerais, parents' organizations, business groups, or pro-education civic alliances were conspicuously absent from these stories of reform. While it is easy to understand why such groups might have an interest in discussions of reform, they were absent because such interests were un-mobilized, did not consider influencing national education policy as the best use of their resources, or were excluded from a relatively closed decision making arena.

In some cases, new interests emerged as reforms were put into practice. Decentralization to the state level in Mexico placed governors, state ministers of education, and union locals in much more prominent positions. After the reform was put in place, they became critically important players in determining the politics of education in the country. In Nicaragua and Minas Gerais, school directors and school boards were empowered to make decisions about education and came to play a larger role in determining education outcomes than they had in the past. In Bolivia, because of a concomitant decentralization initiative, mayors took on new importance in education. Teachers and local school authorities also became the front-line players in how well the reforms were implemented. In most cases, the failure to engage teachers more effectively in the process of change was a significant shortcoming of the reform initiatives and one that held important implications for how much change actually happened in the classroom.

⁹ UNESCO's The Education for All initiative emerged from a global summit on education held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990. This initiative was important to policy planners in many Latin American countries for the networks it established and the information it circulated about the state of the world's schools.

The reforms left winners and losers in their wake. In general, teachers' unions and central bureaucrats believed they were less well off after new policies were approved and implemented. Political parties and unions that had long benefited from using teaching and administrative appointments to reward their memberships also lost out where decolonization and decentralization made significant inroads into ministries. Many teachers also considered themselves losers, largely because the reforms were imposed on them, their unions excoriated the changes, and they often did not understand the purpose of the new order or their place in it. Among the winners were certainly regional and local officials where decentralization gave them more influence, and school directors and boards where school autonomy initiatives provided them with greater capacity to determine what was happening at the community level. Only in Minas Gerais did parents and local communities more generally believe that they had won significant new influence vis-à-vis the local school, however. Elsewhere, they did not emerge as interests with the capacity to exert influence in the sector.

Institutional Sources of Power. To a significant degree, institutions presented reformers with formidable obstacles at the outset of the 1990s. Weak ministries of education meant that they had to begin their efforts in the absence of hierarchical authority, professional standards, information, or incentives that they could draw on. The hold of clientelism on decisions about personnel and administration was extensive in all the cases, and informal mechanisms linking ministries to political parties and unions made it difficult to know where to begin in altering current practice. Indeed, while the ministries were weak in the capacity to deliver education and respond to ministerial leadership, they were strong in the ability to resist change.

Moreover, institutions that linked the center to the periphery helped entrench centralization, lack of accountability, and a wide variety of inefficiencies. Under pre-reform conditions, even minor issues about education had to be referred to national capitals for resolution. Decision making in parties and unions, and about resource allocation all flowed from the top down, reinforcing centralization. The very strong presidentialist system in Mexico, for example, shaped the centralization of all other institutions in ways that benefited the ministry, the union, and the dominant political party. In Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Ecuador, centralization meant a compounding of inefficiencies in the distribution of resources and resolution of problems. Only in Minas Gerais, where states had traditionally held more power and where the democratization movement of the 1980s had left greater local political activism behind, was the hold of centralization in education somewhat less stifling. Even there, however, a reformist minister was as adamant as any national counterpart in arguing that centralization in a state of 30 million people was a powerful impediment to efficiency, effectiveness, and responsiveness.

Institutional constraints were important, but they were far from defining the scope of possibilities for reform. Reformers had some capacity to lessen these constraints and

to use institutional resources to their advantage. “Reformmongering” by presidents and ministers, for example, was important in increasing the salience of quality in education as a policy issue. These same actors were able to initiate changes because they were part of executive institutions that allowed them to seize the initiative in setting national agendas about education and in developing new policies for the sector. In particular, traditions of executive dominance in defining policy priorities and developing proposals and laws gave reformers the upper hand in deciding how to initiate and design changes and in selecting appropriate moments to take actions to promote reform. The appointment of design teams was exclusively their prerogative in all the countries except Ecuador, where internationally funded projects operated as a parallel universe within the ministry of education. In four cases, the lead reformers were able to alter the structure of ministerial decision-making through decentralization and they continued to use powers of appointment to influence the implementation of their initiatives.

Moreover, reformers had considerable scope for locating the reform initiative within government, and where possible, benefiting from the support of others interested in change. This was clearest in the case of Bolivia, where the reform initiative survived in a generally hostile environment in part through its location in the powerful ministry of planning. Choices about timing were also in the hands of reform initiators. In Mexico, for example, the president and two ministers of education committed more than three years to orchestrating efforts to alter the context within which a reform would be introduced. In contrast, the minister of education in Minas Gerais moved swiftly to put a new policy in place just after an election, judging that the chances for success were best when the opposition would be caught off-guard. In Nicaragua, a reformist minister took advantage of an unsettled moment in national politics to promote his initiative as a counterpoint to what the previous government had done in the sector.

Thus, to overcome barriers to change, reformers drew on institutional sources of power to undermine the institutional resources of reform opponents. They sought to control the timing of reform initiatives, to use their powers of appointment to bolster the capacity to lead policy change, and to set the terms under which reform would be discussed in the political arena. They sought to weaken the position of the opposition and at times sought to garner broad public support for what they wanted to accomplish. In Mexico, it was important that the reform was about “federalization,” not its twin, “decentralization;” in Mexico and Bolivia, the reforms were presented as important to larger projects of modernization; and in Nicaragua, the reform was presented as an effort to reintroduce Christian values and tradition into the classroom.

Executive prerogatives also allowed reformers to determine who would be in the room when reforms were designed and initially discussed. This was clearest in Minas Gerais, where the minister of education determined who would be invited to debate school

autonomy, and in Bolivia, where the design team kept the door only partially open for policy discussions. In large measure, it was such actions that placed the opposition to reform in a reactive and defensive mode when the new policies were announced. Once announced, of course, opponents of reform responded with communication initiatives of their own, charging that reformers were intent upon privatizing education and imposing neoliberal policies on unwilling publics. Nevertheless, the capacity of the reformers to dominate the early phases of the policy process was an indication of the malleability of some institutional constraints. Table 3 indicates activities that reformers used to seize the initiative.

Legislatures were less important to the education reforms than the executive, but these institutions had some role in their destinies. In Mexico, the decision to move ahead with negotiations with the union was on hold until after mid-term elections ensured that the long-dominant party regained a two-thirds majority in the legislature. At that point, given the presidentialism of the system, there was little question that party representatives would rubber stamp the initiative. In Bolivia, a governing pact between the executive and legislature meant that the reform, although extremely contentious on the streets, would be little discussed in congress and then passed easily. In Nicaragua, the possibility that the reform would be rejected in the congress was great enough that the reformist minister instead announced and implemented the reform through administrative decree. In Ecuador, a tradition of tension and conflict characterizing executive-legislative interactions meant that reformist legislation probably had limited chances even if there had not been major economic and political crises occurring at the same time. In Minas Gerais, in the context of a state-wide teachers' strike, legislative approval for

Table 3
SEIZING THE INITIATIVE: LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

Case	Year	Principal Protagonist	Strategies				
			Manage timing	Appoint supporters	Weaken or marginalize opponents	Set terms of debate	Campaign on issue
Minas Gerais	1991	Minister	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mexico	1992	President	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Nicaragua	1993	Minister	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Bolivia	1994	President	✓	✓	✓		✓
Ecuador	1999	Minister	✓	✓			✓

school autonomy was chancy until a supportive governor let representatives know that he would use his considerable power over resource allocation to punish them if they did not vote in favor of it¹⁰.

The discussion of the role of executive and legislative institutions also indicates that party systems were intertwined with the fate of reform in each of the cases. Clearly, clientelism based in the party systems and party relationships with unions and ministries was seen by the reformers as a critical part of the problem of education in the first place. Beyond that, however, the party system influenced how reforms were managed after they were designed. Indeed, in Mexico, Bolivia, and Ecuador, legislative votes were an outcome of executive-legislative-party relationships, and were very little concerned with the issue of public education. The fragmented party system in Nicaragua and tensions within the president's electoral coalition meant that the risks of attempting to legislate reform were considerable.

Institutions were important in the reform stories of five cases. They helped define the problems that reformers sought to correct and they provided both opponents and supporters of reform with resources to use in the conflicts surrounding the initiatives. They further helped define the obstacles to reform approval and implementation. Yet it is difficult to argue that institutional distributions of power determined outcomes. At the outset of the reform decade, institutional biases favored the *status quo*. Later, institutions provided sites and resources for use in conflicts over reform, but did not determine the use of those resources. Through the use of such resources, reformers had significant opportunities for restructuring institutions and altering institutional biases to be more congruent with their objectives.

Reformers and Strategic Choices. Reformers in Minas Gerais, Mexico, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Ecuador had diverse objectives, although all were committed to the idea that education was instrumental in achieving some larger goal. They took on education reform out of concern about the need to modernize their countries, increase the efficient use of public resources, improve the degree of equity in their societies, or strengthen important societal values. In this activity, they were not furthering the aims of existing ministries of education or promoting the ends of powerful actors in education. If they represented the interests of local communities, regional and local governments, or religious or economic elites, they did so in the absence of mobilized pressure or support from these entities. Throughout much of the reform process, they worked from the top down to promote change, and found social bases of support only after the reforms had

¹⁰ This case is also interesting because of the intervention of another institution, the supreme court, which declared the election of school directors to be unconstitutional and subsequently left the fate of this aspect of the reform in the hands of local communities.

been put in practice and were producing benefits for governors, ministers, school directors, local communities, or others.

As indicated, these reformers made a series of strategic choices during the process, often some very effective ones. They mobilized networks to develop their visions of change, they courted leadership support, they placed supporters in critical positions, they sought examples from other countries to inform and shape their own ideas, they negotiated or confronted or maneuvered around hostile unions with considerable aplomb, they sought alliances with international funders, and they created new stakeholders to enhance the sustainability of their policies. Their energy in seeking high level political support helped some remain in office much longer than was characteristic of education leaders in general. In the case studies, education reform initiatives thus played out in a series of decisions and actions that drew reformers and anti-reformers serially into conflict within malleable institutional contexts. In most cases, strategic choices about how to use resources of power significantly affected the outcome of these conflicts.

At times, reformers could have made better decisions. In Mexico, for example, had reformers paid more attention to state governors while negotiating with the union, they might have introduced more incentives for them to manage their new responsibilities in the interest of improved education. In Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Ecuador, if reformers had sought allies sooner in the process, they might have put themselves in a better position to face down union opposition and to ensure more effective implementation of their projects. In Ecuador, if design teams in the ministry had found a way to work together rather than to compete with each other, there was some possibility—however slim—that reform could have made more headway.

Moreover, drawing teachers more fully into the process, finding additional means to reward effective teaching, mobilizing parents around improved education for their children, using information more effectively to demonstrate the failings of the old system, promoting party identification with better education—these are all activities that might have smoothed the introduction and implementation of reform. Such actions are certainly part of conventional wisdom about how to approach the politics of reform. Building consensus on what needs to be done, gaining the collaboration of social actors, developing initiatives in transparent ways, creating incentives for affected parties to tolerate or even welcome change, and investing in social marketing are frequently proposed methodologies for promoting a wide variety of changes¹¹.

In fact, the strategic choices made by reformers in the five case studies replicated some frequently observed pathologies of decision-making and participation in Latin America. A long history of top down decision-making was reflected when teachers were

¹¹ See, for example, IDB (n.d.:40-43).

largely excluded, parents were not consulted, and unions treated roughly. Moreover, they speak to a legacy of failing to take conditions faced by teachers seriously, not encouraging politicians to identify quality education as a good to be delivered to constituents, and not using information more effectively to build constituencies of support. At the end of a decade, these issues remained for a subsequent generation of reformers to resolve.

Time and Process in Reform Initiatives. Different actors were drawn into the reform initiatives at distinct moments¹². Through the use of their strategic resources, reform leaders were able to seize the initiative. This gave them considerable capacity to control the early stages of reform development. Teachers' unions were present only as part of the problem that reformers sought to resolve, not as active participants in arenas where reforms were being initiated and designed. Through this process, reform opponents were thrown on the defensive and their capacity to affect the design of policies was undermined. In the early phases of reform initiation, then, leadership strategies were critically important to the survival of proposals for change.

Similarly, seizing the initiative was important in the design phase of the policy process. Design teams play an important role in defining the contents of a reformist initiative and, in the case of education policy reforms, such teams hammered out the specific ingredients of new initiatives in their countries. But the cases of Bolivia, Minas Gerais, Ecuador, and Mexico also suggest that the composition of design teams, as well as their ability to work effectively together, and their management of the discussion of change and who was involved in that discussion were important strategic resources that could be used to promote the reformist agenda. The credibility of these design teams, their interactions with more traditional bureaucrats in public sector ministries, and their efforts to enlist domestic and international supporters were critical to the acceptance and pursuit of reform in later phases of the policy process.

While reformers had considerable room to put education reform on national political agendas and to manage their design, when new initiatives were announced, reform proponents were met with considerable opposition that constrained how they went forward with their initiatives. The unions became central actors in the reform approval phase, and then reemerged in the implementation arena as a further constraint on the possibilities for change. Similarly, although they were excluded from much of the process of design and approval, the ministries of education became more important to the outcome of reform when arenas of conflict shifted to implementation and sustainability.

¹² On this point more generally, see Trostle, Somerfeld, and Simon (1997); Kwon and Reich (2003).

Unions were central actors in attacking the new initiatives and, across the five cases, there is considerable evidence that they used similar tactics—strikes, demands for salaries and benefits, and labeling the initiatives as inimical to the public and national good (see Table 4). Some of the unions introduced counterproposals and some escalated their denunciations of the reforms to impugn the entire government. In the face of this opposition, some governments negotiated over the contents of reform while others confronted the unions or sought ways to promote reform by maneuvering around them. The reasons for these different approaches are complex, but among them is the role of the alliances between particular unions and particular political parties.

Table 4
TEACHERS' UNIONS RESPONSES TO EDUCATION REFORM INITIATIVES

	Strikes	Demand better salaries or benefits	Claim attack on union integrity/solidarity	Claim exclusion from discussion and design	Claim privatization of public education/neoliberalism	Provide counter proposal	Denounce government more generally
Minas Gerais	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Mexico	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Nicaragua	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bolivia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ecuador	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓

Negotiated settlement.

Confrontation.

The politics of implementing and sustaining new education policies indicates that that contention over reform moved to new sites and new voices were heard in debates over the costs and benefits of change. Prior to implementation, the most active proponents of education policy were found in capital cities, where they were deeply engaged in convincing national executives and legislatures of the value and feasibility of reform, managing bureaucratic resistance to change, and confronting nationally organized unions. Similarly, international assistance agencies were actively engaged in studying, proposing, and assisting reform program development in alliances with national reform entrepreneurs. As soon as efforts were made to put the reforms into practice, however, alternative sites for conflict emerged. State and local governments, schools, school councils, and local communities became important places where much of the fate of reform was decided. As this happened, governors, mayors, school directors, teachers, and local union organizations became the principal protagonists of ongoing struggles

among those who favored reform and those who opposed it and at times, parents and local communities were brought into the fray.

In some cases, new groups of reformers emerged within state or municipal education departments or at the school level and sought to increase the extent of change. While many teachers' unions continued to press for increased benefits and to resist the reforms at national levels, they also were active in subnational arenas. School directors often found themselves empowered by reform initiatives, but teachers frequently had a very different perception of the costs and benefits of change. Parents at times backed reform, but at other times were suspicious of it. Together, these political dynamics meant that reform implementation was likely to vary significantly by location—among states in Mexico, among communities in Minas Gerais, and among schools in Nicaragua and Bolivia. And, if implementation of change was a patchwork, so was the outlook for sustaining the reforms over the longer term. Most changes required ongoing support from executive leaders, and also the commitment of teachers and parents to new ways of doing things. These were the weakest links in implementing and sustaining the reforms.

Thus, the value of the resources controlled by reformers and the room they had to maneuver altered during the policy process. During agenda setting and design, they were largely in the driver's seat; during adoption and implementation, their room for maneuver became considerably more constricted. An important conclusion that can be drawn from the cases, then, is that room for maneuver in introducing change expanded and contracted over time as the policy process introduced new arenas of contestation. The choices the reformers of the 1990s made in distinct arenas during this ongoing process mattered for the outcome of the initiatives they sponsored, sometimes enhancing the degree of success they enjoyed, in some cases undermining it. Moreover, the politics of education reform created a legacy of interests and institutions that would define a political starting point for a future generation of reformers.

In other ways, as well, the politics of subsequent reform initiatives would be different. At the millennium, governments throughout Latin America were being forced to open up more to demands for democratic accountability and responsiveness. Civil society in most countries was becoming more organized and vocal and the perquisites of politicians more uncertain. Most particularly, citizen demands for better government and more effective social services had become more insistent. The politically disruptive potential of disparities in wealth and poverty, power and powerlessness, took on new meaning in the wake of unanticipated political changes in several countries. Strategies that had worked in the past might be less useful in this distinct political context. In a new era, to be successful, reformers might need to learn more about how to engage

citizen interest, allow for more participation, and build support coalitions in advance of their activities. Thus, at the beginning of a new millennium, education reform remained in process.

Conclusions

Assessments about the political fate of future reforms need to consider the numerous ways in which the strategic choices of reform proponents can shape the process of reform and affect tolerance for change. Current political economy models, of course, provide insights into the incentives that motivate winners and losers and suggest how institutions shape the political fortunes of reform initiatives. Clearly, interests and institutions are important factors in the politics of reform. In five cases of reform that unfolded in the 1990s, initial conditions featured strong losers and weak winners, as well as institutions that privileged the *status quo* and constrained reformers. Yet predicting results of reform despite the odds was risky in these cases. The interests and incentives that affect winners and losers and the biases of institutions are not always enough to understand the politics of reform.

In the case studies, reformers made a series of strategic choices that affected the outcome of their policy change initiatives. They were able to select opportune moments for pushing ahead with change proposals and they made strategic retreats when the timing was inauspicious for change. Even more impressively, reformers in some cases were able to delay reforms until they had successfully altered the political landscape to support their initiatives. Reformers also took the lead in altering incentives in ways that were more supportive of reform. Similarly, they sought to create networks for promoting reform initiatives in environments that were hostile to change. Reformers were also able to take advantage of patronage and appointment powers to salt their organizations with supporters of change. At the same time, their strategic actions and top-down approaches may have led them to overlook opportunities for enlisting greater support for their initiatives.

Reform proponents had the widest scope for undermining opposition and promoting change while they were engaged in ensuring that education was an important issue on national political agendas and while new policies were being designed. At these moments, they were most able to seize the initiative and affect the capacity of interests and institutions to resist change. Moreover, strategic actions at these moments in the policy process shaped the subsequent political dynamics surrounding their proposals, at times facilitating change and at times making it more difficult. Once new initiatives were announced, however, reformers typically lost some capacity to manage the political destinies of their proposals. Thus, their room for maneuver varied over time and was

both a result of their own actions and a condition shaped by the power of interests and institutions opposed to change.

At the turn of the millennium, an expert on education in Latin America summed up what countries in the region needed to do in order to improve the life chances of children: “Get them earlier, keep them longer, and teach them better”¹³. Behind this simple formulation, of course, are very challenging tasks of transformation, critical shortages of resources, and extensive needs for capacity building, evaluation, and monitoring throughout the education system¹⁴. Also behind the adage to teach longer and better is an even more arduous task—that of dealing with the deep social problems of poverty and inequality that keep so many children from performing well in school. Thus, whatever the gains and shortcomings of reforms in education systems during the 1990s, much remained for reformers to do. At the end of a decade of reform initiatives, the promotion of high quality education systems remained subject to the vagaries of mobilized interests, institutional biases, and reformer strategies in specific countries.

¹³ Juan Carlos Navarro, remarks at a workshop on education reform, Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C., April 4-5, 2002.

¹⁴ By the end of the decade of the 1990s, in fact, pre-schooling and secondary schooling were receiving more attention from policy makers and important new initiatives were being discussed to professionalize the teaching corps.

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