

A young girl with dark hair is shown in profile, looking upwards. The background is a blurred image of hands, suggesting a classroom or a group of people. The overall color palette is dark with a teal and red accent.

*Research Perspectives
on School Reform:*

LESSONS FROM THE
ANNENBERG CHALLENGE

Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

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ANNENBERG CHALLENGE

Credits

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FOREWORD

Warren Simmons and Michael Grady
Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

RECENT NATIONAL REPORTS and press accounts have documented the full scope of Ambassador Walter Annenberg's unprecedented gift to American public schools. The \$500-million Annenberg Challenge provided direct support to locally developed education reform projects in eighteen communities, directly affecting some 2,500 schools. In addition to providing incentives for local schools and systems to improve, the Annenberg gift presented a collateral challenge to education researchers to record and report on the missions and outcomes of the Challenge projects and thus enrich the nation's understanding of the civic, community, and educational conditions needed to promote quality schooling. Each of the Annenberg Challenge projects devoted a share of its grant dollars to support local research and evaluation.

The Challenge Evaluation Studies

The mainstays of the Challenge research effort have been the longitudinal evaluations, designed and conducted by local evaluators working in collaboration with the Challenge projects. Most of these studies were carried out by teams of social scientists from nearby universities or from independent research firms who were involved throughout the life of the project.

These systematic assessments of the local reform strategies provided well-specified theories of action, implementation histories, and analyses of student, school, and community-level outcomes. The diffusion of knowledge from these local studies will allow the ultimate impact of the Challenge to be felt well beyond the students, teachers, and communities touched directly by the grants. Information about the final evaluation reports from the sites can be found in the Appendix, along with a list of periodic cross-site reports issued during the life of the Challenge.

Three culminating reports that bring together insights from across the eighteen Challenge sites have appeared in the past year. In June 2002, the Annenberg Foundation and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform jointly published *The Annenberg Challenge: Lessons and Reflections on Public School Reform*, which describes nine lessons learned from the cumulative experience of the eighteen sites. *Lessons* was followed in early 2003 by *The Arts and School Reform: Lessons and Possibilities from the Annenberg Challenge Arts Projects*, offering an analysis and reflections on how the three Challenge Arts projects shaped the character and progress of education reform in their communities.

The collection of essays in this volume is the latest contribution to the body of cross-site knowl-

edge on the Challenge. Our intent here is to further advance the understanding and practice of educators and policy leaders about what it takes to achieve and sustain large-scale reform, all the more urgent in light of new state and federal mandates. In her introduction, Brenda Turnbull articulates the scope of the writing assignment for each of the contributors to this collection, which asked them to address two questions: What did these Challenge projects intend to do and how well did they succeed? How did the partnerships-in-learning between researchers and Challenge program staff at these sites evolve and help shape the work over time?

In Support of Collaborative Learning

This publication appears at a time of great national debate over the fundamental purpose and quality of education research. No Child Left Behind's insistence that improvement strategies be certified through scientific-based research drew strength from recommendations in several national reports, in particular the prestigious National Research Council's *Scientific Research in Education*. That report provides a sweeping commentary on issues concerning research priorities and practices. But what has generated the greatest attention and angst among some scholars in education is its call for expanded federal funding for randomized trials. The fear in some quarters is that federal funding streams for education research will be channeled to support costly, large-scale experiments at the expense of other, equally legitimate forms of inquiry.

We believe that lessons from the Challenge experience bear on the current debate about the state of education research. Fundamental and valuable knowledge was gleaned from the local projects through a thoughtful blending of research methods, always in a nonexperimental context.

In fairness to the Council's report, it states that the essential first step in any scientific inquiry is to identify a research design that suits the empirical question under investigation, and that an experiment is not always the correct choice. That said, we would amplify the caution against a "rush to trials," pressure that might cause government and private funders to reduce support for questions that are vital to our aim of understanding large-scale reform but not easily testable under experimental conditions. Our ultimate aim is not about endorsing one form of inquiry over the other, but rather to challenge the field – both experimental and nonexperimental traditions – to achieve and maintain the highest standards of scholarship.

Achieving and sustaining progress toward the goals of No Child Left Behind will require more and better-quality research on the policy and community contexts of reform. These include questions about effective state and district responses to NCLB mandates, the potential of community partners to advance reform, measures of school quality that supplement standardized-test scores, and the preservation of reform progress in the face of leadership changes. Yet, questions such as these are not effectively studied through randomized trials. Hence, a retreat from these questions by research funders would leave large gaps in our understanding of important aspects of reform in the NCLB context.

The Challenge research experience can also inform a second important proposal in the NRC report, that the U.S. Department of Education's new Institute of Education Sciences adopt design principles that focus its mission and improve operations. One of these recommendations, concerning ways the agency can promote closer working relationships between educators and researchers, is based in the belief that productive relationships between these groups improve the chances that school reform strategies will be designed and implemented using the best available evidence on effective practice.

Most of the projects you will read about in this volume represent strong working models of learning partnerships between researchers and educators that

have yielded greater or lesser benefits for both sides. From the researchers' perspective, a strong, cooperative relationship improves the quality of underlying theories and measures, the proper collection and analysis of data, and the interpretation and consistent application of findings in field settings. By definition, formative assessments are not possible in experiments, given their requirements to operate in more "controlled" research settings.

Likewise, strong collaboration brings benefits from the educators' perspective. One of the main virtues of such a partnership lies in the new access it provides educators to organizations with strong technical capacities to translate research findings from local and national studies into on-the-ground activities and strategies. Scrupulous attention to implementation by researchers affords the project access to data on "leading indicators" of change, information essential to reaching sound decisions about program implementation and deployment of resources.

In closing, we are grateful to the seven local teams of researchers and Challenge project staff who contributed to this volume. Their accounts of empirical discoveries are illuminating; their descriptions of partnerships in social learning, compelling and candid. We are also indebted to Brenda Turnbull and Ullik Rouk of Policy Studies Associates. As editor of this volume, Brenda provided both intellectual and inspirational leadership to this enterprise and wrote the introduction which follows. We hope that the product of their work will help illuminate some of the essential foundations of knowledge needed to sustain Ambassador Annenberg's ultimate goal of investing in public education, which he believed would stimulate "a crusade for the betterment of our country."

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INTRODUCTION

Brenda J. Turnbull, Policy Studies Associates

DURING THE 1990s and beyond, the Annenberg Challenge set the standard for ambitious initiatives to reform and support public schooling. Challenge sites in urban centers embarked on reform in response to an invitation issued by Ambassador Walter Annenberg at a White House ceremony in December 1993; nationwide initiatives in arts education and rural school reform did the same.

Across the panorama of sites and projects, much has happened and much has been learned. Some of this learning was shared in *The Annenberg Challenge: Lessons and Reflections on Public School Reform*, a publication that captured significant cross-cutting conclusions about the Challenge and its results (Annenberg Foundation 2002).

This companion volume, *Research Perspectives on School Reform: Lessons from the Annenberg Challenge*, offers a collection of more detailed narratives and analyses from individual sites. It takes advantage of one of the hallmarks of the Annenberg Challenge: in every site a research team worked alongside the reform team, usually in a nontraditional role that involved clarifying plans and advising on next steps, as well as in the conventional evaluation tasks of measuring progress and issuing findings.

As most sites' original funding drew to a close, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and a cooper-

ating research organization, Policy Studies Associates, invited researchers and site directors to write essays about their experiences and learning in the Challenge. Those who accepted the invitation approached the task from varying vantage points. They included site directors who emphasize what they gained from research and evaluation; researchers who reflect on the puzzles and disappointments that accompanied the sites' accomplishments; and several joint or individual authors who point with pride to their new ways of working. The result is a collection that reflects the rich variety of perspectives from and about research in the Challenge and that begins to assemble discoveries from this pioneering research.

Believing that research and evaluation should inform the work, the Annenberg Challenge encouraged researchers to communicate often and openly with the organizations directing the reforms. The Challenge did not use evaluation as an instrument of central command and control. Instead, sites were free to develop methods, analyses, and reports that would best advance their progress and their learning.

The late Donald Schön played a key role in inspiring many of the researchers to view their designs and working relationships through a "theory of action" perspective. As Schön described it, the researchers would critically observe the sites' intentions

The experiences of Challenge sites present intriguing images of research-reform partnerships suited to ambitious, evolving reform efforts.

(espoused theory), designs (theory in action), and ongoing choices (theory in use) in order to analyze what contributed to successes and failures (Schön & McDonald 1998, pp. 12–13). Organizational learning at the sites would be a major goal of the research.

This volume describes learning that evolved in and from the Annenberg Challenge research. It illustrates a combination of deliberately designed research and evaluation with the adroit seizing of learning opportunities as they arose. Because future reformers and researchers will inevitably face many of the issues and struggles described here, we have sought to record both the conceptual framework and the practical solutions that these authors created. The experiences of these Challenge sites present intriguing images of research-reform partnerships suited to ambitious, evolving reform efforts. They also illustrate ways in which dynamic reform leaders have been able to learn from their experiences, aided by the rigorous inquiry of distinguished researchers.

The Challenge Approach to Reform

Defining its purpose broadly, the Challenge encouraged all the sites to invent reform designs tailored to their settings. The sites represented here illustrate the results of that inventiveness. Moreover, both sites and the schools they supported changed their focus over time as they learned from their reform experience.

- The Center for Arts Education in New York City awarded grants with a philosophy that initially united its cooperating organizations under a banner of mainstream comprehensive arts education. Later evaluation and research led this program into different avenues of funding and inquiry.
- The Houston Annenberg Challenge also supplemented conventional, quantitative measures of results with qualitative inquiry, including hands-on work with individual schools by Planning and Evaluation consultants.
- The Boston Plan for Excellence – Boston Annenberg Challenge worked with the Boston Public Schools, forging an identity as an intermediary organization deeply engaged in school reform, yet independent of the school system in key respects.
- The Transforming Education Through the Arts Challenge (TETAC) blended the approaches to arts education of six collaborating organizations, learned from the evaluation of its initial grants that neither implementation nor results would be easily attained, and changed its strategy in many ways as a result.
- The Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project launched several initiatives to realize its reform principles. This volume describes the close working relationship between the evaluation team and one initiative, Parents as Learning Partners, which supported schools and networks of schools to involve parents in their children's academic programs.
- In Philadelphia, Children Achieving was the multifaceted reform program of the new superintendent. The project researchers chronicled the results and frustrations of this program and, here, they reanalyze their findings.

- The South Florida Annenberg Challenge relied on case studies to provide in-depth information on reform implementation and about the factors that made a difference in results across different approaches and contexts.

All observers of the Annenberg Challenge agree that its reliance on intermediary organizations in school reform has forged new roles and relationships. The Challenge required that intermediaries – often newly established to lead reform in their sites – differ significantly from school district bureaucracies. They had to be lean, spending a very limited portion of the reform dollars on their own operations. This leanness constrained the organizations’ capacity for reflection and learning because they had to do so much with their limited time and dollars. Several chapters in this volume show the mixed results of launching grant programs in haste. The authors also illustrate the struggles in many sites to build working relationships from scratch.

Many Challenge sites tried to be nimble, reassessing and revising their strategies in response to setbacks and new opportunities, and the “theory of action” perspective helped them do this. Site leaders’ willingness to learn was a crucial ingredient, and it was often extraordinarily impressive to the researchers, as many of them say in this volume. As Schön had predicted, however, knowing what core principles to hang onto and what tactical choices to abandon was seldom easy. When everything was cast as a matter of principle, as in Philadelphia, the reform was arguably destined to fail because no adjustment was allowed. Other sites illustrated greater willingness to change direction – sometimes frustrating those who saw the changes as compromises.

Civic engagement emerged as a hallmark of many Challenge sites. Researchers in this volume and elsewhere have pointed to hands-on involvement by civic leaders and local philanthropies as a distinctive feature of the Challenge. The drive and commitment of the South Florida Annenberg Challenge board and the engagement of the local Weingart Foundation in shaping the Los Angeles Parents as Learning Partners program are two notable examples.

Civic engagement has meant a coalition of partners at most sites, each bringing a history and agenda to the reforms. Direction could change as partnerships

and leadership evolved. Both of the Arts Challenges represented in this volume illustrate this: even though they ostensibly pursued shared aims, the numerous organizations at the table each contributed a somewhat different perspective on engagement of the arts with learning. At worst, this was a problem, bringing confusion where some would have hoped for order. At best, it brought vitality, passion, fresh ideas, and connections to civic assets.

Approaches to Research and Evaluation in the Challenge

Like the reforms themselves, research and evaluation differed across sites, yet shared some common themes. First, all the Challenge projects emphasized student achievement as the goal of reform. In many of the participating communities, philanthropic support for reform had never before insisted on such a level of accountability for student performance. C. T. Kerchner and colleagues (2000) made this point in their summary of the entire Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project.

In this volume, Denise Quigley echoes the theme of rigorous accountability in her description of the Parents as Learning Partners program within the Los Angeles effort. As Ann Bedell, Jeanne Shay Shumm, Okhee Lee, Elaine Liftin, and Sisty Walsh observe, funders in South Florida wanted the evaluation to “raise the education standards in the community.” Reform partners in the two Arts sites were not accustomed

Site leaders’ willingness to learn was a crucial ingredient, and it was often extraordinarily impressive to the researchers.

to rigorous outcome evaluation but they learned, over time, to see evaluation as a partner in reform.

Experience in the Challenge has shown that the fate of a reform can hinge on student performance. Tom Corcoran and Ellen Foley describe how Philadelphia staked the credibility of its reform on student gains. Although other factors also contributed to the erosion of support for Children Achieving, both the strengths and the weaknesses of student performance were key to the public dialogue about the fate of the initiative.

The Challenge has supported important work on factors associated with achievement, including research not described in this volume. Research in New York City has demonstrated that small schools are cost-effective when their long-term achievement results are taken into consideration (Stiefel et al. 2000). The Consortium on Chicago School Research has tracked reforms in that city (for which the Annenberg Challenge has provided significant support) and has issued important findings on the connection between authentic, challenging student assignments and achievement (Wenzel et al. 2001). One example of pioneering research on student achievement in this volume is the analysis of Philadelphia data explaining the results of including previously untested students in the accountability system.

A second important feature of research in these sites was that, like the reformers themselves, the research teams had to balance rigorous adherence to their core purposes with constant adjustments to meet changing circumstances. These researchers were

nimble in adjusting and even inventing methods. Their creativity went beyond blending qualitative and quantitative methods, although they all changed designs to follow up on promising findings and adapt to new directions in the programs.

Because of their work with the Challenge, evaluators and researchers in arts education have embarked on new advances. In the chapter on TETAC, Joy Frechtling and Donald Killeen describe the balancing of summative and formative evaluation. In some aspects of the design, evaluators took the lead because evaluation integrity had to be paramount, while in others there was more flexibility for joint decision making.

A third distinctive feature of these research efforts is the stream of information with which they have rapidly alerted the reformers to emerging results. This has included providing information on what *wasn't* happening. Early implementation that falls short of reformers' hopes is an old but important story in reform. Frechtling and Killeen call their section on the first wave of TETAC results "There's no 'there' there." The same title could have appeared in other chapters.

Parents as Learning Partners, a relatively small and focused effort of the Los Angeles project, responded to the news of partial implementation by retooling individual participating schools and working vigorously to fill in what was missing. Barbara Neufeld and Ellen Guiney describe how Boston, although a districtwide effort, was also able to make midcourse corrections. Philadelphia provides the opposite case: the central office was largely unwilling or unable to learn from the early news about implementation; researchers could see the "reform overload," but those who suffered from it were unable to fix it.

The researchers also alerted reformers to early successes on which they could build. New York's Center for Arts Education changed its program description from "comprehensive" to "contextual" arts education because the new title better captured the experience at participating schools. Joy Phillips, Pedro Reyes, and Linda Clarke describe what happened in one Houston school when a researcher insisted that the staff ask, "Who are we, and how good are we at who we are?" as a way to focus and strengthen the reform. Early data from the case studies conducted in schools reinforced South Florida's emphasis on leadership.

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Finally, some schools participating in the Challenge, like some of the site leaders, experienced research as an ally in their reforms, typically for the first time ever. The Planning and Evaluation consultants' work with individual schools in Houston vividly illustrates several ways in which this happened, ranging from schools' deepening engagement with portfolio evaluation to the "gadfly" relationship that a consultant formed with a principal. In Los Angeles, after the team presented data at individual schools, some principals invited them back for more detailed discussions with school staff and parents.

The Research-Reform Relationship

As should be clear from the foregoing, the relationship between reform and research in most Challenge sites was extraordinarily collaborative. That relationship presents an alternative to conventional images of evaluation as a process that works in isolation to render judgment over the long term. Most of the authors in this volume describe what such collaboration could be like: it had its benefits, but it also brought struggles.

Collaboration was necessary because Challenge-site programs typically presented moving targets. There were several reasons for this: most of the programs themselves reflected multiparty collaborations; they were all too ambitious to be implemented in every particular within a short time; they were buffeted by forces arising from state and local policy contexts; and their leaders made adjustments because they were learning from early results. The Challenge research-reform relationships – most of which were newly forged around the projects – established levels of trust and cooperation that were truly remarkable.

Collaboration was beneficial because it made up-to-date insights available; however, it was never easy. Reformers and researchers live in different cultures and face different professional imperatives. Reformers are rewarded for boundless optimism, big-picture

The Challenge research-reform relationships established levels of trust and cooperation that were truly remarkable.

vision, and inspirational images. Researchers' stock-in-trade includes skepticism, careful specification of observed behaviors, and painstaking scrutiny of evidence. The two groups live by different timetables: the Annenberg reformers prized rapid movement; the researchers insisted on time for careful reflection.

Communication about ongoing reforms – with high stakes for the reformers and sometimes-contending reform agendas at the table – is not all sweetness and light. Battles were fought over the meaning of data. As described in *Lessons and Reflections*, every interim Challenge report reflected intense discussions about the wording that would publicly characterize progress and setbacks. Because student testing set a high-stakes hurdle for the reforms, accountability structures within each Challenge site were a contentious issue and sparked intense debate over the merits of the tests.

Implications for Education Research

These lessons are emerging at a time when "scientific" education research is a national imperative and when many are calling for controlled experimentation as the gold standard of scientific inquiry. Clearly, the kinds of research described here are no one's idea of controlled experiments. But the Challenge was by design a dynamically evolving system, and it enlisted research more as a partner than as a judge. The Challenge sites were not installing tightly specified reforms that would hold still for long-term measurement. Rather, they were launching initiatives that

could – and did – evolve. Research informed that evolution in a number of ways documented here. This approach is consistent with two imperatives issued by a National Research Council panel on scientific education research: education researchers should collaborate with education practitioners, and designs must fit the questions posed (National Research Council 2002).

Although the Annenberg Challenge has neither created nor validated simple recipes for reform, the sites' experiences are rich in lessons about both reform and research. The research approaches illustrated in this volume pose important challenges. The sites offer significant examples of success in facing those challenges, but the problems are real and must be faced anew as reform continues in U.S. schools. Future reformers would do well to heed the ups and downs of the reforms chronicled here and would be fortunate to enlist the wisdom of researchers and reform leaders such as those who participated in the Annenberg Challenge.

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