*Chapter Seven*

# From Dialogue to Policy? A Comparison of P–16 Councils in Three States

Nancy B. Shulock

The three states profiled in the case study research provide useful contrasts in their experiences with, and approaches to, the P–16 and P–20 council mechanism. Of the three, Kentucky has the oldest council, which was formed by mutual agreement of K–12 and postsecondary education officials in 1999. Neither the governor nor the Legislature has a formal role in the council. The councils in Arizona and Rhode Island were both created by executive order of their respective governors in 2005 but reflect vastly different gubernatorial visions. Arizona's P–20 Council has 40 members, including four members of the Legislature and extensive representation from business, government, and the community. It is highly structured into committees and subcommittees and serves as a vehicle for generating broad-based recommendations to the governor. Rhode Island's PK–16 Council has nine members, most of whom report directly to the governor. This council functions more as an internal management tool (through which the governor coordinates his education officials) than as a means of generating external information for consideration by those education officials. While neither Kentucky nor Rhode Island includes legislators as formal council members, in Kentucky legislators are engaged in council activities whereas Rhode Island's council proceeds without buy-in by the Legislature as a partner in educational policymaking.

Aside from their obvious geographic differences in size and location, the three states provide variation in socio-economic conditions and thus in the nature of the educational challenges addressed by their respective councils. Kentucky is a historically lower-income state trying to raise educational achievement and engineer a transformation to a postindustrial economy. With a history of low educational attainment and ambitious reform efforts to improve education, the council's primary task has been to pull together discrete reform efforts. Arizona, one of the fastest-growing states in the country, is trying to redesign its educational systems to accommodate increasing numbers of Latino immigrants who have less experience with and success in the educational system. One of its council's notable challenges is to increase the college-going culture in the state. Rhode Island is a traditionally high-performing state on many educational measures, but it has begun to face some of the strains of diversification that have been experienced far longer in other parts of the country.

The National Center selected these states for in-depth study because of the conviction that their councils have engaged in substantive work to bridge the governance divide between K–12 and postsecondary education that was documented in a previous report (Venezia et al. 2005). The case studies did produce useful lessons for those interested in whether and how such councils can increase college readiness and success, and thereby help stem this nation's decline in educational attainment relative to many other nations. While this chapter offers some of these lessons, it does not present a detailed analysis of the differences among the three councils in terms of context, history, operation, and accomplishment. For that we encourage examination of the individual cases, which provide vivid accounts of each council's experiences and collectively offer important lessons.

The three cases reveal the depth of the divide between the K–12 and postsecondary governance systems, as well as the great difficulty states face in attempting to close it. There are daunting substantive and procedural barriers to using P–16 and P–20 councils to reform policy in ways that remedy the problems of the governance divide. For example, there are serious trade-offs to be faced in decisions about structure, influence, and sustainability of such councils. Each case study, however, reports positive outcomes as well as barriers, and some conclusions that can be drawn regarding how councils might be most effective, despite the challenges they face.

## SUBSTANTIVE CHALLENGES: THE TALL ORDER OF ALIGNMENT

Substantively, there is a long agenda of tasks to accomplish to improve the alignment of these two historically divided educational bureaucracies. The three councils we studied have each recognized that one—perhaps *the*—primary task is to develop standards for college readiness that are shared across the K–16 educational community and to use those standards to influence high school and college curricula to yield a logical progression of coursework that prepares high school graduates for college success. Adding to this challenge is the awareness, in all three states, that workforce readiness of high school graduates is also a pressing concern that must be addressed through attention to readiness standards. In each of the states, these alignment efforts began with actions to increase the rigor of high school graduation requirements—efforts that were consistently cited by interview participants as major accomplishments. Less successful, however, have been efforts to use those standards to align curricula *across* the divide—an accomplishment that requires far greater coordination than agreeing on requirements in one sector (that is, high school).

All three states have struggled mightily over the issue of assessments. A key component to creating a smooth transition of students across the divide is the development of a set of instruments that measures how well students have learned the material at each stage and that feeds useful information back to educators and families so

that corrective steps can be taken. The issues involving assessment, however, have become greatly politicized in all three states and seem to be confounded by a lack of full understanding of the appropriate uses of different kinds of assessments. For example, nationally normed tests like the ACT, used widely in Kentucky, are well-suited to gauge how Kentucky students perform relative to students in other states. As a result, the ACT is favored by many who fear that local tests may use lower standards and thereby may mask relative underperformance in Kentucky. In many cases, however, end-of-course exams may serve better than ACT in identifying student proficiency levels in precollegiate course sequences whose curricula have been aligned to help students reach college readiness standards. ACT may be favored by selective colleges for admissions and placement but likely does not provide information about specific proficiency levels to help community colleges know where, in precollegiate course sequences, a student should be placed.

Rhode Island faces an additional challenge with assessment in its decision to incorporate the demonstration of proficiency in graduation requirements through portfolios and other nonstandardized test approaches. This provision has not been well implemented because it requires a high level of sustained participation from external stakeholders, particularly business, to establish and evaluate workplace-readiness proficiency.

Arizona has faced a problem common across the country with respect to the use of standards-based assessments—that is, how much and how quickly should the results of such tests have consequences for students in terms of promotion and graduation? Fierce political battles have been waged there, as elsewhere, between those who believe that students will be unfairly punished because they have not had sufficient opportunity to reach such standards, and those who believe that delaying the use of such assessments will harm students by diverting attention from the need to improve educational outcomes.

Achieving greater alignment between K–12 and postsecondary education requires a high degree of cooperation between the sectors, which would be difficult to achieve under any circumstances. To be successful in this area, states, under the guidance of their P–16 and P–20 councils, must: (1) achieve agreement on college and workforce readiness standards, (2) adjust curricula in high schools, community colleges, and four-year sectors to reflect those standards, (3) adopt plans to ensure that teacher education and in-service trainings cover the readiness standards, and develop pedagogy to teach them effectively, and (4) adopt assessment practices that help students overcome deficiencies while still in high school and help colleges with admissions and placement decisions. The councils must pursue these alignment goals along with other priorities such as increasing teacher quality, increasing teacher supply in high-need fields, expanding dual enrollment, and increasing public awareness of the need to increase college-going and college success. In addition, councils face huge procedural challenges because they lack authority over the existing governance structures that they seek to bridge. It is not surprising, therefore, that

the councils have made more progress on specific parts of the alignment agenda—such as increasing graduation requirements, improving teacher training, and expanding data collection—than on the overall goal of aligning K–16 standards, curricula, and assessments.

## PROCEDURAL CHALLENGES: THEORIES OF CHANGE IN THE ABSENCE OF AUTHORITY

Although the three councils are quite different in historical context, structure, and operation, they are similar in their lack of authority to implement educational policy. The key procedural challenge facing the P–16 and P–20 council mechanism in general is that it is overlaid on existing governance structures over which it holds no authority. The three states we studied each took a different approach to dealing with this authority conundrum. These approaches can be characterized as theories of change for how state policy might be affected in the absence of direct policymaking authority.

In Kentucky, the council operates outside of the formal legislative and executive branches of government and has no representatives from either branch among its members. It is a voluntary association of state agencies brought together under the auspices of the Council for Postsecondary Education to inform one another's work. The council does not take policy positions or work as a body to implement policies. Its implicit theory of change has two parts. First, it is assumed that the council will produce a whole greater than the sum of its parts by providing a forum for state agencies to gain a broader perspective about statewide goals and modify their independent agendas accordingly, for the better. Second, the Kentucky model depends on a network of 22 regional councils. The absence of authority, funding, and staffing for the state-level council is not perceived as a major barrier to progress since the regional councils have been created to accomplish the local work of P–16 reform. The first part of the theory appears sound, as most observers have seen evidence that cooperation among the constituent agencies has influenced their policy priorities. The regional approach, however, does not appear to have much potential to influence policy. Few regional councils have acquired the resources to attain the capacity to accomplish much. Even more importantly, the independent actions of the regions have not produced statewide consensus on policy priorities or anything resembling a statewide policy agenda.

The Rhode Island PK–16 Council enjoys a basis in law, as it was set up by an executive order of the governor. But owing to a complex and heated struggle between the legislative and executive branches (a struggle that also reflects a partisan divide), the council has no legislative support. To make matters worse, the council suffers from legislative hostility that pronounces any would-be policy initiative of the council "dead on arrival." The governor established the council as a management tool for his administration—in effect as an education cabinet—and it is not clear whether this was a

cause or a consequence of the struggle between the branches. The implied theory of change is that a top-down model by which the governor coordinates executive branch offices that influence the education and workforce policy agendas will improve statewide coordination and results. Since the council operates largely as a management structure, it has little formal communication *per se* with outside stakeholders. This model encounters greater barriers to policy development than the Kentucky model because, absent legislative buy-in, the governor and his lieutenants are limited to working within existing policy constraints. To the extent that the Legislature pursues policy reforms, it does so on its own track, with little regard for the council's agenda.

Of the three, the Arizona P–20 Council seems to have the most potential to influence state policy. The structure and functioning of the council is based on the idea that an expanded conversation about educational performance and needs among a broad set of stakeholders can yield policy change. Two points are critical to understanding the policy potential of this council. First, while in Kentucky and Rhode Island the driving force behind the formation of the council was (and is) the higher education bureaucracy and the governor, respectively, in Arizona it was unquestionably the business community. The business community in Arizona encouraged the development of a council model that brings many stakeholders together to influence an education bureaucracy known for its ability to resist reform. Second, this expanded stakeholder group was granted legitimacy by the governor, who issued an executive order and allocated staffing and resources from her office that far outpace the resources available to the other two councils we studied. The result is a council that has a better chance of sustaining a coordinated policy agenda and for which there is a high degree of public accountability, since there are large, open meetings, published agendas, and expectations for follow-up by participants.

## STRUCTURE, INFLUENCE, AND SUSTAINABILITY: TRADE-OFFS

In all three states, questions concerning the sustainability of the council loom large, but in different ways. In Rhode Island, sustainability is threatened mostly by the council's strong identification with the governor. The council is viewed as his tool for implementing his management and policy vision. There is little chance that the hostile Legislature would act to put the council in statute; thus, the fate of the council depends on the priorities of the next governor. An incoming governor would likely need to restructure the council to incorporate more voices if it is to have a good chance of surviving and having an influence on policy.

In Kentucky, by contrast, the council's sustainability is threatened by its lack of connections to any political figure. Its sustainability is threatened as well by the perception of the council's limited impact, particularly within the business community, which widely views the council as having failed to coordinate the reform agenda. There is thus the prospect of a trade-off between influence and longevity. The Kentucky council

is notably one of the oldest in the nation, but according to some observers this longevity may have resulted from its position on the sidelines of several contested issues: it has been a forum for discussion as opposed to policy development. The Kentucky Chamber of Commerce is leading an effort to strengthen the council so that it would be more effective in the policy domain. The challenge will be to increase its effectiveness without increasing opposition to its work.

In Arizona, the council's future is likewise tied to the future of the governor, who, since the case study was performed, has been appointed to a position in the Obama Administration. However, there is a reasonable likelihood that the council will continue in some form because of the widespread involvement by business, the Legislature, representatives from local schools, and the greater community.[1]

In all three states the question of the councils' sustainability arises from this conundrum: councils have no statutory authority over existing educational bureaucracies and few, if anyone, supports giving them such authority. No one has called for the creation of a "super agency" or a "super board." One person we interviewed called this prospect "a train wreck" and others noted such a model would not be workable given the role and authority of existing structures. Since there appears to be no discussion of *replacing* existing structures with a unified K–16 governance body, the pertinent question in all three states becomes: what structure and legislative basis (in or outside of government) offers the best chance for a council to survive and influence the policy agendas of existing agencies and systems that, in turn, have the power to improve college and workforce readiness and postsecondary success?

## CONCLUSION: TOWARD A SUSTAINABLE COUNCIL MECHANISM TO INFLUENCE POLICY

In each of the three states studied, the P–16 and P–20 councils made valuable contributions to statewide deliberations about college readiness and success. They did so by providing a forum for various stakeholders to come together to share information and gain a greater appreciation of multiple perspectives. Each of the state councils can claim a set of accomplishments that has added value within the state compared with what might have been achieved in the council's absence. But as the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education concluded in *Claiming Common Ground,* fundamental changes in state policy will be required to transform systems of education that were designed for a bygone era (Callan et al. 2006). The three councils we studied have, for the most part, struggled to be the vehicle that can promote a statewide policy agenda.

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[1] Since the completion of the case study, Governor Janice Brewer, who replaced Governor Napolitano, issued an executive order establishing a "Governor's P–20 Coordinating Council."

As these states, and others, seek to enhance the value of their P–16 and P–20 councils, the chief objective should be to give the council the capacity to develop a policy agenda and push for its implementation. Councils are, no doubt, constrained by being overlaid on existing governance structures, but there appears to be no structural reason why a council cannot be charged with developing and promoting a collective P–16 policy agenda. In none of the three cases we studied did the council take on this role. Instead, the existing state entities pursued their own, independent policy agendas—shaped, one would hope, by the broader discussions of the council but nonetheless pursued independently. Councils would be more effective if they carried a unified agenda to the Legislature and advocated collectively for its enactment. Such collective, coordinated action would seem to go far in alleviating the criticism that the lack of statutory authority limits what councils can accomplish.

Councils could also be more effective if they operated with more public accountability, which could be accomplished without formal statutory authority. The Arizona council provides the best example here. The breadth of public involvement and the openness in which that council operates provide de facto accountability in generating a public record of actions to which each agency has committed. The Kentucky case provides the counterpoint, because it is a voluntary association that is not charged with making recommendations to any public official. Given the overall governance constraints, the best approach appears to be some official charge—be it by executive order or in statute—for a council to generate a policy agenda, recommend it to the governor and/or the Legislature, and advocate collectively on its behalf.

The challenge facing states more generally is to place statewide needs, not institutional interests, at the center of the policy agenda. Again, Arizona offers a key example in this regard by involving a large, broad base of participants in the council. The business community, in particular, has been credited with keeping the economic interests of the state at the heart of the reform agenda. But doing so has required a commitment of time and resources to the council that has not been matched by the other states.

In sum, these case studies suggest that closing the governance divide is not easy—certainly not unless or until fundamentally new governance structures are devised. Short of that, the cases suggest that the P–16 and P–20 council mechanism has the potential to influence policy reform aimed at closing the divide between K–12 and postsecondary education. To realize that potential, careful thought must be given to designing a structure that grants councils the authority to develop a unified policy agenda, the responsibility to recommend and advocate for that agenda in a publicly accountable manner, and the resources to sustain a broad base of council participation in order to ensure that conversations, and resulting policy agendas, are shaped by statewide needs and priorities.