The State Innovation Exchange and Educational Policy

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Abstract: Especially since 2010, conservative interests' dominance at advancing their preferred policies across U.S. states has been clear, with large and escalating impacts in education. Although adversaries on the political left remain in catch-up mode, there have been auspicious developments. This study focuses on one of these, seeking to understand a uniquely positioned progressively state-focused policy organization called State Innovation Exchange (SiX). It was aimed to a) provide a valuable case study of perhaps the leading organization in this space, focusing on understanding its education policy footprint; b) further understandings of conflicts, tensions, and responses on the political left relative to education policy; and c) generate insights into contemporary sub-national policy mobility. We interviewed nine key stakeholders and analyzed electronic materials to address two research questions. Findings demonstrate SiX fulfills four main purposes: 1) building and sustaining cross-state progressive power; 2) acting as a counter; 3) fostering progressive leader development; and 4) advancing progressive policies/ideas. SiX shows an economics-focused agenda emphasizing working- and middle-class families, and education policy has not been a major, consistent area of emphasis. SiX does, however, play unique roles in education (as in other areas) by connecting state legislators and supporting their work. Specific to education, we surfaced some challenges SiX has faced in building alignment around a shared vision. We

suggest, if SiX or a similarly situated organization can develop a clear education philosophy and policy agenda, it will be more effective at advancing its preferred policies, and in countering those being advanced by adversaries. Absent such shifts, we project continued conservative dominance of education policy at the state level.

State Innovation Exchange y la política educativa

Resumen: Desde 2010, el dominio de los intereses conservadores en el avance de sus políticas preferidas en los estados de EE. UU. ha sido claro, con impactos grandes y crecientes en la educación. Aunque los adversarios de la izquierda política siguen en modo de ponerse al día, ha habido desarrollos auspiciosos. Este estudio se enfoca en uno de estos, buscando comprender una organización de políticas progresivamente enfocada en el estado en una posición única llamada State Innovation Exchange (SiX). Su objetivo era a) proporcionar un estudio de caso valioso de quizás la organización líder en este espacio, centrándose en comprender la huella de su política educativa; b) una mayor comprensión de los conflictos, las tensiones y las respuestas de la izquierda política en relación con la política educativa; yc) generar conocimientos sobre la movilidad de políticas subnacionales contemporáneas. Entrevistamos a nueve partes interesadas clave y analizamos materiales electrónicos para abordar dos preguntas de investigación. Los hallazgos demuestran que SiX cumple con cuatro propósitos principales: 1) construir y mantener el poder progresivo entre estados; 2) actuar como contador; 3) fomentar el desarrollo progresivo de líderes; y 4) promover políticas/ideas progresistas. SiX muestra una agenda centrada en la economía que hace hincapié en las familias de clase media y trabajadora, y la política educativa no ha sido un área de énfasis importante y consistente. Sin embargo, SiX juega un papel único en la educación (como en otras áreas) al conectar a los legisladores estatales y apoyar su trabajo. Específicamente a la educación, sacamos a la luz algunos desafíos que SiX ha enfrentado para construir una alineación en torno a una visión compartida. Sugerimos que, si SiX o una organización en una situación similar pueden desarrollar una filosofía educativa y una agenda de políticas claras, será más eficaz para promover sus políticas preferidas y contrarrestar las propuestas por los adversarios. En ausencia de tales cambios, proyectamos un dominio conservador continuo de la política educativa a nivel estatal.

Keywords: política de la educación; política estatal; federalismo; organizaciones intermediarias; difusión de políticas

State Innovation Exchange e a política educacional

Resumo: Desde 2010, o domínio dos interesses conservadores no avanço de suas políticas preferidas nos estados dos EUA tem sido claro, com impactos grandes e crescentes na educação. Embora os adversários da esquerda política permaneçam no modo de recuperação, houve desenvolvimentos auspiciosos. Este estudo concentra-se em um deles, buscando entender uma organização política progressivamente focada no estado de posição única chamada State Innovation Exchange (SiX). O objetivo era a) fornecer um valioso estudo de caso de talvez a organização líder neste espaço, com foco na compreensão de sua pegada de política educacional; b) maior compreensão dos conflitos, tensões e respostas da esquerda política em relação à política educacional; ec) gerar insights sobre a mobilidade política subnacional contemporânea. Entrevistamos nove principais interessados e analisamos materiais eletrônicos para abordar duas questões de pesquisa. Os resultados demonstram que o SiX cumpre quatro propósitos principais: 1) construir e sustentar o poder

progressivo entre estados; 2) atuar como contador; 3) promover o desenvolvimento progressivo de líderes; e 4) promover políticas/ideias progressistas. O SiX mostra uma agenda focada na economia, enfatizando as famílias das classes trabalhadora e média, e a política educacional não tem sido uma área de ênfase importante e consistente. O SiX, no entanto, desempenha um papel único na educação (como em outras áreas), conectando legisladores estaduais e apoiando seu trabalho. Específicos para a educação, trouxemos à tona alguns desafios que a SiX enfrentou na construção de alinhamento em torno de uma visão compartilhada. Sugerimos que, se o SiX ou uma organização similar puder desenvolver uma filosofia educacional clara e uma agenda política, ela será mais eficaz no avanço de suas políticas preferidas e no combate às propostas pelos adversários. Na ausência de tais mudanças, projetamos um domínio conservador contínuo da política educacional no nível estadual.
Palavras-chave: política de educação; política estadual; federalismo; organizações intermediárias; difusão de políticas

The State Innovation Exchange and Educational Policy

In the United States (US), though states[1] as policymaking units receive just a fraction of the attention accorded to the federal level (Hopkins, 2018), they are pivotal in most areas, routinely making decisions with far-reaching implications (Grumbach, 2022; Michener, 2018; Schneider & Berkshire, 2020). Recently, as political polarization has increased and federal-level partisan gridlock has become the norm, the vital role of U.S. states as sites for affecting policy change has been particularly clear. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the centrality of state governance and state officials' power over important aspects of our lives (e.g., school operations, mask and vaccine requirements). Consequently, though state policymaking frequently occurs under the radar, current events and trends remind that states do indeed matter.

In fact, elite[2] stakeholders and organized interests – and especially, in recent decades, those aligned with and mobilizing the political right – have long operated from this understanding, engaging assertively in intra- and across-state advocacy (Hertel-Fernandez, 2019; Horsford et al., 2019; Lubienski et al., 2011) to pursue their preferred policy goals. Education policy has been a central focus, reflecting how education is principally a state function: The power to operate public schools resides within state constitutions, and state legislatures are tasked with providing for education systems (Heck, 2004). Public elementary and secondary education comprises the largest share of most states' budgets, and public higher education is also a major budgetary area (Alexander & Alexander, 2011). Recently, states' educational roles have only grown; the federal government has relinquished considerable control, and states have asserted powers historically delegated to local levels (Henig, 2013; Malin et al., 2020; McGuinn, 2016).

A key contemporary issue, however, is that the political right has been considerably better resourced and organized—and, ultimately, more effective at influencing and even driving state policy. This partisan asymmetry has had particularly large consequences in education, where a powerful constellation of intermediaries (Scott & Jabbar, 2014) has worked concertedly and

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[1] Here, "states" refer to the 50 political entities in the United States (for example, New York, Arizona) that hold jurisdiction over a particular geographic area and share sovereignty with the federal government.
[2] "Elites" as used in this study denotes Americans who hold disproportionately high levels of wealth and political power. In recent years, legal and socioeconomic changes have served to further strengthen the political power of elites—i.e., to tighten the relationship between "affluence and influence" (Gilens, 2012).

aggressively to advance a policy agenda centered on extending "privatization and marketization" (p. 165). An implication is that, until progressive[3] or liberal adversaries develop a formidable counter, conservative state-level domination will continue, and with potentially accelerating consequences. For example, presently we note highly aggressive conservative cross-state campaigns to severely restrict voting and reproductive rights, and escalating efforts to restrict or ban the teaching of "divisive concepts" in public schools (Kumashiro, 2021; Malin & Hornbeck, 2021; Ray, 2022).

Recently, there has accordingly been increased focus on "progressive federalism" as an answer to conservative state and local dominance (Hertel-Fernandez, 2019) and in light of national-level deadlock and division—that is, "the pursuit of progressive policy goals using the subnational governments of the U.S. federal system" (Mendonca & Tyson, 2018, p. 12). Federalism, despite its negative connotations among some on the political left[4], does not have intrinsic political valence (Gerken & Revesz, 2017) and can be put in service of progressive goals—as it has, for example, when local leaders have undertaken major policing reforms, blocked federal ICE raids, and acted to halt evictions during the pandemic. (Of course, such developments have provoked vigorous response by conservative adversaries, for instance through their passage of state-level pre-emption laws that act to block local actions they find disagreeable; Grabar, 2016; Grumbach, 2022).

Some interested parties on the political left, then, have awakened but are in catch up mode, with lesser infrastructure and perhaps a still-fragile embrace of progressive federalism. Nevertheless, there have been promising developments. Notably, in early 2014 a politically progressive state-policy focused intermediary organization called the State Innovation Exchange (SiX) was formed. Since then, SiX appears to have developed into a unique, leading force in this area, one that might be able to counter conservative state-level policy dominance. Given their promise, here we examine SiX and its prioritization of education policy, addressing two research questions:

1. What are SiX's primary purposes?
2. To what extent and in what ways has SiX focused on education policy, relative to other policy areas?

This work holds significance in three main ways. First, it provides a valuable case study of SiX's functioning and influence. Given its identified primacy in the cross-state policy space and its potential for ameliorating political asymmetries, it is intrinsically worthy of study. More broadly, this analysis contributes to understanding the meaning and operations of various state-level policy advocacy organizations in the education space. Second, through this examination we have elucidated a deeper understanding of conflicts, tensions, and responses on the political left relative to education policy influence and advocacy. In short, as we reveal, the task of countering adversaries on this terrain requires more than copying their longer-standing work. Third, this study contributes to burgeoning research into *subnational* policy mobility (McKenzie & Aikens, 2020). In education policy scholarship, much more scholarly attention has aimed toward understanding *global* policy mobility; this is especially problematic in federal systems like the US and Australia, given that subnational governments (including, in the US, states) therein maintain chief responsibility for schooling (Beech

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[3] This study understands progressivism as a political orientation characterized by the pursuit of social change and progress via government action, informed by ongoing human advancements. Conservatism, by contrast, is typically characterized by efforts to preserve existing institutions.

[4] Federalism and related "states' rights" arguments have an ugly history, frequently invoked as cover for racist practices such as slavery and enforced racial segregation. However, it is increasingly understood that federalism itself is neutral and indeed can be a powerful tool for progressive change (Gerken & Revesz, 2017).

et al., 2021; Savage, 2020). Ultimately, if we wish to understand and predict policy mobility, we must understand the powerful intermediaries and networks operating subnationally.

The literature review that follows first provides background in relation to: a) evolution of the U.S. policy context; and b) the longstanding dominance of conservative groups and networks in terms of influencing state policy. It then describes a potential antidote, the "*countervailing power* approach" (Hertel-Fernandez, 2019, p. 257, italics in original), and provides further conceptual support for the present study.

The State Reigns Supreme in Education, and Conservative Groups/Networks Dominate

Education policy influence has widely shifted. Since the early-mid 1980s, public education has been portrayed as being in crisis, with educators (and teachers' unions) framed as key sources of the problem (Malin & Lubienski, 2022). While these traditionally powerful professional actors have seen their influence diminish, business, corporate, and philanthropic sectors have worked diligently (and often in concert) to gain influence over education policy. Indeed, scholars have observed a "proliferation of [non-state actors] in the political arena" (Horsford et al., 2019), an array of intermediary organizations that play an increasingly influential role in education policy (also see Goldie et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2015).

Altogether, these shifts have also served to buttress elite (and typically conservative) interests (Ellison et al., 2018). Though U.S. elites can adopt various political positions, they are typically economically conservative (Frank, 2004; Malin & Lubienski, 2022; Page et al., 2013), and the very wealthy are "much more conservative than the American public as a whole" (Page et al., 2013, p. 51). Empirical research, moreover, reveals that U.S. policy activity is tightly responsive to elite preferences (Gilens & Page, 2014).

These actors, as we detail, have attained many state-level policy changes, and perhaps with special strength in education, where they have pushed market- and privatization-favoring policies. They have done so by, for example, developing ready-made legislation and by providing ideational and networking supports to legislators (Verger et al., 2016). Especially within the last decade, system-changing education reforms – e.g., right to work laws, large-scale voucher programs – were enacted or pursued in many states (Malin et al., 2020). Such reforms show a partisan gradient, being typically enacted in states where Republicans possess political control.

Such activities are best understood within a changed sociopolitical context: Recent scholarship has clarified private interests' major and often covert state-level policy influence (Hertel-Fernandez, 2019; Mayer, 2016), including the American Legislative Exchange Council's (ALEC) and advocacy networks' pivotal roles in advancing/spreading particular reforms (Malin et al., 2020). Across policy areas, reforms invariably serve to reduce the size of government, lower taxes, privatize services, and/or pursue culturally conservative causes (Hertel-Fernandez, 2019; Underwood & Mead, 2012). Public understanding of these elite network-actors' influence in education appears weak, however, with education largely being overlooked in popular accounts (Schneider & Berkshire, 2020).

Hertel-Fernandez (2019) identified a "conservative troika" (p. 5) of networks – anchored by ALEC (created in 1973) and including the State Policy Network (SPN; 1986) and Americans for Prosperity (AFP; 2004) – that has been profoundly successful at pursuing cross-state policy change. ALEC, which receives the most attention, is a "coalition that [attempts] to reconcile the varied preferences of big businesses, firebrand conservative activists, and wealthy donors" (Hertel-Fernandez, 2019, p. 24). It operates non-transparently, with "its primary function and selling point

for its non-public servant members relating to [its] ability to craft and share model state-level legislation" (Malin et al., 2020a, p. 20).

ALEC members include more than 2,000 state legislators (more than 25% nationally; Graves, 2016), who gain access to policy proposals (i.e., legislative language) and to networks, associated research, talking points, polling information, and expert witnesses (Hertel-Fernandez, 2019). ALEC's sizable education policy footprint reflects its overarching pro-market, pro-competition, and anti-tax philosophy. It has pushed for and fostered: educational privatization (e.g., via vouchers, tax-credit programs, for-profit charters); curbs on collective bargaining and local school board authority; standardized testing and results-based accountability for public schools; and pension system reforms (Horsford et al., 2019; Shaffer et al., 2018). As analyzed by deMarrais et al. (2019, p. 164), ALEC's model education bills employ "neutral-sounding language that masks a conservative agenda," namely to increase "privatization and marketization" (p. 165).

ALEC's education agenda is infrastructurally supported. Its Education and Workforce Development Task Force (1 of 10; ALEC, 2020) is productive; Hertel-Fernandez (2019) analyzed 1995-2013 ALEC model bill enactment across all areas, and found its Education Reform Package (originating in Indiana) to be "by far the most copied" (p. 75) provision, enacted over 300 times. This model bill packages several proposals including "measures encouraging the creation of charter schools, providing vouchers for students, changing teacher evaluation and licensing standards, cutting back the power of teachers unions, and encouraging the contracting-out of some educational services to private providers" (p. 75). Also, ALEC's Tax and Fiscal Policy task force frequently advances policies affecting education. Its subcommittees "examine specific policy areas in detail," including "education finance, and public pensions" (ALEC, 2020, n.p.). Broadly, this task force is salient because any policies that decrease tax revenues or adjust the allocation of state monies affect education.

The SPN is "an association of over sixty state-level think tanks focusing on free market and conservative policy" (Hertel-Fernandez, 2019, p. 4). With a budget exceeding $78mm per year, its activities include coordinating think tanks, testifying for model bills, generating supportive media coverage, and commissioning polls (Hertel-Fernandez, 2019). The AFP, created in 2004, focuses on organizing (e.g., recruiting and coordinating activists, organizing rallies and petitions), elections (e.g., running political ads), developing coalitions, and commissioning polls. Its budget exceeds $150mm per year and includes more than 500 paid staffers and directors in 36+ states (Hertel-Fernandez, 2019).

Together, these entities have achieved many successes in and beyond education. Especially after the 2010 midterms, when Republicans assumed full control of 21 states (from 16), their dominance showed. Particularly "striking was the speed with which states began introducing and enacting a near-identical set of very conservative policy priorities" (Hertel-Fernandez, 2019, p. 2). Moreover, these policies appeared to be strategic, aimed to shift the political context to further their long-term agenda. Right to work laws, for example, stretch unions' financial resources and sap their strength (Hertel-Fernandez & Skopcol, 2016), while voter ID laws generally decrease Democrat-supporting voter pools. In education, voucher reforms have similar system-changing properties, fundamentally shifting school-state relations (Malin et al., 2020). Republicans are still dominant in many states, controlling 31 statehouses and enjoying trifectas (control of governorship and legislative chambers) in 23 (Ballotpedia, 2021).

Conceptual and Theoretical Resources: Countering Conservative Dominance, Engaging in Realpolitik

For those opposing policies and rhetoric originating in conservative networks, and/or concerned about damage to democracy incurred when elite interests disproportionately impact policy (Black, 2020; Hacker & Pierson, 2020; Horsford et al., 2019), an urgent and pragmatic question concerns how to respond. Among several options is for political progressives to develop/foster a worthy antidote or counter-force[5]. When viewing politics as "organized combat" (Hacker & Pierson, 2010, p. 291) in which organized interests largely determine when/how policy changes, and in a context featuring such power asymmetry, it follows that a strong counter-force is needed to obtain different outcomes. Hertel-Fernandez (2019) operates from this understanding; he asserts – and we concur – conservative actors have "grasped the reality of politics as organized combat" (p. 246) and adversaries on the left ought do so as well, specifically by creating "cross-state networks that can *counter* the troika on its own terrain" (p. 263, italics added).

Hertel-Fernandez (2019) also asserts that adversaries can benefit from studying counterparts' successes and failures. Here he draws on a concept called "the advantage of backwardness" (Gerschenkron, 1962; Hertel-Fernandez & Skopcol, 2016) explaining how organizations can learn from the past, studying and adapting competitors' models. To this end, he lays out several principles emerging from his examinations of the troika (summarized in Table 1).

Table 1

Summary of Principles from Troika for Progressives' Consideration (built from Hertel-Fernandez, 2019)

Principle	Key Points
It's not the federal government or bust	*Consistently attend to states as policy sites *Coordinate with Democratic administrations
Don't reinvent the wheel (again)	*Complement, do not duplicate efforts
It's not just about the model bills	*Model policies are important, but not everything; build supports and networks
Establish membership that means something	*Members must experience tangible benefits
To build membership, turn to preexisting networks within states	*Leverage existing relationships *Consider instituting in-state chairs *Work with existing state-level organizations
Establish organizational structures for adjudicating between conflicting policies and priorities	*Design to avoid collective-action problems (e.g., task forces, issue boundaries)
Find better sources and structures for funding	*Move toward sustainable funding structure (e.g., membership dues, flexible grants)

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[5] Other approaches include pursuing reforms to constrain and/or make transparent money in politics, or applying public pressure to oppose those supporting organizations like ALEC (Hertel-Fernandez, 2019).

Principle	Key Points
Use policy as a means to advance both substantive and policy goals	*For example, expand citizens' voting rights

These principles span matters of *purpose* (RQ1) (e.g., provide resources and networks; advance substantive and policy goals) and *policy prioritization/conflict resolution* (RQ2) (e.g., find better funding structures; establish structures to adjudicate conflicts) and, accordingly, provide an analytic frame. Previously, Hertel-Fernandez and Skopcol (2016) examined the fledgling SiX vis-à-vis these principles, given signs SiX was developing into a progressive force. They identified areas of promise and concern, suggesting SiX might be better positioned to counter AFP than ALEC – i.e., by focusing more on building support for progressive causes than offering specific policy supports (model bills, etc.). Notwithstanding, SiX appeared then (and remains) poised as perhaps the leading competitor to these conservative interests.

Further conceptual support is needed to analyze SiX's development, particularly given major political asymmetries and a unique educational policy context. As Grossman and Hopkins (2016) detail, U.S. partisan politics are highly asymmetric: The Republican party acts as "the vehicle of an ideological movement" (Grossman & Hopkins, 2016, p. 3) and is tightly focused on reducing the size and scope of government. Most of its relatively homogeneous voters and nearly all major party players identify as conservatives and "voice support for the abstract values of small government and American cultural traditionalism." In international context, the Republican party is an outlier, being much more conservative than center-right parties elsewhere (Grossman & Hopkins, 2016). The Democratic Party, by contrast, maintains a "big tent" coalition, composed of various social groups that make intense policy demands and whose disparate interests invariably must be reconciled. In international perspective, the Democratic Party is just left-of-center, which reflects its inability to construct or align itself with a broadly popular ideology. Nevertheless, it is advantaged in that the policies it favors are often more popular than those favored by Republican counterparts. Thus, it and its politicians are incentivized to talk and act pragmatically, focusing less on abstract argument and more on advancing policies and their projected benefits to one or more focal groups.

Though SiX is officially non-partisan, it aligns most closely with the Democratic Party. Accordingly, it is subject to many of the dynamics facing the party. It would therefore be unrealistic to expect SiX to easily morph into an adversary's mirror image. Rather, we expected to find SiX engaging in realpolitik, building upon unique strengths and addressing challenges while seeking to build itself into an effective cross-state policy organization. For example, given the recency and fragility of some stakeholders' embrace of progressive federalism, we expect SiX leaders would need to focus concertedly on salesmanship and fundraising.

Educational policy contains additional nuances. In recent decades there has been substantial overlap (especially at the national level) between Republican and Democratic education policy preferences. For example, we have seen Democratic and Republican administrations embracing such reforms as charter schools and test-based accountability and teacher evaluation (McGuinn, 2016). Indeed, both parties have used "the issue of education to reposition themselves ideologically and to appeal to moderate voters" (McGuinn, 2016, p. 4)—as when Democrat Bill Clinton used education to fashion himself as a pragmatic centrist, unafraid to take on the party's special interests to pursue educational improvement (Schneider & Berkshire, 2020), or when Republican George W. Bush broke from conservative orthodoxy to manifest "compassionate conservativism" via his education positions (McGuinn, 2006).

Notwithstanding such complications, it seems imperative for SiX to focus on education (perhaps *the* preeminent state-level policy area) and differentiate itself from adversaries—e.g., relative to private school choice, collective bargaining, the teaching of U.S. history, and school funding. Still, we anticipated SiX would face challenges and might need to: a) develop partnerships with an array of organizations on the left, both to increase their operational effectiveness and to signal their coalitional appeal; and b) articulate the specific benefits of policies they favor (versus relying more on abstract principles). However, given recent tendencies toward ideological entrenchment on both left and right, we expected to observe efforts by SiX to construct abstract visions and develop principles to undergird their policy advocacy.

Methods

We applied case study methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and assumed a pragmatic perspective to examine SiX's purposes and uncover if and how it focuses on educational policy. We consider SiX as a prominent, U.S.-based, progressive cross-state policy advocacy/influence organization "case." Our principal goal in undertaking this research is to better understand SiX; thus, this is an intrinsic case study (Stake, 1994). Secondarily, as possible, we sought to achieve broader insights – e.g., to elucidate general dynamics (e.g., tensions, challenges, possibilities) and add to current understandings regarding cross-state policy influence. We sought to develop a robust, trustworthy chain of evidence (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). We collected and drew upon multiple sources of evidence (described below), engaging in methodological and data triangulation (Denzin, 2017) to address our research questions.

Initially, the first author used Nexus Uni to identify news items pertaining to the "State Innovation Exchange." This February 3, 2020 search yielded 335 results. They were chronologically reviewed and included (i.e., recorded into a spreadsheet) if judged to contain a) information or analysis pertinent to this study's research questions; or b) relevant case context. These items also occasionally referred to other news items or pertinent material, and we snowballed to these. Ultimately, 136 items were included. The first author led the review and subsequent analysis of these items; on first read, the process was unstructured, aspiring to obtain a broad "lay of the land." On second read-through, the analysis was more structured – data were identified, compared, and combined (e.g., working through areas of complementarity and contradiction) in relation to the research questions, supported by our analytic frame.

Simultaneously, the second author served as lead data analyst of *SiX's website and annual reports*. She chronologically examined SiX's blogs and Facebook posts, analyzing SiX's relative education policy prioritization. She also collected and analyzed related journal articles to study SiX's development and locate various academic arguments about SiX. The goal of this work was to provide provisional answers to our research questions – SiX's *purposes* (RQ1) and its *prioritization of education policy* (RQ2) – and to solidify our understanding of key context surrounding the development and evolution of SiX.

In this study's second phase (November 2020-March 2021) we interviewed nine stakeholders with intimate experience with SiX. This included a SiX founder who also served on its board, several high-ranking current or former SiX officials, and a state legislator who experienced SiX's services. We engaged in semi-structured interviewing (see interview guide, Appendix A). Interview data were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed jointly, in relation to the study's framework and in comparison with tentative findings reached via first step analyses. Areas of contradiction were examined until we could resolve them – for instance, by theorizing the distinction between public-facing comments and interview-based sharing, noting patterns related to interviewee positionality, etc.

The State Innovation Exchange (SiX): Background

The Progressive States Network (PSN) was launched in 2005 to "publish legislative proposals, convene national meetings, and help the most left-leaning lawmakers form links to national liberal advocates and policy organizations" (Hertel-Fernandez & Skocpol, 2016, p. 51). Also around this time, Joel Rogers of the University of Wisconsin-Madison launched the American Legislative and Issue Campaign Exchange (ALICE), "which built an online library of progressive policy ideas for lawmakers" and "the Center for State Innovation (CSI), which provided similar resources and training to state executive staff" (Hertel-Fernandez & Skocpol, 2016, p. 51). These three groups – PSN, CSI, and ALICE – merged in 2014 to form the 501(c)3 State Innovation Exchange (SiX) (State Innovation Exchange, 2020a). SiX also has a sister 501(c)4 organization called SiX Action. Nick Rathod, SiX's founding executive director, described SiX as focusing on bringing together progressive state legislators and advocates to "drive a people's agenda that focuses on working-class, middle-class issues" (as quoted in Overby, 2014, n.p.).

SiX and SiX Action (n.d.) are registered under portions of the tax code that make it challenging to track its fundraising. However, SiX was reportedly successful early on in securing funding from major donors including the Democracy Alliance (DA), a donor network founded by George Soros (Gold, 2015); Edelman (2017, ¶6) described SiX as being part of DA's "core portfolio." In early 2015, Rathod noted SiX was on pace to raise $3-5mm in the first year, and he expressed hope it would raise up to $10mm in subsequent years (Vogel, 2015). Its donors are a combination of individuals, unions and other interest groups, and progressive foundations (Hamburger, 2014). The American Federation for Teachers (AFT), for example, reportedly gave SiX $115,000 in 2016-17 (Biddle, 2017). According to Greenblatt (2020), SiX's reported $6.5mm budget dwarfed other organizations on the left, but fell far short of adversaries.

SiX's posted mission is to "empower, embolden and equip state legislators to build and wield progressive governing power by/with/for the people they represent" by "providing legislators with the tools needed to shape impactful public policy and building their capacity to lead with their constituents" (State Innovation Exchange, 2020f). To do so, they "foster long-term collaboration between legislators—across chambers, across regions, and across state lines–and with grassroots movements." SiX "envision[s] an equitable, resilient, healthy and prosperous future for every person in the United States, which is secured and safeguarded by progressive state legislators" (State Innovation Exchange, 2020f).

A nine-member Board of Directors, including representatives of the National Education Association (NEA) and AFT, governs SiX. Hertel-Fernandez and Skopcol (2016, ¶29) opined that the board was "chock full of representatives from unions and progressive advocacy groups mostly headquartered on the coasts" and suggested this does not "send a welcoming message to more moderate legislators in the heartland." Still, they conceded, such a configuration might seem "a good way to encourage allied groups to donate resources and to signal to progressive donors that everyone is cooperating this time." SiX is currently led by co-Executive Directors Neha Patel and Jessie Ulibarri.

SiX has expanded and evolved over time, for instance by "embedding its staff in individual states and focusing on a limited number of issue areas, such as reproductive health and voting rights" (Greenblatt, 2020, n.p.). Its staffing numbers have also grown, from 10 in 2017 to 30 in mid-2021, and its materials reportedly reach 3,000 legislators or staffers (Greenblatt, 2020). However, no listed job titles appear to have an education focus; by contrast, three staff members are apparently focused on reproductive rights, three on democracy, and one on agriculture.

SiX leaders are often asked whether it is "the liberal version of ALEC" (SiX, 2020a), and they indicate that it is not (although, a key reason for its existence relates to countering ALEC; see *findings*). To differentiate, for example, they note they do not take corporate money and do not require legislators to pay membership dues. Rather, they note, they are funded by foundations, individual donors, and progressive allies. They also label ALEC as a "bill mill" whereas they take a "policy plus approach" by providing various forms of legislative support (SiX, 2020a).

Findings

First, we elucidate SiX's primary purposes. Next, we describe its policy priority areas, paying special attention to how they function around education.

SiX's Main Purposes

SiX, we conclude, fulfills four main purposes: a) build and sustain cross-state progressive power; b) counter adversaries; c) foster progressive leader development; and d) advance progressive policies/ideas.

Build and Sustain Cross-State Progressive Power

Key to SiX's strength and sustainability hinged on attracting progressives' attention (and resources) to the state level. SiX's first Executive Director, Nick Rathod, described state-level weakness as "the biggest missing piece in the progressive infrastructure" (as quoted in Firestone, 2014, n.p.). As explained Firestone (2014, n.p.), "For years, state control has been the not-so-secret weapon of conservatives, who have [been positioned infrastructurally to take] advantage of the lack of popular interest in state politics to enact their policies with impunity."

Our interview participants concurred. One reflected, "the left has basically neglected…for a long time" the state level, which "controls issues" that "everybody needs" and "which should be of great concern to…progressives." Per another:

> on the right … they have 40 years or so of explicit focus and investment at the state and local level. And on the left … quite honestly, we've spent the last four decades, more or less, ignoring it. You know [we've been] exceptionally focused at the federal level, and in particular on the White House. And I mean … that sort of goes for donors, for advocacy groups, all the way on down.

Funders likewise needed convincing that "states really matter." One participant lamented the "lack of appreciation by donors – and [more] generally on the left – for just how powerful the states are, and how much we need to capitalize organizations like SiX to be able to be fully effective." They added, "to the last day … we were still having to have hard, frustrating conversations with individuals trying to convince them … to deeply invest in the state [level]." We interpreted this as highlighting funders' fragile support for progressive federalism, and for entities like SiX that could (if consistently supported) support or fuel it. Nonetheless, these frustrating funding efforts bore fruit. The DA, as noted, included SiX in its core portfolio, reflecting a partial shift in focus from funding elections toward funding political infrastructure (e.g., think tanks, media advocacy, organizing outfits; Vogel & Parti, 2015). By early 2018, SiX had grown into "about a 10 million organization," which was "more than anyone [on the left] even had ever come close to." Still, their capitalization was "nowhere near" that of SiX's adversaries, which carried material implications; as explained another interviewee, SiX's relatively "tiny" budget meant less legal defense and fewer connections into party leadership.

Notwithstanding, SiX leveraged its resources to build and sustain power: it has been successful in "building a community of legislators" (with many progressive partners) that is "interconnected across…states so they could share best practices, align on language…and just [create] sort of a support network." They assume a vital "convener" or "hub and connector" function by "exposing legislators across states to experts" and doing "education around different policies." This includes a large annual conference hosted by SiX; a former SiX official noted the last one he attended brought "around 600 legislators" and partners, experts, etc.—a convening of unprecedented scale. As another reflected, "so much of what we were focused on doing was bringing people together in conversation." They aimed to help "get legislators into a place where they're able to do their job and do it successfully, combining that with a focus on…good progressive policy." As summarized one participant:

> we are bringing legislators together, we are helping them/ supporting them around communications, we're supporting them around policy and technical aspects of legislation, we are organizing in the state, all with the goal of articulating and rolling out a unified vision for the state.

A state legislator participant benefited from these opportunities. Beyond generally appreciating how SiX shines "a light on state government," he lauded their capacity to "connect lawmakers between states" to "share different ideas." He noted how "SiX has shown the ability to bring large groups of people in" and "connect different levels of government" (as when SiX hosted a town hall including him and his state's governor) or "legislators in the same conversation space." Ultimately, SiX appears well on its way to being successful at "building long-term, long-lasting power in the states," in a SiX state director's words.

Serve as a Counter

Within news items, the most frequently described purpose for SiX concerned competing with conservative state-focused counterparts. Kenneth P. Vogel (2014, n.p.), writing for *Politico*, summarized SiX's "ambitious" goal as follows:

> compete with a well-financed network of conservative groups, including the American Legislative Exchange Council that for years have dominated state policy battles, advancing pro-business, anti-regulation bills at the state level.

A shared notion among SiX leaders and donors (Vogel, 2014, n.p.) was that "Democrats, having essentially ceded state-level battles in recent years, [were] approaching a tipping point" and urgently needed to "mount an effective and well-funded response." SiX leaders described a "power deficit" plaguing progressives at state levels, with SiX needed to rectify it (see Hamburger, 2014, n.p.). The need was seen as particularly acute because the 2010 elections, and subsequent redistricting processes, had hampered Democrats' electoral prospects. A concerted counter effort was argued needed, and with urgency as 2020 elections loomed (Gold, 2015). SiX, Vogel sensed, was "the chosen vehicle for Democrat's catch-up effort" (2015, n.p.).

Former Executive Director Nick Rathod, writing with Howard Dean, portrayed adversaries as conducting a "full-on assault on middle-class families" and engaging in efforts "to attack basic environmental protections." These efforts, they argued, were "orchestrated by far right-wing groups like the American Legislative Exchange Council and Americans for Prosperity (the Koch brothers)." As a remedy, they offered:

> It's no longer enough for progressives to simply complain … We need to match the organizational skill of our opponents and level the playing field so the best ideas win

in states both big and small, instead of being buried in an avalanche of special-
interest money. (Rathod & Dean, 2015, n.p.)

Some interviewees acknowledged this countering function; one noted the "defensive measure" animating some SiX work, like when they work with legislators and partners to "identify [harmful policies being advanced] and try to push back as much as possible." Concerning education, a participant described how SiX has been "pretty strong in its opposition of voucher programs." SiX, however, does not highlight this countering function through its official communications. Instead, they portray a proactive stance (i.e., building progressive power, providing legislator support; State Innovation Exchange, 2020b). We interpreted this stance as reflecting two main components: 1) a recognition that simply countering or playing defense is uninspiring; and 2) an effort and a sense that it was possible to craft a proactive vision and identity to undergird its efforts (for further analysis, see Advance Progressive Policies and Ideas section).

Notwithstanding, as reflected a SiX founder, a central SiX focus has been "to try to put together...a sort of counterweight to ALEC" – but, he noted wryly, "if you talk to people in SiX, they'll say, 'Oh no, that's not really what we are about!'" This countering function takes varied forms, including fighting against conservative bills (Meyer & Vogel, 2015) or otherwise "defending against efforts to move our country backward" (SiX Action, n.d.). After Donald Trump was elected as President, SiX countered his agenda, for example by joining with others in opposing Supreme Court Justice Kavanaugh's confirmation. More aggressively, in early 2017 SiX Action led a coordinated legislative blitz – lawmakers in 30+ states coordinated bills targeting working-class voters, in "a coordinated rebuttal" to Trump's agenda (Przybyla, 2017, n.p.). This was "an attempt to form the legislative spine of a state-level resistance to Trump's policies" and aimed to stand "in stark contrast to the [Trump administration's] corporate, billionaire-driven agenda" (Rathod, quoted in Przybyla, 2017, n.p.). A goal, it seemed, was to show progressive policies could produce tangible benefits for working-class voters—thereby leaning into Democrats' policy popularity advantage (versus Republicans' ideological advantage; see conceptual framework). Focusing on states was also prudent given Republican (partial) federal control (Greenblatt, 2018).

Facilitate Progressive Leader Development

SiX's leadership development function was also salient. For example, Rathod (quoted in Vogel, 2015) described how "a farm team of the next generation of leaders" can be built in the states. Vanden Heuvel (2016) likewise opined "state and local government is where the next generation of progressive voices will emerge."

In late 2018, the Progressive Governance Academy was launched. Formed from a partnership between SiX and two other organizations, it offers training for newly elected local and state officials on a regional basis. Leadership development fits into a broad SiX aim, which (per a SiX founder) has been "to support and enliven and power progressive state legislators." SiX, per a state director, seeks to "build up [legislators'] skills" so they can "fight better and fight differently." The following puts the overall effort into perspective:

> We are talking about building long-term, long-lasting power in the States and the change doesn't happen in like one legislative cycle, or one year; it [takes] years before we see the fruits of our labor, right? And we've invested time and resources into especially newer legislators, and it takes time before those new legislators … rise in their ranks to be able to be minority or majority leaders, and then we see how … the skills that we've provided them with come to fruition.

Advance Progressive Policies and Ideas

We noted variation around whether SiX is more so about "meeting [legislators] where they were" with tailored supports, or advancing progressive policies and ideas. A current SiX employee stressed it is "not a group that parachutes into a state and ... tries to push a specific agenda." By contrast, a former SiX official noted a persistent struggle to balance pragmatic, tailored support versus pushing progressive ideas, and his "sense is that SiX has moved in the direction of trying to push more." To us, these approaches manifest a distinction between *facilitation/support* and *leadership*, and we conclude SiX performs both functions – and to different degrees, depending on policy area.

Regarding advancing specific policies, interviewees sensed SiX's preferences were or could be popular, so it was important to get effective messages out. By contrast, they contended the "corporate agenda" being pushed by their adversaries was unpopular. Accordingly, there was impetus to be bold, both to advance policies and undergirding ideas. (We interpreted this as showing SiX playing to its strengths [popular policies] and a way in which its activities were different from their counterparts, who tend to advance less popular policies by relying on ideological vehicles.) A key goal for SiX, for example, appeared to be to reframe government as a force for good, rather than a problem as portrayed by conservatives. Such a focus was at the heart "why SiX was created: to provide policy, communications, and messaging support to legislators around the country" (Rathod & Dean, 2015, n.p.).

> In a CNN article, Rathod opined:
> Democrats should stop second-guessing themselves so much and really put forward a broad vision that's bold and pushes the envelope and see what happens. It's OK for people to poke holes in policy, it's always going to happen. But leading with our values – big and bold – is what leadership is about. People will follow that. (as quoted in Krieg & Bradner, 2017, n.p.)

These comments are interesting given current intra-party debates regarding how the Democratic party can win elections, which may hinge on attracting more white working class and rural voters. Painting broadly, one group argues for a Democratic politics led by principles and another is calling for a politics led by popularity ("popularism"), with special focus on policies they know in advance to be well-liked (Klein, 2021). Rathod, in this quotation, shows alignment with the former group—i.e., leading boldly with values.

Beyond noting specific policy priority areas, we observed a small number of coordinated, cross-state legislative pushes -- e.g., an "Equal Pay Can't Wait" campaign launched in early 2016, and a "Fight for $15" campaign in late 2017 (see next section). More subtly, SiX frequently connected legislators with experts and each other to work through particular issues; for instance, they hosted a call around paid sick leave enabling "state legislators who [were] in the middle of...fights in their states" to "have close conversations about what went right and what went wrong." To us, these were ways in which they could elevate particular issues and enable legislators to address information and service gaps. Such a function, we believe, may be particularly needed in education—for instance, to develop effective responses given the proliferation of voucher and neo-voucher legislation and legislation regarding the teaching of history, race, gender and sexuality, and other so-called "divisive concepts" (Malin & Lubienski, 2022).

SiX Agenda, Policy Priorities, and Extent/Manner of Education Focus

In this section, we report on findings regarding: a) SiX's demonstrated policy priorities; and b) the extent and manner in which education policy has been a focus.

SiX: Policy Priorities

SiX consistently demonstrated an *economics-focused agenda* to "fight for working families" (State Innovation Exchange, 2020e), grow the middle class, and promote broader prosperity. As framed by Rathod and Dean (2015), a key goal "is to inspire a restoration of what was once the greatest and most prosperous middle class in the world." Specific policies being advanced within this agenda addressed, for example: paid overtime, boosting paid sick and family leave, raising the minimum wage, and making the tax system more progressive.

Related, SiX spearheaded an "Equal Pay Can't Wait" campaign, facilitating a "supernova approach" which entailed advancing a "blitz" of legislation in statehouses in early 2016 (DePillis, 2016, n.p.). Rathod described equal pay as "a bipartisan issue", adding "it's hard to be on the side of arguing that mothers and daughters should be paid less than men" (as quoted in Ludden, 2016).

Following Trump's election, SiX published *The Progressive Economic Blueprint for the States* (SiX, 2020c). It was said to be "a joint vision of hundreds of state lawmakers, policy experts, and leaders of the progressive movement" and announced:

> Starting with the first 100 days of a Trump administration – as 2017 legislative
> sessions convene in the states – elected officials and progressive leaders will put
> forth policies that better respond to the needs of all Americans. While each state and
> legislative chamber is different, this blueprint serves as a guide for all state
> policymakers to be laser-focused on creating economic opportunity for working
> families, for making stronger and smarter investments for local communities, and
> leveling the playing field to put the American worker first. (p. 1)

Indeed, in early 2017, SiX Action launched a multi-state #fightingforfamilies campaign/movement that included the introduction of related bills in more than 30 states. We saw these as promising moves, while knowing these efforts are complicated given how progressives and the Democratic Party have struggled to win working-class voters amidst deepening educational polarization (Klein, 2021).

Other prominent focal areas included reproductive rights, climate change/equity, and voting rights. The latter focus represents strategic, systems-changing reform. The salience of reproductive rights was also discernible—five staff members work specifically on this issue, and in 2018 SiX became a founding member of the Reproductive Freedom Leadership Council (RFLC), "a cohort of more than 425 legislators" who receive access to various skills-building events and opportunities (SiX, 2020e, n.p.). Thereby, RFLC provides exemplifies substantive infrastructure and legislative support in a specific area. (We did not discern similar developments in education.)

Some reporting suggests conflicts regarding which policy areas should be emphasized, and how to do so. For example, an *NBC* report described the scene at SiX's 2017 annual meeting as follows:

> Lawmakers from places like New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and Arkansas bickered
> openly with those pitching policies that have had success in California and New York.
> Tensions also emerged between state representatives from rural districts and urban
> areas, as well as between legislators wanting to talk mostly about social and
> environmental issues and others focused primarily on economic concerns.

Again, we interpret such tensions as reflecting larger challenges and ongoing debates facing the Democratic Party and other actors on the political left. In the same article, Nick Rathod (Executive Director at the time) admitted there was a divide between SiX and the Democratic party at large,

with the subtext being SiX was more progressive. Interviewees also confirmed challenges around agenda development, perhaps especially in education.

SiX's Roles vis-à-vis Educational Policy

Compared with the aforementioned priority areas, SiX's education policy focus was weaker. In the next section, we provide an explanation. First, we describe SiX's roles in education.

Albeit with lesser intensity and clarity, SiX's roles in the educational policy area mirrored those in other areas – i.e., they: served as *connector/convener* (e.g., by hosting town halls); developed *policy briefs* and otherwise provided *research supports* for legislators; and provided *customized supports* (e.g., responding to legislators' queries and needs).

Regarding research support, for example, a current employee described legislative research SiX conducted on legislators' behalf, listing numerous topics and (as a preface) emphasizing SiX's flexibility; it is "built to be able to respond to what's happening in the country and different states." Accordingly, from his perspective, SiX does not "push a specific agenda" but instead aims at "meeting [legislators] where they are" with tailored supports. SiX, he stressed, is not comprised of "education policy advocates." Instead, its focus is:

> coming directly from state legislators… [SiX is] really just trying to provide supports to the legislators … who are the champions of these issues – and where we have connections, or where we have resource capacity, or where we can connect legislators to what's happening in other states.

A legislator participant expressed appreciation for SiX's connector role. SiX reached out to him "about a tele town hall" about education policy also including his state's Governor. He described this as a "unique opportunity" to communicate with a large audience on education issues, and interface with the governor. He was impressed with how it was run. He also noted SiX can and does play a vital role in connecting legislators across states. He said he would "love that experience personally" of being able to "hear the ideas going on" in different states and suggested SiX is uniquely positioned to provide this service.

We reviewed and classified SiX website (blog and pressroom) and Facebook posts from January 1, 2019 through July 22, 2020. We noted 0 education-centered website posts and 6 education-related ones, out of a total of 69 posts (8.7%), and 1 education-centered press room post, of 9 in total. Posts in other areas (e.g., health, the economy, voting rights) were more common (see Tables 1-2 in Appendix B). Likewise, just 5% of SiX's Facebook posts were education-centered or -related (see Tables 3-4 in Appendix B).

Attention toward education policy was frequently directed toward pre-Kindergarten or higher education. In higher education, among SiX's "top ten progressive policies" (State Innovation Exchange, 2015) were "expanding access to higher education" and "tackling the student debt crisis." SiX also showed interest in state-level Title IX legislation; per Joyce (2017), SiX may have been connected to a Massachusetts bill "mandating better sexual assault training for campus staff," and was discussing potential legislation elsewhere SiX also showed some focus on "[Making] Pre-K universal." SiX's *Progressive Economic Blueprint for the States* (SiX, 2020c), likewise, highlighted policies that would enhance college affordability and universalize Pre-K. Still, SiX's overall impact even in these areas was unclear; we did not uncover evidence that SiX authored or influenced sponsorship or passage of legislation.

We saw even less substantive K-12 policy engagement. For instance, their *Blueprint* was silent on ongoing state-level K-12 policy issues, such as school choice programs (a strong, continuous focus of adversaries) or increasing K-12 funding levels and enhancing equity (SiX, 2020c). Regarding school choice, they did note progressives have needed to "fend off the worst excesses of corporate

interests," and that "Voucher and charter school bills proposed in New Mexico, Rhode Island, Montana, and Illinois all stalled or were rejected" in 2015 (State Innovation Exchange, 2015, p. 11); however, it was unclear what SiX's role had been when these bills were under consideration.

Some educational policy focus is evident in some SiX "end of session" reports. For example, SiX's 2016 report included commentary at each educational level (early childhood, K-12, and higher education). It also highlighted "a new and holistic approach to education," the "community school model," as "one that recognizes the importance of communities as stakeholders and puts local educators and parents at the heart of the decision-making process" (State Innovation Exchange, 2016, p. 28). The 2017 report, by contrast, did not feature education (SiX, 2017).

Explaining SiX's (Limited) Education-Related Focus

Some participants reported challenges building alignment around a particular education policy vision. These challenges in part reflected a diversity of "invested stakeholders" – including some, like teachers' unions, wielding "outsized influence" – and an associated diversity of ideas regarding what constitutes desirable education policy. Broadly, as an interviewee noted, recently on the left "there just [hasn't been] a lot of alignment…in terms of policy solutions" in education. The upshot, one reflected, was that education was "certainly part of the mix" at SiX, but that it had not yet developed "as coherent a vision of education policy – and of where we wanted the country to go in terms of education – as we had in some other areas."

Teachers' unions – the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) – have been (from the beginning) among SiX's core supporters, and were described as "very enthusiastic." They have always had a board presence and been key to SiX's funding (both by providing funding and by being "influential with a lot of the individual donors"). The teachers' unions were viewed by one as promoting a "very traditional school- and teacher-focused model;" given unions' main focus, another wondered aloud "how critical of the current educational establishment they can be." Here we noted the use of "educational establishment," a term more often associated with conservative thinking and rhetoric but perhaps increasingly wending into others' calculus too. In any case, the unions' positions reportedly were frequently different from other funders and partners, who showed more interest in new educational models, technological disruption, etc. (e.g., one interviewee differentiated their positions from those held by people "like Arne Duncan…Mark Zuckerberg").

Related, as noted, SiX enjoyed close relationships with the Obama administration, which was "not necessarily…a strength on education policy": the Obama admin was "seen as not particularly supportive of teachers' unions, at least for a typical Democratic president." Indeed, the Obama administration generally took a centrist or neoliberal approach to education (e.g., see its massive funding competition, *Race to the Top*; Malin & Winner, 2022). Thus, from a teachers' union perspective, this connection led to SiX "being [seen as] overly centrist and insufficiently labor-supporting." Such tensions were strong enough that SiX officials spent time considering "how to be funded to do education work outside the teachers' unions." Still, this participant stressed not wanting to make the unions out as "a villain" but instead just make plain there was "always a tension in terms of education policy" requiring attention.

Notwithstanding, some outlines of a vision and focus appeared, though not everyone felt inspired about it. SiX, according to one, has tended to "look at education as a comprehensive thing, and effectively a public good." Related to this, another opined, SiX has been "pretty clear" around its support for public education and the need for robust school funding, and for collective bargaining rights. Another participant described this as an emphasis on "bread and butter stuff."

Education was also an area wherein policy could be – and sometimes was – tied to SiX's broader focus on "economic interests," on strengthening the middle class, etc. For instance, a focus

on protecting the ability of employees (including teachers) to collectively bargain seemed to fit their vision of promoting broad prosperity. Yet, one participant appraised their education policy footprint as being "pretty primitive;" Nonetheless, he concluded this was "okay" because SiX was supporting policy – like adequate funding, the right to bargain, etc. – that is a "necessary precondition of the educational reform we want." This implied the eventual need for larger, bolder education policy changes, but first the necessary to protect education against conservative-led existential threats (i.e., divestment in and privatization of education). Still, there were regretful notes in appraisals like the following: "in terms of education policy…[SiX is] pretty mainstream, union-based."

Discussion

This study has elucidated SiX's purposes and gauged its educational policy focus. If SiX possessed a coherent educational vision and agenda, we reasoned, they would be favorably positioned to advance their preferred ideas and policies and counter undesirable ones. If, by contrast, they were more focused on other areas or failed to pursue a coherent agenda, we would expect to see continued conservative cross-state education policy dominance. Now we revisit findings, describe implications, and make recommendations.

Broadly, we conclude SiX is not yet serving as a formidable antidote to cross-state conservative policy dominance in education. Summary points in relation to the features/lessons advanced by Hertel-Fernandez (2019) are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Findings: Summary Points, in Comparison to Adversaries (ALEC/Troika)

Summary Point	Supportive evidence (sample)	ALEC/Troika Comparison
Education policy is not a prominent or consistent focus for SiX.	"I don't think that SiX had as coherent a vision of education policy and of where [they] wanted the country to go in terms of education as we did in some other areas." "Education policy in general was not one of the issues that we took on with a heavy focus on advancing specific pieces of legislation in specific states."	ALEC has dedicated Education and Workforce Development Task Force, with clear mission and many documented instances of policy enactment.
Education policy is not clearly or regularly connected to SiX's dominant focal areas (e.g., its economic agenda).	Scarce mentions of education and its fit within broader SiX agenda. Interview participants did not readily make connections between, for example, their foci on broadened economic prosperity of protecting democracy and how these interrelate with education policy.	Education policies advocated by ALEC clearly fit into dominant pro-market, pro-competition, anti-tax focus.

Summary Point	Supportive evidence (sample)	ALEC/Troika Comparison
An emphasis on education policy, relative to some other areas, is not evident in terms of SiX staff positions or other forms of infrastructure.	No dedicated staff positions related to education.	Education policy focus supported by considerable infrastructure (task force, network of think tanks, and advocacy organizations).
No clear evidence that SiX advanced particular education policies for promotion in the states, or that they were particularly active or effective at promoting progressive education policy.	Zero instances of news reporting or SiX press releases (etc.) highlighting a SiX role in advancing or passing education legislation. "All the issues that [SiX] work on are brought to SiX by legislators. So it's really the legislators' vision."	Many education policies promoted, passed, and spread.

To be sure, SiX has shown some focus on education; indeed, all primary SiX functions are evident in education, and we noted elevated SiX interest in certain reforms or sectors (e.g., universal pre-K). Most impressively, SiX demonstrated a *unique capacity* as a "bridge" or "hub" for state legislators and partners in education, just as in other areas. Favorably, SiX has also enjoyed major educational funders/partners since its onset.

We also revealed and explained certain issues SiX has faced regarding educational policy; we conclude these issues largely reflect challenges within the Democratic party. As has the party, SiX has struggled to develop a clear, guiding education vision and associated policies to champion. Education is an area in which Democrats have, of late, often overlapped with Republicans: federally, both major parties have "use(d) the issue of education to reposition themselves ideologically and to appeal to moderate voters" (McGuinn, 2016, p. 4). This continued into the Obama administration, which embraced such policies as school choice and teacher evaluation reform that have also, at state levels, been vigorously pursued by conservative interests (albeit usually in more aggressive forms).

Although SiX's lack of clarity around education does not severely hinder its *facilitation* function, it does diminish its ability to *lead* progressive education change; SiX could serve as a convener and provide bespoke legislative supports, but – absent a clear vision – their ability to *drive* policymaking was limited. SiX also struggled to connect educational policy to their core focus areas (fostering widely shared economic prosperity, strengthening democracy). Overall, we sensed notes of regret as participants appraised SiX's footprint in educational policy as being "pretty mainstream," "primitive," or "union-based."

When an organization like SiX primarily focuses on *state-level* policy, it seems a major omission if it lacks a clear, compelling educational vision. Ultimately, a weakness in this arena – relative to conservative networks' superior strength and clarity – portends continued conservative policy dominance. Unless or until the left develops formidable education policy-focused counter(s), we expect to see more of the same: a flurry of conservative education policy reform proposals, with some becoming law, and continued moves toward public disinvestment, privatization, and marketization of education.

Broadly, then, this study yields novel scholarly insights into educational policy influence and mobility at the state (i.e., subnational) level (McKenzie & Aikens, 2020), and supports prediction about the nature and prospects of future state-level policy mobility: We know a good deal about the policies favored by SiX's adversaries and can assume their continuation on/near this trajectory. We also know SiX has been identified as a top potential adversary, and we now can see that is it at quite

some distance from fulfilling its potential in the educational realm. For scholars and interested stakeholders, too, our study has yielded provisional insights into several key *challenges* (e.g., unclarity of vision; diverse stakeholder preferences) and *opportunities* that exist. Next, we turn to these areas of opportunity.

Accordingly, our analyses serve not only to validate SiX's unique roles in connecting state legislators and enhancing state legislators' work, but also allow us to offer suggestions for how SiX or another progressive state-focused policy organization might proceed in the education policy area. Indeed, several participants shared strong ideas, so we suggest the task, largely, is to fortify and operationalize the strongest ones. (This is easier said than done, of course). For example, one participant spoke of how SiX generally saw education as "a public good" that needed to be supported accordingly. Likewise, two participants spoke broadly about the promise of progressive federalism (Gerken & Revesz, 2017); in their view, this meant rolling out (at state and local levels) strong progressive policies and letting people experience their material benefits. Such an approach, we believe, is applicable to education. Other participants observed that SiX has been consistently strong in protecting labor rights. These could become strong foundations and are consistent with a progressive educational vision. However, they seem to need further development, so next we share some ideas.

Broadly, as Rathod argued, SiX and like organizations should pursue policies consistent with the belief that government can be *a force for good*. Applied to education, this means a strategy of public investment in education; empirical evidence supports such a strategy (see Horsford et al., 2019; Baker, 2021). Moreover, one should understand conservative adversaries have worked hard to undermine these strategies, to disinvest in the public sector and rather to insert the logic of markets, competition, and accountability into these realms (Phillips-Fein, 2009). These efforts have been successful, indeed attracting some Democratic politicians. This is all the more reason, we suggest, to return with passion toward supporting robust investments in *social infrastructure* such as public schools. High quality, well-supported schools are indeed part of the common good: "children need to be nurtured in a caring and democratic school and society" (Horsford et al., 2019, p. 213). The focus, then, should be on "adequately and, even better, generously fund public education to provide all students with the best services possible" (Malin et al., 2021). Such services might be provided within innovative models, which sometimes seemed on SiX's radar, such as community schools and democratic community accountability models.

Certainly, there are diverse formulations of what constitutes progressive educational policy, and indeed it is healthy for SiX and partners to continuously engage in conversation and debate and arrive at their own conclusions. We have merely scratched the surface of what a vision might include. SiX could, for example, differentiate from its adversaries in several other areas, including around the teaching of history and sexuality education, educational standards and accountability approaches. Regarding history, SiX could assert children should be "taught the truth about their nation – its wonders and blemishes" (Lakoff, 2014, p. 140). They could also argue, in line with Mehta and Fine (2019), that students need to learn deeply in all areas, identifying problems and exploring solutions; indeed, it may be that our shared future is at stake, since schools "lay the foundation of our economy and our path to equity" (p. 400). Here, too, are examples of how an education policy focus might connect to SiX's core foci around the economy, equity, and democracy. As Darling-Hammond (n.p.) argues, "At the end of the day, the public welfare is best served when investments in schools enable all young people to become responsible citizens prepared to participate effectively in the political, social, and economic life of their democracy."

Strong examples are available. One could, for instance, look at Bernie Sanders' or Elizabeth Warren's platform regarding education. Both articulated progressive visions and translated these into specifics (albeit with a federal focus). One can also sample state and local-level education platforms

(e.g., Progressive Dane, n.d.), showing how general commitments lead to specific policies along several key dimensions (e.g., funding, labor rights, choice, accountability).

Of course, our reasoning could be flawed, and our recommendations are certainly incomplete. It may be, for instance, that elite-driven state policy on the left is simply antithetical to progressivism, and that progressives should thus focus their energies toward grassroots networks that can influence state education policy. Meanwhile, perhaps the left should focus on disempowering such elites (e.g., eliminating dark money from politics, changing policy regarding legislation authoring and disclosure, etc.). Although we do not take this position, we think a "both-and" makes sense. In other words, the left should earnestly work to strengthen its cross-state policy advocacy vis-à-vis SiX and related organizations, and meanwhile grapple with whether and how to it might shift the political milieu in the future so state-level policy influence and advocacy is more democratic in nature. Here we have taken a pragmatic stance, following Hertel-Fernandez (2019), given our understanding of the politics of U.S. subnational education policy as it currently exists, and shared our perspectives regarding how it might be reshaped.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A

Appendix - Interview Guide

Note: We intended to conduct semi-structured interviews. Accordingly, some of the questions listed below may not be asked or might be asked somewhat differently than listed below, and follow-up or clarification questions may be asked, depending upon responses and other factors (e.g., timing, interviewees' body language) while interviews are underway.

Note 2. These questions were designed for a broader study of various policy-influencing organizations. For the interviews completed in the study reported here, the questions were adjusted so that "organization" as indicated in brackets in the questions below refer to SiX, and "other organization" in brackets (item 18) was replaced/exemplified by ALEC, SPN, and AFP.

Questions for Persons Who Work at Policy-Influencing Organization

1. Please tell [[me/us]] about yourself, including your current role and how you have arrived with [[organization]].
2. Why did you choose to work with [[organization]]?
3. What are some of the major current projects you are working on, and how are they going?
4. What do you see as the primary purpose/s of [[organization]]?
5. To what extent and in what ways do you see your organization as being similar to or different than [[other organization]]?
6. What do you see as current areas of strength of [[organization]]?
7. To what metrics or success stories, etc., might you point that would speak to the strength of the organization relative to its aims?
8. What do you see as the top current areas of challenge of [[organization]]?
9. To what metrics or stories might you point, in terms of demonstrating areas of challenge or need that [[organization]] faces/is facing?
10. How is [[organization]] currently funded? Does current funding seem in your view to be adequate to the tasks that you would like to see [[organization]] carry out?
11. What do you see as the top priorities of [[organization]] presently?
12. How have the priorities shifted or been negotiated over time, in your view?
13. What, in your view, is the vision of [[organization]] in terms of education policy? [[follow-up: perhaps break into pre-K, K-12, and higher education]]
14. To what extent, and in what ways, has education policy been an area of priority for [[organization]]?
15. How would you say education policy compares to other areas in terms of policy priorities?
16. Are there currently any plans, initiatives, and/or internal debates you might be able to share, concerning education policy as a potential focus?
17. Could you point us to any examples of ways/instances in which [[organization]] has influenced education policy in some way? [e.g., new legislation, individual or cross-state efforts to influence education policy, etc.]
18. Do you currently think [[organization]] provides a viable counter to [[other organization]] in terms of influencing or spreading state-level education policies? If yes, how come? If not, does the organization discuss ways to rectify?

Questions for Legislators or Other Stakeholders (e.g., Partners or Donors) Who Have Some experiences with Policy-Influencing Organization

1. How did you first come into contact with [[organization]]?
2. Tell us about your experience working with [[organization]]. In what ways have they shaped or supported your work?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages that you have experienced, or that you might anticipate, around working with [[organization]]?
4. What impact does [[organization]] have, in your experience or in your observations? What role does [[organization]] play in our society?
5. Would you recommend other legislators working with [[organization]]? Why or why not?
6. If you were asked by [[organization]] for advice on how it could be more influential and beneficial to policymakers, what might you share?
7. What have been your experiences with respect to working in the area of education policy? What are your interests and needs in this area, and has [[organization]] provided any assistance or support in this area?

Appendix B

Table 1

An Analysis of SiX's Website Posts for 2019

2019	Education		Non-Education			
	Education Centered	Education Related	Health (e.g. abortion, sexual assault, health care cost)	Economy (e.g. working people wages, paid leave)	Demographics (e.g. census)	Others (e.g. support for progressive priorities, voting rights, and training)
THE SiX BLOG	0	5 (affordability of education, better policy outcomes on education, access to early and higher education, public education system)	6	12	1	11
SiX PRESS ROOM	1 (address student debt crisis)	0	5	0	1	2

Retrieved July 21, 2020 from: https://stateinnovation.org/press-room/ and https://stateinnovation.org/blog/\

Table 2

An Analysis of SiX's Website Posts for 2020

2020	Education		Non-Education					
	Education Centered	Education Related (as part of progressive agenda)	Social Justice (e.g. anti-racism, solidarity)	Covid-19 (e.g. its impact on economy, democracy, and Census)	Health (e.g. abortion, affordability)	Economy (e.g. wages, tax)	Agriculture (e.g. food)	Others (e.g. Census, gun safety, vote)
THE SiX BLOG	0	1 (prioritize public education)	5	5	9	7	1	7
SiX PRESS ROOM	1 (more investment in education)	0	0	2	5	0	1	1

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Table 3

An Analysis of SiX's Facebook Posts for 2019

2019	Education		Others			
	Education Centered	Education Related (e.g. part of progressive agenda for state legislators)	Health (e.g. abortion, health care policies, black maternal health week)	Economy (e.g. paid family leave, minimum wage, tax, equal pay, affordable housing)	Election (e.g. voter registrations, voting rights)	Others (immigrants' rights, holidays celebration, gun bills, climate change, agriculture, social justice, internships, census, food safety)
SiX's Facebook Posts	21 (college debt, free community college, equity in higher education, school funding, end school "lunch shaming", school funding, sex education curriculum, access to quality schools)	11 (health on college campus, sex ed in Ohio is under attack by anti-abortion lawmakers, budget for public education, higher education and skill training)	82	140	25	112

State Innovation Exchange (n.d.).

Table 4

An Analysis of SiX's Facebook Posts for 2020

2020	Education		Non-Education					
	Education Centered	Education Related (as part of progressive agenda)	Social Justice (e.g. anti-racism, transgender rights)	Covid-19 (e.g. its impact on economy, democracy, and food, state response)	Health (e.g. abortion, affordability, abortion)	Economy (e.g. wages, tax, paid sick day)	Election (safe and accessible vote)	Others (e.g. Census, DACA, agriculture, house, update for state legislators' agenda)
SiX's Facebook Posts	3 (REACH, The Student Athlete Endorsement Act, Arizona education association)	1(Interview of AZ legislative session)	30	48	29	27	26	79

State Innovation Exchange. (n.d.).

Note: REACH: The Responsible Education for Adolescent and Children's Health Act in Illinois.

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