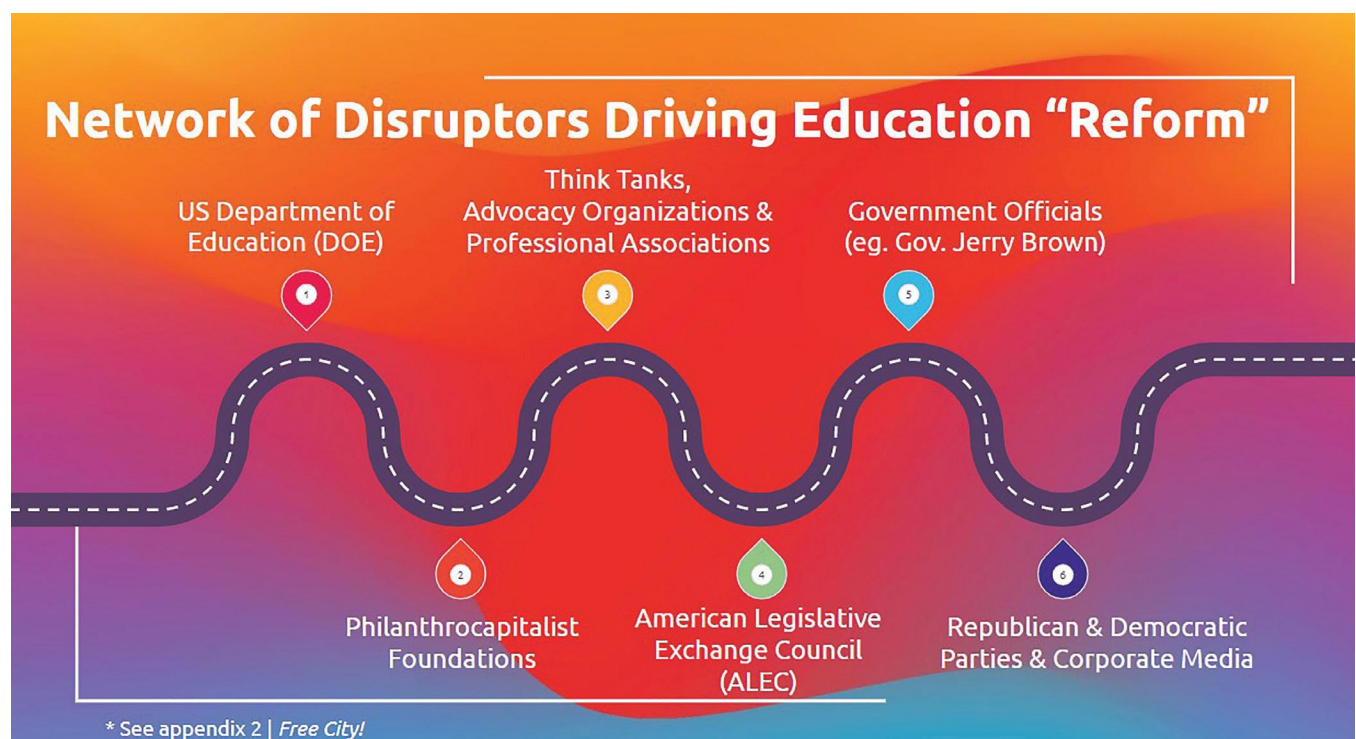


Resisting Decades of “Reform” Movement Disruption in the California Community Colleges

by Debbie Klein, President, Faculty Association of California Community Colleges

Throughout its relatively short history, essentially 1983 to the present, corporate disruption could count on the major media to accept its claims uncritically. The assertion that American education was “failing” was taken as a given, with no need for additional probing. Press releases from billionaire-funded organizations were treated as research studies; think tank reports underwritten by the Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation, the Walton Foundation, and others with an agenda—papers that had never undergone peer review by independent scholars—were dutifully reported as news or as results from actual research. (Ravitch, 2020, p. 76)

Why have so many advocacy organizations whose decision-makers have little, if any, direct experience within the California Community Colleges successfully determined the policy and funding direction of the system over the past few decades? In 2020, I began researching a range of California-based advocacy organizations that have redefined the mission for the California Community Colleges to meet the goals of the so-called education “reform” agenda. As education historian and former U.S. assistant secretary of education Diane Ravitch has revealed through her body of work, the unhidden intention of these policies has been





to defund, disrupt, and dismantle public education. Compelled by Ravitch's argument in *Slaying Goliath: The Passionate Resistance to Privatization and the Fight to Save America's Public Schools* that "the resistance" has successfully defeated the reform agenda in K-12, I believe it is time for a successful resistance movement within the California Community Colleges. The purpose of this article is to call out the educational "reform" movement's agenda and plant the seed for an organized resistance to the policies that have been defunding, disrupting, and dismantling the California Community Colleges for the past two decades.

The "reform"-influenced advocacy groups are regularly granted seats on key statewide committees determining the direction of the California Community Colleges. These groups wield significant influence over the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, the system's regulatory organization, and the Board of Governors, the decision-makers (appointed by the governor) for the system. While these decision-making bodies are required to consult with system practitioners, the majority of employees within the Chancellor's Office and members of the Board of Governors are not practitioners who work within the colleges or directly with students.

The leadership and staff of the "reform"-influenced advocacy groups have little or no representation or input from system practitioners. Over the past two decades, these groups have successfully pushed the system-wide regulatory and governance bodies to

incorporate so-called "reform" policies into the California Community Colleges. While these groups may intend to help students, several of their most influential policies resulted in diminished or stagnant student access and success rates over the past two decades.

Although the goals of these advocacy groups vary and span advocacy areas beyond the California Community Colleges, they all have funding sources in common, including the foundations that Diane Ravitch describes as "corporate disruptors" of public education. Ravitch has chosen not to use the term "reformers" because these groups have not successfully reformed anything, but have disrupted and dismantled public education. A well-coordinated series of campaigns spanning four decades, the "reform"/disruptor movement has aimed to privatize public education and demolish the principle that public education is a common good that belongs to the public.

Within the past two decades, the "reform" groups have coveted and pursued the big prize of the California Community Colleges. System-wide decision-makers and state legislators, influenced by these groups, have either knowingly embraced or been duped by the "reform" groups' bag of tricks. Following the playbook of the "reform" movement, the "reform"-influenced advocacy groups, system-wide leaders, and members of the legislature have perpetuated the false premise that the California Community Colleges are failing, faculty are to blame, and the system needs "saving" in the form of standardized policies.

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The Disruptors of Public Education

Diane Ravitch’s recent book, focusing on K-12 public education, argues that the story of the corporate disruptors, including the “reform”-influenced advocacy groups, is the story of failed experiments on people’s children, resulting in closed schools and millions of students who suffered through decades of No Child Left Behind-style policies. The disruptors are government officials, including California’s past Governor Jerry Brown, philanthropists, ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council), conservative think tanks, centrist neoliberal think tanks, and activist organizations. Their collective goal has been to disrupt public education through campaigns to privatize public schools, destroy unions, tear apart communities, and attack teacher professionalism (Ravitch, 2020, p. 5).

Corporate disruptors do not respect the teaching profession. They think that anyone can teach. Disruptors want to eliminate any job security for teachers, so teachers will live in fear of termination and thus be easier to control. They believe that schools with low test scores have many “incompetent” teachers—protected by their unions—who are acting against the best interests of their students. (Ravitch, 2020, p. 29)

The disruptor movement has strategically demonized faculty to accomplish its political and economic goals of privatizing public schools, lowering taxes, lowering government spending, transforming public education into a free-market enterprise, and disrupting for the sake of disrupting. This movement was never about teaching and learning.

Under the guise of student success and equity, these groups have brought the California Community Col-

leges a range of system-wide reforms, including the following: transfer pathway reform, the Student Success Act, guided pathways, remedial education redesign, an untested funding formula with performance-based funding, Calbright, the failed online community college experiment and pet project of former Governor Brown, and most recently, a proposed student transfer reform act (see figure 1).

While these policies were created by the “reform”-influenced advocacy groups, the California Community Colleges uniquely benefit from over 30 years of democratic governance processes through which the statewide academic senate and local senates work collaboratively with system stakeholders to implement statewide policies to equitably serve students. The system also benefits from over 40 years of faculty and staff collective bargaining within the 72 districts. If any statewide policy succeeds, it is due to the hard work of the faculty in collaboration with system partners. Arguably, however, these policies have caused more disruption than increased student access and success.

Before the “reform”-influenced advocacy groups took hold of the California Community Colleges, the system was not a failure. Despite being woefully underfunded, rates of student transfer, job placement and advancement, and enduring community support demonstrated the remarkable achievements of the largest system of public education in the nation. The 115 colleges have done more with less than any other system of public education. Over the past few decades, however, the “reform” policies have created decades of unnecessary chaos, defunded the faculty, created an enormous workload distracting faculty from teaching and learning, made no progress on the per-student funding rate

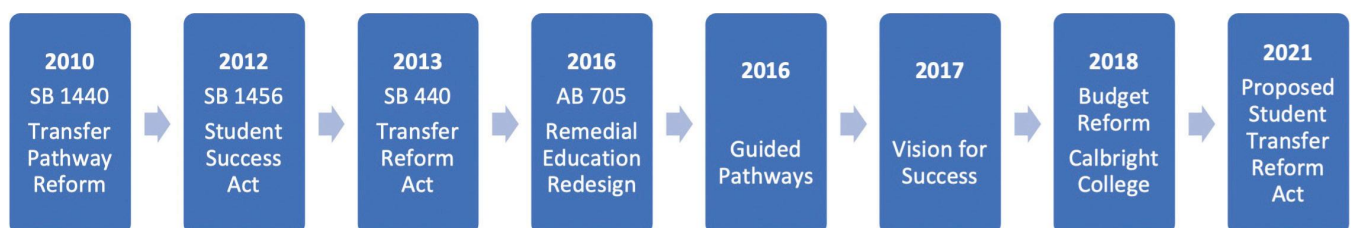


Figure 1: Some key disruptor-funded policies in the California Community Colleges (2010-2021)

(the lowest rate of all segments for a system that has the largest and most diverse mission), and shut out the very students who need the community colleges the most.

While the multiple and overlapping crises of 2020 heightened the urgency to transform the California Community Colleges into a more antiracist and equitable system, the disruptor policies (already firmly in place) were not sufficiently designed to create a more equitable public education system despite their claims to the contrary. Cloaked in “success” and “equity” rhetoric, these policies have defunded the California Community Colleges and turned away the very students they claim to help. Following the pattern of the failed “reform” efforts throughout the nation, the “reform” movement has defunded and derailed the California Community Colleges. The metrics have not improved since the implementation of the new policies, goals, and vision. The equity gaps have persisted and, in many instances, increased. In other words, the “reform” policies have not succeeded in making progress toward the system’s diversity, equity, and inclusion goals.

Truth and Reconciliation

The practitioners, students, and leaders within the California Community Colleges must engage in honest conversations about the policies and funding mechanisms that have gone awry. The South African truth and reconciliation model of restorative justice after the end of apartheid aimed to heal relationships between aggrieved parties by uncovering facts, distinguishing truth from lies, and providing for acknowledgement of the truth, forgiveness, and healing. The following approaches, suggested by Ravitch’s research, would help us become a more equitable system for students and those who serve students, colleges, and communities. We need to come together to engage in the following efforts to heal:

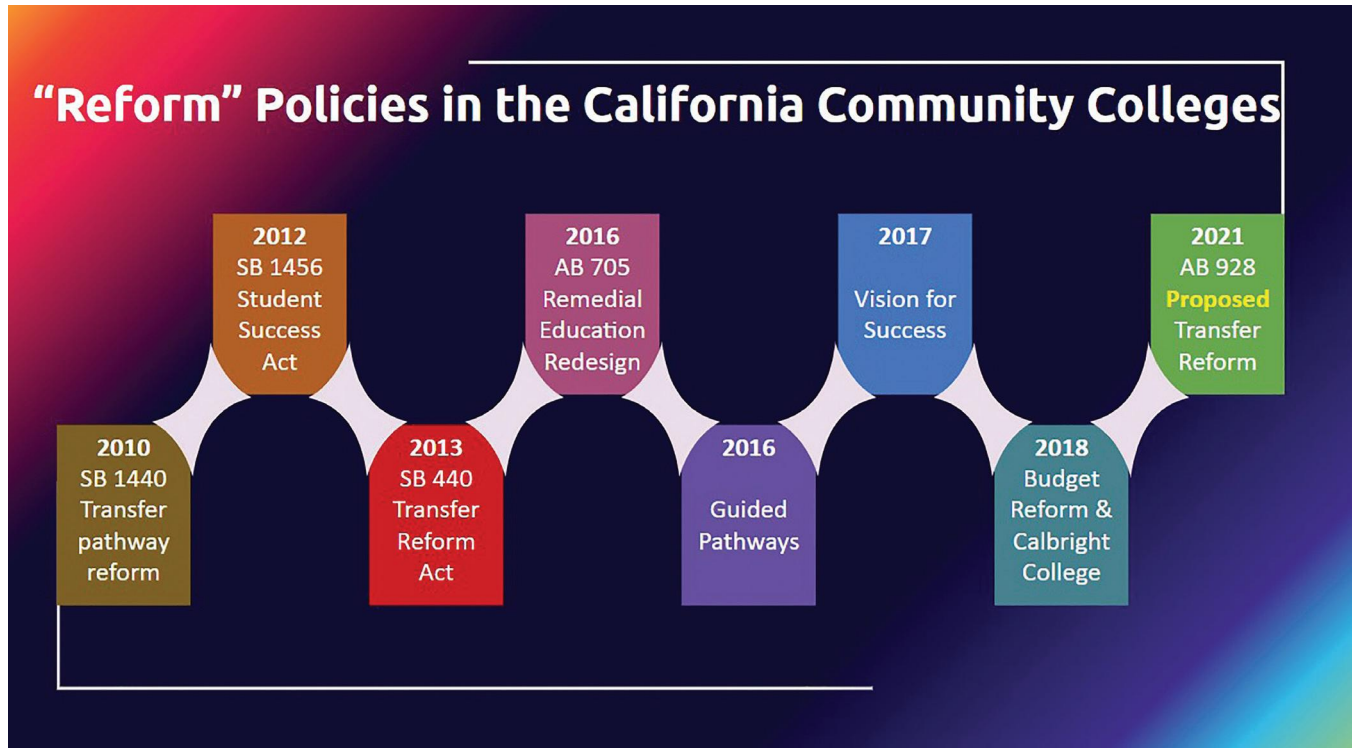
- ▶ Explore the truth about the policies and funding mechanisms that have proven ineffective for students and colleges.
- ▶ Approach the creation of new policies with humility, taking the time to build consensus and practitioner support for any new initiatives.
- ▶ Discontinue the creation of sweeping one-size-fits-all policies for every college, an approach borrowed from the corporate model of standardization and the assumption that all changes must be scalable.
- ▶ Support policies and practices developed by colleges for the specific communities they serve, recognizing the value of diversity, pluralism, and college-specific improvements.
- ▶ Reimagine how to authentically engage system stakeholders by prioritizing the perspectives and experiences of system practitioners—faculty, staff, and administrators—in the early stages and throughout the creation of policy changes.

“The Resistance” to the Education “Reform” Agenda is Winning in K-12!

“The resistance,” argues Ravitch, has publicized the failures and harms of the disruption policies and put forth a vision of what a good public education looks like—a vision acknowledging the individuality of each student, conceiving of education far more broadly than outcomes and completion agendas, and addressing the needs of students to grow in knowledge, critical thinking, character, and civic engagement (Ravitch, 2020, p. 75). “The resistance” is composed of motivated and organized faculty, staff, administrators, parents, community members, scholars, religious leaders, social justice organizations, and teachers’ organizations and unions. Additionally, the resistance has gained the support of several key conservative and neoliberal think tanks, scholars, and organizations that had previously supported the so-called reform movement. Several of these groups have published articles reflecting on the decades of failed disruptor policies, which they themselves had funded.

National civil rights organizations also have been representing communities and schools to preserve democratically controlled public education. For example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Education Law Center (ELC), and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) have constructed and won countless cases throughout the United States over the past five years. The ELC has represented the plaintiff-class of over 300,000 K-12 students in the *Abbott v. Burke* case in New Jersey. One of the nation’s most

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successful efforts to improve public education of poor children and children of color, the rulings directed the implementation of adequate K-12 foundational funding among other systemic improvements.

In the spring of 2018, thousands of teachers went on strike to demand fair working conditions, respect, and successfully reclaimed the narrative about teachers. In West Virginia, Oklahoma, Colorado, Kentucky, Arizona, and California, teachers made significant gains and changed the narrative from “bad” teachers to community heroes who care about students and should not have to struggle to make ends meet. Additionally, a range of scholars, activists, and community members continue to shine a light on dark money-sponsored political campaigns to privatize education, demon-

strating that public exposure and political action have effectively squelched predatory billionaires who aim to undermine public education and democracy (Ravitch, 2020, p. 217).

The time is now to build our own resistance movement. California Community College practitioners, students, and stakeholders must make an effort to engage in honest discussion about the billionaire-funded “reform” policies that have steered the California Community Colleges off course for decades. Committed to the California Community Colleges as a public good that belongs to every student who can benefit from the education we offer, let us work together to stop the “reform”-influenced advocacy groups from defunding and derailing our community colleges. ■

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