

COMMENTARY

K-12 Schools: We Have Our Own 'Brexit' Problem

By Adam Kirk Edgerton

To those of us who work in traditional public education west of the Atlantic, the Brexit cry of "Throw the bums out!" is very familiar. American distrust of government has long been flooding downstream toward our public schools.

Bureaucracy, whether in the European Union or the teachers' union, is the convenient scapegoat. As long as *anything* changes, preferably as quickly as possible, all will be well. Impatience is a virtue. Brexit and American school reform are similarly impulsive and destructive, offering too little thought about what will replace a once-unified system.

While the British cut off their noses to spite their faces through their vote to leave the European Union, Americans need only look at education reform as a microcosm of what happens when we experiment without sufficient planning. The increase of charter schools illustrates the inefficiency that results when we throw away a unified system and operate two separate halves of a whole. Parallel systems—traditional public schools and charter schools—are competing for the same resources. The result is a war over funding and a vast disparity in educational outcomes.

In the past two decades, Democrats and Republicans have come together most frequently around a shared education reform agenda. After the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, with bipartisan support, Congress enacted laws to empower school choice and put muzzles on unions. The Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, the 2015 successor to No Child Left Behind, increases authorized funding for charter schools. With such policies, Democrats, much like the recently resigned British Prime Minister David Cameron, have signed off on political compromises that now undermine the very constituencies supporting them. Bipartisan reforms have reduced union membership and split the once-unified Democratic base of teachers into pro- and anti-charter camps.

Both Brexit and charter school proponents deployed thinly veiled propaganda to achieve their goals. Those behind the effort to quickly open new charter schools cast union and government bureaucracies as the villains, with the claim that they impose unnecessary rules and choke off innovation. Teachers

[← Back to Story](#)

Blended by Design

Diagnostic and monitoring,
whole class and small group instruction,
and personalized learning.



 i-Ready™

[Learn more](#)

have been cast as corrupt with their generous pensions, plush summer vacations, and idle time in "rubber rooms" for those removed from the classroom. Traditional public schools are typically described as "broken" and "dysfunctional."

Sounds very much like Congress. The fragmentation of our political parties, as well as our public schools, has systematically discouraged collaboration and compromise. Our elected representatives, like school leaders, are subject to a vicious churn cycle. They both come into power by promising the impossible—the repeal of Obamacare or the eradication of poverty through education alone. So we fire them regularly, impatient to see different results and rising test scores.

But progress takes time and compromise—qualities the American public currently loathes. This impatience stems from decades of increased accountability through testing, mixed results from increased school choice, and other educational fads that have failed to close the achievement gap.

Students suffer in **cities like Detroit**, where a charter explosion caused a 35 percent student-turnover rate. In Lawrence, Mass., where I taught under state takeover, some schools couldn't keep a principal for more than 10 months. Most disturbingly, in states like North Carolina, charters may be increasing school segregation. In too many states, a district can shift operations to charters as haphazardly as the leadership turnover in the British Conservative Party during its selection of the next prime minister candidate: In a matter of days, Michael Gove backstabbed former ally and front-runner Boris Johnson, announcing he would vie for the title before Theresa May overtook Gove and Andrea Leadsom to become the new prime minister. Turnover, rather than increasing accountability, is slowly but surely hurting our public institutions."

"The fragmentation of our political parties, as well as our public schools, has systematically discouraged collaboration and compromise."

So what can we do to fix the chaos?

All institutions great and small require a steady hand to establish public trust. To foster stability, we must give our leaders longer to achieve results. We must critique them using broader and better metrics. Principals, like teachers, improve over time, particularly since certain legislative changes turned their managerial role into one that requires instructional leadership, political maneuvering, and extensive legal and statistical knowledge.

As Brexit shows, a referendum should not determine policy—or its fate. Unfortunately, this is still the case with many school choice laws. Educators, administrators, and parents must begin the slow process of restoring faith in our schools and, by extension, those who run them. An unconditional mistrust of leadership, however well earned, is not a solution. Thinking that anyone can run a school—or a country—through simple common sense is not a solution.

Well-meaning reforms have shifted politicians and educators away from a sustainable consensus. Both charter and regular



After a divisive referendum campaign, Britain voted to leave the European Union on June 25.
—Associated Press

MORE OPINION



[Visit Opinion.](#)

public school supporters must now forge imperfect compromises to bridge our differences. Market-based reforms continue to have broad bipartisan support, but such support is weakening in its zeal and rigidity. The window of compromise is open. By working together, opposing parties can show shared governance at its best and repudiate direct democracy at its worst.

Adam Kirk Edgerton is a former high school teacher. Previously, he served as a director for the U.S. Department of Education's Upward Bound program, a college-preparation initiative for low-income students. This fall, he enters a Ph.D. program in education policy at the University of Pennsylvania.

Follow the Education Week Commentary section on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).