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Gone before you know it: urban school reform and the short life of the Education Action Zone initiative[1]

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This essay explores the fluctuations in and short-lived nature of urban school reform through a study of the Education Action Zone (EAZ) programme of Britain's New Labour government. Using the notion of civic capacity as a theoretical framework, the essay looks at this reform from the perspectives of its government proponents, critics outside of government and those who work within one such zone in an economically distressed borough of London given the pseudonym of North Upton. The essay concludes by looking at what our case study of North Upton tells us about the causes of this problem and how it may be remedied.

Introduction

One of the persistent dilemmas facing those who have sought to improve urban schools throughout the twentieth and now into the twenty-first century has been the problem of continuing shifts in reform. Reforms that have ostensibly been designed to address any of a number of the problems facing big city schools ranging from the low academic performance of their students and teacher disaffection to their organizational and administrative dysfunction and financial mismanagement have come and gone and continue to do so in such a rapid fire manner that it is virtually impossible to put a policy or programme in place and allow it to settle in before it is cast to the wind as a new initiative comes on the scene to replace it (Henig *et al.*, 1999; St John & Mirón, 2003). Like educational reform elsewhere, efforts to improve urban schools have become a more or less pattern of quick starts and equally rapid stops mediated by an every changing array of emerging and retiring policy initiatives (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Vinovskis, 1999).

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Critics of this impulse note that these recurring, almost endless efforts at reform often begin with great flourish and fanfare but do not lead to much in the way of sustained change and improvement (Hill *et al.*, 2000; Kliebard, 2002). Frederick Hess (1999) argues that the penchant that contemporary politicians and policy-makers seem to have for reform stems from their recognition of the broad public dissatisfaction with the performance of urban schools. Introducing change, almost any change, becomes their hoped for remedy for this discontent. He goes on to say that it often does not seem to make that much difference to its champions whether the reform in question is a new innovation, a castaway from another time and place, or the recycling of a prior initiative. In fact, the outcome of such efforts does not matter. The failure of one reform lends justification for additional reforms. Hess maintains that the introduction of innovation has more to do with its symbolic virtues in promoting the fame, visibility and careers of its proponents than it has to do with real school improvement. The continuing introduction of initiative after initiative lies at the heart of the (often short) life of urban school reform. In this essay, I will look at a reform initiative of Britain's New Labour government, Education Action Zones (EAZ), and through a case study of one zone consider what it can tell us about the problems associated with the fluctuations and short lifespan of efforts to improve urban schools.

Theoretical perspective

The theoretical lens through which I will explore the EAZ programme in this essay is that provided by the notion of civic capacity. A concept that is enjoying increasing popularity among contemporary scholars concerned with urban school reform, civic capacity refers to the ability of various sectors of communities to join together to solve their problems. Clarence Stone and his colleagues note in this vein that:

> When city hall, business elites and labor unions combine efforts to redevelop downtown or build a new convention center, a community's civic capacity has been activated. When a wide alliance develops enough of a common understanding to work in concert to reform urban education, civic capacity has been activated. (Stone *et al.*, 2001, p. 4)

The reference in this quotation to the physical redevelopment of cities is not happenstance. The notion of civic capacity can be traced to the work of political scientists interested in the role that partnerships between business and government, what they refer to as regimes, have played, beginning in the 1950s and continuing to the present day, in supporting such urban renewal efforts as attracting business to central cities, clearing slums and promoting tourism. In recent years, many of these same scholars have extended this idea to include efforts at urban school reform (Portz *et al.*, 1999; Stone, 1989).

Civic capacity is in effect an assessment of the existence within urban settings of the conditions that allow for the formation of cross-sector partnerships that support systemic reform, in this case school reform. It requires that various interest groups within an urban community transcend their individual concerns and

become mobilized around a common understanding of the problem to be addressed. And it points to an array of factors that block or limit change, including the loss of funding, the emergence of conflicting viewpoints among stakeholders, and shifts in sentiments and commitments on the part of sponsors (Stone, 1998; Stone *et al.*, 2001).

Seen in this way, civic capacity bears some resemblance to another popular contemporary concept, that of social capital. But whereas social capital refers to the norms of reciprocity, patterns of trust, and systems of networking that occur in interpersonal relationships within families, volunteer groups, churches, and similar associations, civic capacity emerges within larger community relationships where disparate interests interact around issues of politics and governing (Orr, 1991; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 1993, 2000; Stone, 1998). Civic capacity offers us, as we shall see, a particularly useful vantage point from which to view Education Action Zones.

New Labour's EAZ initiative

The EAZ programme brought together clusters of usually 15 to 25 schools located in areas of social and economic distress throughout the country. The central purpose of the initiative was to raise academic standards in low-achieving rural and urban schools, thereby enhancing the social inclusion of the population. The driving force behind these zones was the establishment of partnerships among individual schools, parents, business, community organizations and the voluntary sector with the intent that these partners were to play an important part in the financial support for the zones as well as in their management. The involvement of partnerships in this reform initiative renders it an especially useful venue for studying the issue of civic capacity.

The first 25 zones received £750,000 of government funding annually for an initial three-year period with the prospect of extending the life of the zone and its support up to five years with satisfactory performance. Each of these zones was expected to supplement this government funding by raising £250,000 in cash or in-kind annually from business or other private contributions. The 48 zones that were established subsequently received annual grants of £500,000 and matched funding up to £250,000 for each pound sterling of private sector funding that they obtained (House of Commons, 2001). By the end of New Labour's first term in office there were 73 EAZs throughout Britain (DfEE, 1997, 1999b, 2000).

A key purpose of the EAZ initiative was to change the existing governing practices of schools, particularly the role of local education authorities (LEA). LEAs traditionally had broad authority in regulating schools in England and Wales. They had control over curriculum, budgets and the hiring of staff. The Conservative government that came to power in 1979 began to limit the authority of LEAs on the grounds that they had not been particularly successful in raising academic standards in the schools. New Labour shared the Conservative's doubts about the ability of LEAs to increase standards and consequently advocated a recalibrated relationship

between local education authorities and the schools. The LEAs, if the government were to have its way, would no longer directly govern schools but would serve as a mediating institution to enlist schools, business, voluntary agencies and local government in the work of increasing academic standards (Letch, 2000).

The administrative unit for a zone was its Action Forum, which served as a site for bringing together the participating partners. Although those submitting applications for an EAZ developed a specific administrative structure for their forum, they typically comprised representatives from participating schools, parents, businesses, community and voluntary organizations and the local educational authority. A forum, in turn, appointed a project director who assumed responsibility for the day-to-day management of the zone. Once established, a forum could assume any of a number of roles. It could leave the running of the schools to their existing governing bodies and focus its attention on raising academic standards. A forum could, however, serve as an agent for one or more participating schools in carrying out specific zone responsibilities. Or a forum could, if participating schools were willing to relinquish authority to it, assume responsibility for most of the zone's functions and become the EAZ's single governing body (DfEE, 1999b).

Launched in 1998 as the key New Labour venue for educational innovation, Educational Action Zones were described with some brandish by then school standards minister, Stephen Byers, as 'the test bed for the education system of the twenty-first century [and] a fundamental challenge to the status quo' (*TES*, 1998a). Beyond serving as a site for introducing new schemes for financing and managing schools, Education Action Zones would be allowed priority in introducing any of a number of other educational initiatives. These programmes included efforts to enhance the quality of teaching and learning, to provide support for families and students, to partner with external organizations, and to promote policies of social inclusion. Schools within an EAZ were given preference when applying to the government to become specialist secondary schools, which provided them additional public and private funding to support a curriculum that emphasized foreign languages, art, technology, or sports. The schools within an EAZ could also establish links with Beacon Schools, existing schools that were allocated additional funding to enable them to use their know-how to aid other schools. They could introduce curricular innovations that would depart from the National Curriculum. And they could also establish more flexible conditions of employment and alternative salary schemes that varied from the National Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document (DfEE, 1999b).

Yet, as the above discussion of education reform suggests, the life of this initiative has been short. In November of 2001, the New Labour government announced the programme was being disbanded and that none of the existing zones would receive funding beyond the original five-year commitment (*TES*, 2001). By the end of 2004 then, EAZs in their original form ceased to exist. Educational Action Zones, however, did not exactly disappear. Within a year of introducing its initial EAZ programme, the government put forward another proposal for a number of smaller EAZs as part of its Excellence in Cities programme for addressing low achievement

in inner city schools. These zones have similar targets to their larger counterparts and involve the development of partnerships. What is different about them, however, is that they are funded and administered through local education authorities (DfEE, 1999a).

There have been numerous critics of this initiative, especially academics, who have voiced their own explanations for why the New Labour government abandoned the programme. Much of the disapproval was there from the start and was not directed exclusively at Education Action Zones but more broadly at New Labour's third-way oriented educational policies. For these critics, the government's educational programme was to a large extent a warmed over version of the neo-liberal, market oriented approach of the previous Conservative government with its penchant for privatization and competition over comprehensive state schooling and equality (Gillborn, 1998; Hatcher, 1998, 2001; O'Brien, 1999; Power & Whitty, 1999; Whitty, 1998).

Critics challenged the record of EAZs in enhancing student academic achievement. The actual results, they claimed, were uneven and inconsistent with zone schools both surpassing and falling below national levels of attainment and those of non-zone schools within their LEAs (Power *et al.*, 2003). They also noted that increases that were occurring in academic achievement within EAZs were also occurring in non-zone schools and that consequently the gap between different segments of society was not declining and perhaps even increasing. While EAZs may have increased standards in the schools in economically distressed communities they were not, then, vehicles for reducing social inequality (Hatcher & LeBlond, 2001).

What especially bothered some opponents of the programme about EAZs was the threat to state schooling they saw from the reliance on private partnerships for the funding and management of schools. Such collaboration, they feared, could ultimately undercut public control of the nation's education system. In that vein, they saw the zone's ability to alter the salary and working conditions of teachers as an attack not only on teachers themselves but more broadly on working people throughout Britain. And similarly, they thought that the authority given to EAZs to depart from the National Curriculum and to establish specialist schools could undermine comprehensive education in favor of a narrow, vocationalized course of study that would channel children of the poor to decidedly unequal occupational and social roles (Clifford, 1999; Socialist Teachers Alliance, 1998).

At the same time, there were other critics of the initiative who questioned the actual efficacy of partnerships with business. They noted in this vein that business contributions never reached their expected levels, that the money that was contributed often came from the voluntary and public sectors, and that much of the contributions were in-kind rather than in cash. There were, they go on to report, instances in which private sector cash and in-kind donations to an LEA but not to the EAZ within the local authority were counted anyway as part of the zone's private match. It was also the case that business involvement in the management of zones was less than expected. These critics noted that there were not that many business partners who had any interest in operating EAZs and that the participation of business in the

Action Forum was often minimal. As it turned out, LEAs were central players in the establishment and management of the EAZs notwithstanding the government's desire to reduce their role in favor of the private sector (Dickson *et al.*, 2003; Hallgarten & Watling, 2001).

Some critics were also worried about the partnerships between schools, parents and communities that were promoted in the EAZ initiative. These were not, they claimed, equal partnerships where parents and communities were to play a role in the management of zones. They were, again to their way of thinking, clearly unequal relationships that sought to use collaboration to enhance the control of school authorities over parents and communities. What so concerned these opponents of EAZs was the government's assumption that low achievement was not a structural problem but rather the result of deficient families and communities and that the goal of this programme was to repair these deficits. In this vein, they were particularly critical of what they viewed as the coercive and authoritarian impulse within this initiative to virtually compel parents to assume principal responsibility for the education and ultimately for the employability of their children. The commitment of the zones to social inclusion did not, they argued, mean that the government sought to use this initiative to achieve equality. Rather, they went on to say, it was an approach, rooted in human capital theory, to make the poor and disadvantaged more employable thereby enhancing the country's competitive advantage in a global economy (Gamarnikow & Green, 1999; Gewirtz, 1999, 2002; Power & Gerwirtz, 2001; Socialist Teachers Alliance, 1998).

And finally, there were those commentators who questioned whether it was even possible to distinguish the true impact of the EAZ initiative from New Labour's assertions about its supposed successes. As they saw it, the claims made about this programme were often caught up in a process of 'spin' or 'impression management' that obscured its actual impact behind a rhetoric emphasizing the government's seeming problem solving acumen or insight (Gewirtz *et al.*, in press).

The government challenged these criticisms. They claimed that the EAZ initiative has been a success in raising academic standards, reducing gaps in levels of achievement among British youth, securing business involvement in the financing of zones, and promoting new governance schemes, particularly partnerships with business, parents, and the community (DfES, 2001, 2003). One member of the EAZ team in the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) denied that the lack of private funding had anything to do with the demise of the programme.[2] From the beginning, he went on to say, New Labour officials did not see Education Action Zones as permanent entities. They were, he noted, temporary initiatives that brought with them a number of important successes that would constitute the basis for further educational reform. As the government saw it, he pointed out, the best strategy for the future was to integrate this programme into their overall school reform strategy, which was being done through the Excellence in Cities initiative. Another member of the EAZ team noted that financial support was not the most important contribution that business brought to this reform effort. 'The cash is useful', but she went on to say that:

> … these businesses have specialties in more general skills such as management of staff, that sort of thing. We wanted to draw on all of that, and the cash is very nice, but it isn't really the biggest thing.

The case of the North Upton EAZ

The division of opinion surrounding the Education Action Zone initiative, punctuated on the one side by claims about its great success and on the other by allegations about its utter failure, and coupled with its short life, suggests that this is a reform that did not generate much in the way of the kind of common understanding necessary for the presence of civic capacity. To understand what this means for our efforts to improve urban schools, we need to explore this question of civic capacity further by looking at how this reform has played itself out in practice in the schools. In the remainder of this essay, I will do just that by considering one such zone in one of England's most disadvantaged communities, an area that I have called the Borough of North Upton.[3]

Established in 2000 and comprising 11 of the community's 58 primary schools and five of its nine secondary schools, the North Upton EAZ is located in the kind of disadvantaged and distressed area that the government had in mind as a site for this initiative (North Upton, 1999; Office for Standards in Education, 2000). A borough within greater London, this community has over the last two decades suffered from a combination of political discord among Labour, Conservatives and Liberal-Democrats, financial mismanagement, and administrative incompetence. Recent problems included a large budget deficit, the inability to collect local taxes, the loss of key civil servants through attrition and redundancies, the deterioration of the public housing infrastructure, and the collapse of such essential services as trash collection (*The Guardian*, 1999c, 2000b, c, d). North Upton, according to a primary school head teacher in the EAZ, has been a 'dysfunctional borough for all the years that I've been in it and words fail me to know … how bad it has been'.

According to the borough's EAZ application, recent immigration has transformed this once largely white working class area into a racially diverse community with large numbers of recent arrivals from Africa, the Caribbean region and Turkey. Poverty and unemployment are key problems facing the residents at the moment. North Upton's average gross household income in 1993 was £11,900 compared to the average gross household income for inner London of £19,700. The official unemployment rate for the community in1999 was 14.7%, which was almost three times higher than that of all of greater London. Other community problems included inadequate housing, high levels of infant morality, and high incidences of violent crime (North Upton, 1999).

Not surprisingly, these larger community difficulties have affected the schools. Again, according to the borough's applications for zone status, the student population within the schools that would comprise the EAZ was 75% ethnic minority. The percentage of these students eligible for free school meals and whose native language was other than English exceeded national averages. In fact, children who attended

schools that were seeking to join the zone spoke over 80 languages. The schools included within the EAZ application exhibited patterns of persistent low achievement. The average performance of primary students was below the national average in reading, mathematics and English, and the percentage of secondary school students who complete the GSCE with five or more A–C grades was about half the national average. These deficits were particularly severe among students of Turkish and Caribbean descent within the borough (North Upton, 1999, 2000).

The local education authority that managed the schools since the early 1980s has experienced many difficulties similar to those that have affected the larger community. One primary school head teacher defined the problems of the local authority as 'incompetence, corruption, nepotism'. It is, he went on to say, 'the most troubled education authority in the country bar none'. The LEA, according to this administrator, was particularly inept. Many of those who were hired when the authority took over control of the schools were put there because of their political influence. Positions were given to individuals who had neither training nor experience in education, including former clerks and recent immigrants without work permits. The LEA did not fare well in the educational reform environment of the 1980s and 1990s. Inspections in 1997 and 1998 by the Office of Standards in Education (Ofsted) pointed to a number of key failings on the part of the authority including its inadequate budgeting processes, its seeming inability to support failing schools, its poorly designed education development plan and its lack of success in introducing information technology into the schools (*TES*, 1998b; *The Guardian*, 1999c, d).

David Blunkett, the Education and Employment Secretary during New Labour's first term, recommended that some of the LEA's services be contracted out to private businesses, which it was thought could operate them more efficiently. This first effort at privatization brought some slight improvements in student academic performance. Yet, continuing management problems led to a third Ofsted inspection in 2000, which concluded that the LEA continued to function at an ineffective level and did not appear capable of achieving much in the way of improvement. Two years later a government committee recommended the replacement of the local education authority with a private, non-profit trust (Office of Standards in Education, 2000; *TES*, 2000; *The Guardian*, 1999a, b, d, 2000e, f).

Despite North Upton's array of educational and social problems, the establishment of an EAZ was not exactly a welcomed event. Teachers affiliated with the borough's teachers association did not share the government's optimistic view of this initiative. As one teacher who also served as an officer of the association noted:

> … the problem with Education Action Zones, first of all, [is] they're unfair. They provide additional resources, which should be going to all schools, to only a few. Secondly, such resources as they do provide are heavily into the administrative costs of running them. And this particular one, for instance, has a director, has a deputy director, has administrative support. And it seemed to us neither a fair, nor an efficient way of providing real funds that all schools need. And finally … their aim was to attract, in

> Tony Blair's third way fantasizing, capital from the private sector, which they seem to [have] failed to do.

A group of teachers from Camden, East London and North Upton that I interviewed held a similar view. EAZs, they noted, only involved a few schools within an area or region thereby excluding the majority of schools from the benefits of the programme. As they saw it, it was an effort that precluded the kind of broad collaboration among schools that would benefit all children.

Another source of opposition that was voiced by the teachers that I interviewed was their belief that the business partnerships promoted in this initiative would lead to the privatization of public education. They were particularly concerned that if business secured control of the schools, they would introduce a commercialized curriculum that would focus solely on preparing youth for the workforce. As the North Upton Teachers Association official that I interviewed put it, 'we don't want the curriculum brought to us by McDonald's, thank you very much indeed'. He was particularly fearful of the prospect of business control of the schools. He saw business involvement in the EAZs as a minor phase of a larger corporate effort. He claimed that 'what they're buggering around with here is for marginal profit'. Their real mission was to position themselves 'for very big global stakes' as the providers of educational services and products for the developing world. The EAZs offered them a place to 'brand their product'.

One of the initial fears of teachers and an important reason why many of them opposed the initiative was their belief that schools within EAZs would actually take advantage of the government's invitation to depart from the National Curriculum and the provisions governing the pay and working conditions of teachers (Hatcher, 1998). As it turned out, neither of these changes actually occurred. The National Union of Teachers' evaluation of the EAZ programme in 2000 reported that no zones had made changes in the working conditions and wages of teachers (National Union of Teachers, 2000). The fact that nothing of this sort happened did not change the opinions that the Camden, East London and North Upton teachers to whom I spoke held of the EAZs. From their vantage point, these were the very worst aspects of a bad programme that thankfully did not occur.

One North Upton primary school head commented that:

> … you hear this rhetoric that you can dis-apply parts of the National Curriculum. Oh yeah, then Ofsted will come in and they suddenly say you're not doing geography, you're not doing history. It's rubbish, absolute rubbish. I don't know of a single school that dis-applies [the] National Curriculum.

A secondary school head from the borough noted that they were able to offer a small number of students having special needs who were served at an off-campus site, a programme outside the National Curriculum. They were not allowed, she went on to say, to do this for other students who were part of the school's general population.

Possible business control and privatization were not the only reasons for opposition to the EAZ in North Upton. According to one primary head teacher, her:

> … governing board was skeptical here. They didn't believe that the money would actually be forthcoming. They felt that the sorts of activities that we might involve ourselves in would detract from our core task of education and instead of being clear about getting all children to certain educational levels, we might be involved in interesting and exciting or different or weird kinds of subjects which would detract. They weren't keen on that. They felt that it would take up a lot of my time and energy and so I wouldn't be able to devote myself to what I should be doing. They were unhappy that somehow their powers might be ceded to the forum.

Parents at this same school also had initial doubts about the EAZ. They were afraid that joining the zone would force them to share their resources with poorer and less well performing schools or that their children would be bused out of their school to schools elsewhere within the EAZ.

In North Upton, as it turned out, the opposition to the EAZ was unsuccessful. Yet, the failure of the opposition to carry the day did not mean that supporters of the initiative in the borough were able to build a shared understanding among its stakeholders. Head teachers, focusing almost exclusively on the money that the programme would bring to their schools, pushed their staffs and governing bodies to approve their participation. One primary head teacher commented that:

> I had lots of meetings with staff, lots of meetings with governors, lots of meetings with parents, and in the end I took quite a hard line, which is to say in my professional opinion and in my judgment, this is a good thing, and I fully believe that we should be doing it. It will be of benefit for the children and the community. And I almost dared them to go against me, and a lot of parents, I think, were very comfortable, because they trusted me and they said okay if [I think] this okay, we'll go for it.

In the end, the governing body was divided. Half of them supported the head in her decision to join the zone, and two governors resigned.

Another primary school head reported that he was put off by what he viewed as the 'bizarre' charges of the 'militant union people' who were leading the opponents. 'The more I heard the opposition, the more I thought it was a good idea'. There were, he noted, two factors that led him to try to convince his staff to support joining the EAZ. One was the money that it would bring into his school. The other was his confidence in the individuals who would lead the zone.

> The thing I liked about them was that they weren't kind of waffly. They were very much this is what we want to do. Do you want to come on board? This is what you get for your school. You have this much autonomy to do, you know, what you want with it, and this is what we'd like from you.

From the start, then, the introduction of North Upton's EAZ seems to have less to do with the realization of civic capacity than it did with the ability of head teachers to achieve their goals by wielding power.

Academic achievement in North Upton's EAZ

The experience of the North Upton EAZ does offer some support for the criticism that the impact of the initiative on academic achievement has been mixed. The

zone's director noted that both academic achievement and attendance in the secondary schools have increased, but at the same time achievement in the primary schools 'has remained static'. A primary head teacher supported this assessment. As he saw it, however, the problem was with one or two schools 'that consistently failed and dragged the aggregate down'. He went on to say that if we leave out the schools that were failing, then the EAZ had 'a very big impact on standards'. It is important to note, he continued, that at the same time that standards were increasing in North Upton, they were also rising throughout the nation. The head teacher in one of the zone's secondary schools also noted improvements in student achievement in English and science along with a small, but not to her way of thinking significant, drop in maths.

A parent and member of the Action Forum at another of the borough's primary schools noted how EAZ funds had allowed the head teacher to work collaboratively with a local secondary school to provide her daughter with work in science, mathematics and English that she had not been getting at her school. She went on to say that through this initiative a mentor from a local business works with her daughter every Wednesday on mathematics and as a consequence her work in this area has improved. She also noted that the programme has supported a partnership with a local football club that has allowed students, such as her son, to participate in a school sponsored soccer programme. The EAZ has, she stated, provided that:

> … extra something that's been really good for them, and also it's helped the secondary transfer because my daughter said she wants to go to the local comprehensive because she been there so often because of the EAZ.

The actual impact of the EAZ in North Upton was, however, a more complex issue. As a primary head teacher saw it, academic standards were not the whole story.

> It's the fantastic opportunities that it gave children … to learn French, to have emotional and behavioral counselors, to have fantastic ICT (information and communication technology) provisions—that's what the EAZ was all about.

At one primary school, EAZ funds supported bringing in professional musicians to promote student involvement with music and offering children the opportunity to learn French. At another primary school, funds were used to employ a part time sports coach, to install interactive white boards in all the classrooms, to construct two ICT suites, to host visiting poets and to employ counselors.

According to this head teacher, the funding that came with the EAZ programme supported what he called the 'peripherals'.

> It provided some of the nice ICT stuff, some of the nice mentoring stuff, the counseling stuff; all that nice stuff on the side. The impact on literacy and numeracy, I personally have to say I can't see what it is.

The head teacher at one of the community's secondary schools also saw the initiatives that she had undertaken with EAZ funds as separate from what she was doing in the area of reading and mathematics, which she pointed out, was supported by

additional funding apart from the EAZ initiative. The programmes that she undertook, including the establishment of parental partnerships, support for staff development, improving ICT facilities, and the introduction of vocational courses were, she noted, largely 'revision and enhancement activities outside the normal school day'. Yet, at the same time she saw them as fitting within her overall strategy of 'raising attainment as well as raising opportunities for students'.

As the head teacher at one primary school pointed out:

> There is your core curriculum, which we have to deliver—the National Curriculum—and other bits you can attach to that but just the possibility to widen it for the children, and I think it has been our biggest achievement.

She noted that her school was one of the few schools in the community to offer French and that 'we've been able to take off with ICT in a way that I'm not sure we would've been able to if we didn't have, if we weren't part of the EAZ'.

The major goal of the EAZ initiative, I noted above, was to enhance academic achievement, which in turn, it was argued, would provide the populations of economically distressed areas with the work related knowledge and skills they required for participation in the national economy (DfEE, 1999b; *The Guardian*, 2000a). This was certainly the case in North Upton whose application for zone status noted that the EAZ would enhance the academic achievement and ambition of the borough's children by 'targeting parental and community involvement in education'. The EAZs' proponents went on to say that:

> … economic regeneration should be driven by sharply rising educational standards. Confidence, self-esteem, high aspirations and good educational standards will open up employment opportunities for … young people in local business and in the city and the rest of London. (North Upton, 1999, p. 3)

As the director of the North Upton Zone noted:

> … quite a few women do … cleaning, waitressing, and so forth, for the big city firms, but the great raft of administrative, secretarial, executive jobs in the financial sector are not done by [North Upton] residents.

He went on to say:

> … the city does not employ in the mainstream jobs of the financial sector a larger percentage of [North Upton] students, and [North Upton] students, in a sense, feel that isn't for them, and on the other hand, the city is saying you're not for us. So the Action Zone is a deliberate attempt to further break down those barriers.

A banker who served on the North Upton Action Forum made the same point when he talked about the 'virtuous circle' that the Education Action Zone could create between the community's inhabitants and the city's commercial and financial sector.

> If we can get business involved in education, young people who may live in conditions of hopelessness domestically, will see a glimmer of hope and as a consequence will raise their ambitions and hopefully their achievements. … As academic achievement rises, employability rises. As employability rises, wealth is brought into the micro-economy

> that will in turn allow local companies to have greater demand for their services and hopefully spawn more local business opportunities and so on.

The zone, as its proponents saw it, would not only increase academic standards. It would instill the community's youth with other attributes, particularly, 'confidence, self-esteem, and high aspirations', that taken together would have the effect of opening up opportunities for these young people in business in both North Upton and London. The plan, according to its proponents, was predicated on the belief that the best way to enhance student achievement was to ensure that parents were actively engaged in supporting both their children's education and their own (North Upton, 1999). Families were clearly not held blameless for the borough's economic distress. The claim of critics, however, that the EAZ programme was based on the belief that family and community deficiencies were the roots causes of such problems did not hold true for North Upton where some recognition was given to the structural roots of the borough's economic plight.

Governing and funding North Upton's EAZ

Educational Action Zones were not, for New Labour, just another educational innovation directed at low achievement. They were to be innovative. Most important in this respect was that they were to be partnerships that linked the schools to parents, business, the community and voluntary organizations in the work of school reform. They were designed to promote new schemes of finance and governance involving substantial contributions from the business sector to support their operation and alternative administrative structures. In short, they were to be efforts at enlisting the civic capacity of communities to solve their educational problems.

The North Upton EAZ was a successful applicant during a second round of bidding during which the DfEE explicitly sought proposals from other groups beyond the LEAs (DfEE, 1998; Hallgarten & Watling, 2000). In fact, its administrative organization seems to point to a change in its governance structure. The Action Forum was chaired by the head of a London financial trading company who was an officer in a large voluntary organization that sponsored the EAZ. Other members of the forum included two additional members of the sponsoring voluntary agency, an appointee of the government and representatives from the zone's business, community and voluntary sector partners, from each school's governing body, from teachers working in zone schools and from parents attending these schools. Similarly, the Executive Committee that was responsible for the day-to-day operation of the EAZ was composed of the Action Forum chair, an appointee of the sponsoring voluntary organization, a business partner representative, and three head teachers (North Upton, 1999, 2000).

Yet, according to North Upton's director, change in governance 'never happened and it was never going to happen'. There was, he felt, neither the capacity nor interest among those involved with the initiative in the borough in changing the governance of the schools. And besides, he went on to say, 'there was no way governors

were going to willingly give up their power to govern'. At the outset, the zone remained under the overall monitoring authority of the LEA. Professional development and other school improvement efforts were joint ventures between borough schools that were both a part of and outside of the EAZ (North Upton, 1999). As one secondary school head noted, it was the staff of the LEA that undertook the zone's school improvement initiatives. The transferring of authority of the borough's schools from the local education authority to a non-profit trust did represent something of an administrative change. Yet, it is not clear that this shift brought with it changes in the relationship between the zone and the trust that was different from its original connection with the North Upton LEA. As a member of the North Upton Teachers Association saw it, authority in the EAZ was concentrated at the top and administered in a hierarchical fashion. 'One of the complaints that I've heard about the EAZs', he noted, 'is you have the schools, you have the Action Forum. You have the Executive Committee within the Action Forum, and the whole process is one of excluding the people at the ground floor'.

North Upton was quite successful in building the kind of cross sector partnerships with business and voluntary agencies that would allow for civic capacity. The cash grants were not, according to the EAZ director, 'massive' but the combination of smaller grants from numerous business and voluntary sector agencies meant, according to a primary head that 'there was a lot of private money that came in, a lot of initiatives', and he went on to say that 'I am happy to take it'. A secondary school head noted that it was the support of the EAZ and their links to business that enabled the school to secure the funding necessary to take on specialist status and become a sports college. She also noted that the school was able to refurbish their ICT suite with a £30,000 donation from a London based company. And the EAZ itself provided funding to support a corrective reading programme for her low achieving black students and a language instructor to provide help for Turkish students. A primary head teacher reported that during the last week she was able to garner £1400 in cash donations from her business partners.

Most of the business support that schools in the zone received, however, was in-kind and involved employees from these companies volunteering as tutors within individual schools. The head of one primary school noted that the Bank of England 'send in their volunteers who give up their lunch time, and they work with our more able readers and develop their skills'. She went on to say that they are in the process of expanding this effort and have these volunteers tutor children in mathematics. A parent at another primary school noted that employees from J.P. Morgan volunteered to work as 'reading' and 'number' partners to tutor both gifted and underachieving students in these areas. The zone's director commented that this year his major voluntary sector partner pays for the cost of a full time teacher in one school and a school liaison worker in another school as well as donating equipment worth £10,000. North Upton, like most EAZs, did not reach its targeted private sector contribution, but as the director noted the combination of monetary and in-kind donations made the borough 'one of the most successful sites' in the EAZ programme.

Parent involvement in North Upton

Parents and community organizations, it seems, played a small role in the management of the North Upton EAZ. The zone's director noted that they have virtually no parent participation and a few representatives from the community. One primary head noted that at least initially the zone was 'very keen to get representatives from parent groups [and] very keen to get significant minority representation'. During the first year that the EAZ was in operation, parent and community participation was high, but by the second year their involvement had dropped significantly. One way in which parents could have been represented on the Action Forum was for those governors who were also parents of children attending a zone school to assume a place on that body. A head teacher reported that at her school it came down to whether she or one of the governors would be on the forum.

> The governors were very keen in the first instance to do it because they felt that somehow I might lead them up the garden path … but in fact a governor who was elected and who was very keen to do it, I think, actually only managed because of pressures to get to about one meeting. So in fact, I am now back to being the representative.

There are several reasons why parents did not choose to participate in the management of the EAZ. A primary school head teacher blamed the lack of parent involvement on the multicultural character of the borough. She thought that the diversity of North Upton made it difficult for any one parent of a particular ethnicity to be selected as a forum representative. In addition, zone administrators had a dim view of the role that parents could play. The EAZ's director thought that most parents would be 'bored stiff' if they were involved in the Action Forum.

> What interests most parents in education is how their son or daughter is getting on in school. Now, I'm not going to tell them that; the forum isn't going to tell them that; the school's going to tell them that.

He went on to say that his interest was in promoting the involvement of parents in the impact of the school on the education of their children, not in the administration of the zone. A primary school head noted that today's parents are 'far more astute' than in the past and much more aware of what they 'want for their children'. She noticed that during the time that she had been a head teacher there had been a growth in parental participation. It was not, however, in the management of the school but involvement as reading volunteers, in helping out with Christmas projects, and in fundraising.

Similarly, head teachers were not all that enthusiastic about parent involvement in the direction of the EAZ. One primary school head found parental involvement very stressful. Many of the demands that parents make, she noted:

> … are completely unrealistic. Some of the parental demands are very much focused on what they believe is best for their child with no notion that there are 200 other odd children in the school. I have difficulty with the notion that the tail is going to wag the dog. I'm very happy that parents work with us to improve the school, but I'm not quite so happy with the notion that parents are going to [run] the school.

Another primary school head felt that parent involvement in decisions affecting the zone created more problems than it solved. He argued that much of the opposition in North Upton to the establishment of the programme was the result of parents being manipulated and fed false information about the initiative by opponents who had harangued them at a series of meetings that were held to promote the EAZ in the community.

> Parents were worried. And you know, when you're not involved in it, in education, and somebody says to you these project funds are coming in and they're going to take away your kids' pencils and things like that, you know … you're going to be worried.

He went on to say that 'parents didn't need to be consulted. You tell them. You say we're going in … you tell them after what the benefits are'. He noted that in his school he consulted with the school governors, teachers, and because it was a Catholic school with the diocese and once they approved, he told the parents that the school was joining the zone.

Parents, not surprisingly, did not feel encouraged to participate in governance. One parent and member of her school's governing body was active in the establishment of the zone, but once it was up and running she stopped attending Action Forum meetings. 'If you expressed an opinion, you were in the way really. So really, the community dropped out'. The forum, as she saw it, was primarily concerned about making 'management decisions'. She noted that:

> … as a parent, you're quite stretched; you're trying to run your own life; your trying to do your own thing; it's quite hard to get empowered because you're busy doing things. It's easier for professionals to get up running. So in many ways parents think well, fine because they're so worn out.

This parent was not all that happy with her decision to withdraw from the Action Forum. Yet, constraints of time coupled with what she saw as a lack of encouragement from the zone's administrators led to her decision.

> I think it's a shame. I think I would have carried on going to these meetings if I thought there was a way in which I could get involved, but I just didn't. … I thought, well, they're getting on with it; they're doing their special stuff, but for me to take time out and get childcare, and I have to pick up my kids and the meeting sometimes is at four. So it's impossible to juggle everything.

Ultimately, what was important was that the EAZ brought resources to the school that had 'empowered my child. … She was low achieving, and it's given her confidence'. Having a say in the direction of the zone was not all that important to this parent.

The civic capacity of the EAZ Programme

Our discussion thus far leaves us with two important questions. First, what can we say in general about the civic capacity of Education Action Zones? And second, how does our consideration of events in North Upton move us along further in

understanding what issues of civic capacity tell us about the fluctuations in urban initiatives like the EAZ programme? There is no metric that enables us to answer this question precisely. Rather, what we need to do is to consider what the implementation of the EAZ programme suggests about the presence of civic capacity. There were early on some obvious warning signs that the EAZ programme as a national reform lacked the kind of common understandings necessary for cross sector collaborations. Most important in this respect was the programme's short life. Taken together, the criticisms of EAZs raised by those outside of the New Labour government along with the quick willingness of the government to abandon the programme suggests that its civic capacity was quite low. In the same vein, the gap between what the government sought in private financial support and what it actually received and the strong role that LEAs continued to play in the governance of EAZs suggest the inability of the parties involved in the EAZ programme to secure the kind of broad agreement among cross sector partners that signaled the presence of civic capacity.

At first glance, we might conclude that events in North Upton point in the opposite direction. From the vantage point of those in North Upton, the EAZ had amassed important accomplishments. A key success of the zone, the director noted, was that 'we galvanized and harnessed a great deal of support for schools from external sources'. Because of this support, he went on to say, the zone was able to increase achievement 'in specific areas', to enhance professional development, and to improve provisions for technology, which had been 'in the dark ages'. When he first became director he commented that he was 'absolutely stunned by the lack of IT in both primary and secondary schools', but with the establishment of the EAZ, this has become an area of strength. As a primary head teacher noted, this external support was helpful in 'enriching the curriculum, definitely enriching the curriculum in a very major way, giving teachers a boost, giving them all these fantastic new resources … it was nice; it was just terrific'.

Similarly, a secondary head saw the great success of North Upton's EAZ as its ability to establish linkages among the schools that allowed for cooperation and the establishment of a 'shared vision of what the zone should be doing'. There was, she went on to say, a clear focus in their work that remained constant but allowed for sufficient creativity to enable new ideas to be considered.

At the same time, however, there are indications that little in the way of civic capacity was activated in North Upton. The most striking evidence pointing to this absence was the opposition of borough teachers to the EAZ. Another such indicator was the fact that for many head teachers it was not so much the EAZ programme itself that attracted them, but the funding it brought to their schools. My interviews also pointed to other possible signs of disagreement including the reluctance of some parents and school governors to join the zone, conflicts between head teachers and their teachers over the zone, and the attitudes of head teachers regarding parental involvement in the management of the EAZ.

Looking further at the programme's supposed achievements also raises questions about its actual civic capacity. The successes that those in North Upton attributed to

the EAZs were, at it turns out, measured and modest. For the zone's director, the problem with this initiative was the array of expectations that the government had set for it. It was, he commented, 'pure nonsense' to believe that one initiative operating on less than £1 million could transform everything. The government, he went on to say, 'wanted every indicator to go up on a million quid a year', and one 'couldn't work intelligently on that basis'. What an EAZ had to do was to select a few 'key areas' on which 'to move forward'. He believed if you did that and then had demonstrated accomplishments, the enterprise was successful. And that was precisely, to his way of thinking, what was occurring at North Upton.

The problem that this initiative posed, according to one primary head, was that it built up expectations, promoted a number of good initiatives, and 'then suddenly it's all gone'. As he saw it, once the money came to an end, the programme was finished.

> Money is tight. And I am sorry, it's been wonderful, but we will not be able to afford emotional-behavioral counselors, the French, the sports—we will not be able to afford that.

A secondary school head noted that the demise of the EAZ will be 'devastating' to her school. Because of the EAZ, she was able to provide parent workshops, programmes for disaffected students, and cooperative ventures with other schools. A primary school head noted that when the EAZ was established, North Upton citizens were told that:

> … it's for the long term … and then the money is taken away. Well it is a fad. It was a passing experiment, but because New Labour didn't hit their targets, their obsessionally bloody targets—you know, they suddenly pulled the funding.

He went on to say that he did not understand the government's preoccupation with targets. He pointed out that last year their school did well in English but terribly in maths. This year, however, many of his students were doing better in maths. New Labour's targets, he felt, were 'meaningless'. It would be better, he thought, if everyone would simply say that we 'will all do our best'.

It was the impending demise of the EAZ that was most troubling to those in North Upton. They probably could continue to fund some of the projects in their schools. The director pointed out in this vein that if a school wants 'to keep attendance high, they'll carry on purchasing a home-school worker out of their own money'. The schools within the zone, he argued, would have to decide what their priorities were.

> When you've had funding for four years and you know it's going to end at the end of year five, well then you have to make plans accordingly. I've got no sympathy for the school that says well, you know, what are you going to do. Well, you've been lucky so far; you should have been … prioritizing for the future.

It was likely that one of the schools within the North Upton EAZ would become part of the Excellence in Cities initiative and be able to continue its programmes on a smaller scale. But once the EAZ comes to an end, the schools in North Upton will have to raise their own funds if they wish to see programmes that they value continue. But, as one primary head noted, fund raising was not that simple. It was

relatively easier, he noted, to raise money to support ICT and for buildings than it was to fund an emotional or behavioral counselor or a sports coach.

Educators in North Upton may have been as supportive of the EAZ as its government proponents. Yet, they had a very different understanding than did either its government supporters or non-government opponents of what the programme was all about. And such different viewpoints coupled with the ultimate demise of the programme would suggest that the initiative's stakeholders, not only its government proponents but those who were responsible for putting this reform in place in the schools, had not established the kind of common understanding necessary to maintain this initiative.

Events in North Upton point to why this may be the case. A major problem that urban reform initiatives like Education Action Zones pose for teachers and school administrators, David Tyack and Larry Cuban tell us, is that they often becomes an attempt at 'reinventing schooling' (p. 110). Such efforts usually originate outside the schools at the behest of politicians, policy makers, academics, or business executives and seek to fundamentally transform schools from top to bottom. Because they are so pervasive in what they attempt to accomplish, they represent too much of a challenge to the taken-for-granted and accepted managerial and pedagogical practices of schools, what they call the 'grammar of schooling' (p. 85). The EAZ programme is a good example of this approach to reform. For Tyack and Cuban, and as our case study of North Upton illustrates, such initiatives come with grand but often unrealistic claims, engender major opposition, have a modest if not minimal impact, and are short-lived. A better and ultimately more successful route to reform, Tyack and Cuban argue, is one that seeks changes that are less extensive, that occur slowly over time, and that allow those within the schools to modify and adjust them to fit their existing practices. A concern with civic capacity would suggest that any successful effort at mobilizing the forces behind urban school reform would have of necessity to take this viewpoint into account.

Such a concern does not, however, suggest that we simply privilege the views of practicing educators over and above those of other potential cross-sectors partners. As it turns out, there was something quite important that was missing in this borough's reform efforts—a role for parents. Like the government supporters of EAZs, Tyack and Cuban argue that successful school reform emerges out of a partnership between parents and educators. Yet, those involved in the North Upton EAZ saw parents playing a very limited role. They clearly wanted parental support for the reforms that they were supporting with EAZ funds. They did not, however, want parents to be decision makers. That was a role that in North Upton was to be reserved for professionals and managers. Situated in the history of twentieth century urban education where so much of the ensuing conflict has pitted economically distressed and disempowered parents against a powerful educational establishment, this is a viewpoint that leaves one with a pause for concern. What North Upton has actually done in its EAZ programme may certainly help us to understand why our conventional approaches to urban school reform often fail. Ultimately, however, it leaves us with a strategy for school change that is faulty at best.

There is still perhaps another explanation that accounts for why North Upton educators saw the EAZ programme differently from its government supporters. It may have been the case that the government's impetus for this reform had more to do with, as some critics have claimed, notions of 'spin' or 'image making' than with a real commitment to reform (Scammell, 2001). Labourites after all had spent a good portion of the 1990s, prior to coming to power, in refashioning the image of the party by muting its leftist image as part of an effort to convince the electorate that it was fit and responsible to govern (Atkinson & Savage, 2001; Stephens, 2004; Toynbee & Walker, 2001). Coming into office, those responsible for educational reform in the government may have been more concerned with creating the belief that they were capable of solving problems than they were with the intricacies of implementing change in the schools. That is in creating the EAZ initiative, they may have been more interested in creating the symbolic trappings of an active and change oriented government, than in establishing common ground with practicing educators or putting in place something that was achievable within the context of existing beliefs, resources, and school practices. Urban school reform, I noted at the beginning of this essay, is often more about image and careerism than actual educational improvement.

Conclusions

In this essay, I used the notion of civic capacity to explore the implementation and operation of an urban school reform initiative, the Education Action Zone programme. My purpose in doing so was to consider what such a view could tell us about the problems of contemporary urban school reform, particularly the shifting and vacillations between specific programmes and their limited longevity.

Looking both at the goals that the New Labour government set for the Education Action Zone programme and the assessment of the initiative's critics, EAZs were viewed, it would seem, as a reform that would for better or worse remake Britain's system of state schooling. It would establish a new governance structure outside the LEAs that would open up the direction of education in England to partnerships involving parents, businesses, and voluntary organizations. The EAZ would provide for private sector financing of Britain's system of public education. The EAZ would allow its schools to depart from the National Curriculum as well as from the existing national pay scheme for teachers and provisions for their working conditions. It would also address the low academic achievement of urban youth, which in turn would improve their acquisition of job related knowledge and skills and enhance their employment opportunities. And over time the zone would be a vehicle for improving the economy of economically distressed communities like North Upton.

The way in which EAZ critics depicted this initiative as an effort to bootleg the Conservative Party's educational agenda under the guise of a left-of-center reform initiative reinforced the notion that this was a fundamental change in Britain's educational system. The emphasis they placed on certain features of the initiative—the

proposals to alter the conditions of teachers' work and pay and to allow schools to depart from the National Curriculum, the threat of privatization posed by business partnerships, and the 'victim blaming' view of parents and communities in New Labour rhetoric—went even further to suggest that this was a far more pervasive and ultimately more dangerous reform effort than the educational proposals of the previous Conservative government. Taken together, the supporters and opponents of EAZs created the kind of oppositional climate that pit unrealizable hopes against the dread of reactionary changes. In making their assessments of this initiative, neither group took into account the principle of civic capacity, namely that successful school reform requires broad patterns of common agreement about existing problems and potential solutions.

Those who led North Upton's Education Action Zone saw the programme quite differently than did either its New Labour proponents or critics outside the government. It appears that the claim made by EAZ critics that many of the programme's goals were not achieved was largely correct. The North Upton EAZ remained under the control of its local education authority. The governance structure remained hierarchical with authority largely in the hands of the LEA, school administrators, and the business partners. The influence that parents gained over the direction of the borough's education was minimal. Yet, the programme in this borough did enjoy some successes. They were not necessarily the successes touted by the government. The great achievement of the EAZ from the vantage point of those in North Upton was that it provided them financial support, albeit limited by any absolute standard, to undertake an array of very typical school improvement efforts in ways in which they had become accustomed. With EAZ funds the schools of North Upton were able to support curriculum enrichment and remedial efforts; they were able to hire auxiliary personnel; they were able to improve facilities, particularly ICT; and they were able to provide additional professional development opportunities for teachers. The other important contribution that the EAZ programme made to the schools of North Upton was that it brought in volunteers from the private sector that were able to provide supplemental instruction in such areas as reading and maths. In short, what the Education Action Zone initiative brought to North Upton was the ability to pursue traditional school improvement goals with some added resources. It was hardly revolutionary change!

There were certain features of the EAZ initiative that seemed to garner more support from North Upton's school leaders than others. The most popular aspects of the programme were those that they could modify and adjust to fit their particular situation. What they liked best about the EAZ was that it offered them money to pursue goals and implement strategies and procedures that they thought were most appropriate for their students and their community. The features of the programme that were least popular in this borough were those that threatened to disrupt accepted practices and those that compelled the schools and their staffs to follow procedures or work toward goals that were prescribed for them in advance and that did not lend themselves to modification. In that vein, teachers and administrators in North Upton were most opposed to requirements that they meet predetermined

achievement targets, that they follow mandates to change the governance structure of the schools, or that they accept changes in their working conditions and salary.

Finally, events in North Upton point to the danger that the short lives of many reforms pose to schools. As we saw, these initiatives bring with them the financial and other resources that enable schools to institute programmes and services that seem to bring about desirable improvements. The problem is that once these programmes get going and are bringing about worthy outcomes, the reforms are disbanded and the financial and other supports are cut off. School leaders and teachers are faced with the unenviable task of cutting back valuable programmes or assuming fundraising tasks that detract from their instructional responsibilities. Taking into account the significant problems of urban communities, this is an all too frequent outcome that undercuts the effectiveness of schools as agents of change and betterment and does real damage to the lives of very vulnerable children caught within this flux of on-again, off-again reform. If activating civic capacity is the key to successful urban school reform, and I believe that it is, there must be a common understanding of the problems and potential solutions that takes into account the concerns of those who live and work in places like North Upton.

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2. Following New Labour's second term election victory in 2001, the name of the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), the agency that administered the EAZ programme, was changed to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).
3. North Upton is a pseudonym for the real community in which this research was conducted in January, February and November of 2001, March of 2002 and December of 2003. These visits included interviews with the members of the government's EAZ team, the directors of the North Upton EAZ and two nearby EAZs, head teachers of five of the 16 schools within the Zone, a group of six teachers from North Upton, Camden, and East London, a teacher and officer of the North Upton Teachers Association, a parent and governor of one of the zone schools, one of the zone's business partners, and two community activists working in agencies in North Upton. Those participating in these interviews were guaranteed anonymity and are thus not identified.

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