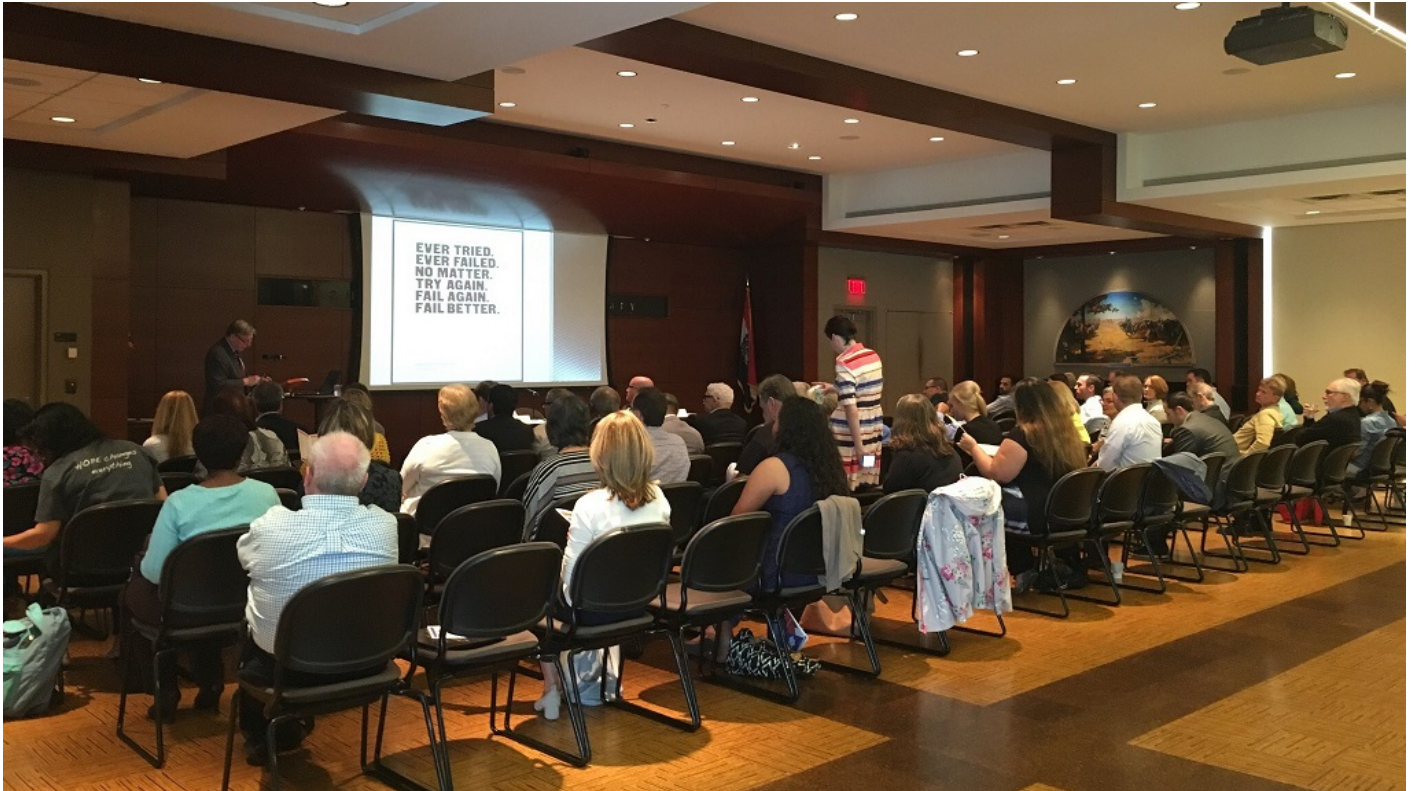




Who Wants to Talk About Failure?

Published on *Show-Me Institute* (<https://showmeinstitute.org>)



By: Michael Q. McShane

It was the Irish Playwright Samuel Beckett who wrote, “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.”

This admonition is often forgotten in the world of education reform, where advocates wade hip-deep into the trenches of political warfare, researchers build staffs that require ever more philanthropic dollars, and writers make the TED talk circuit. Saying “I was wrong” can be seen as suicidal.

But it doesn’t even have to go that far. Policy ideas like charter schools, teacher evaluation, and high standards first exist in the abstract. When they are actually implemented, they look quite different from state to state or district to district. What one state calls “charter schooling” might look different from charter schooling in another state. So, if charter schools struggle in one state, it isn’t necessarily an indictment of the idea a whole. It might just be that the implementation didn’t match the specific environment where it was tried. In an ideal world, we’d learn from that, and do better.

But we don’t. When a new study comes out that says a policy has “failed,” we man the ramparts. Opponents (who were against the policy before any data was available) come out and *tut-tut* at advocates, telling them to “follow the data” or not to “cling to ideology.” Advocates circle the wagons. They spin the findings or pettify the implications. They counter with personal stories

or impugn the motives of critics. Rinse and repeat. (By the way, much of this is covered much more in depth than I can manage here in Rick Hess's great new volume [Letters to a Young Education Reformer](#)).

Now I'm not naïve. Part of this is the way of the world. We live in a dynamic, diverse, pluralistic, democratic republic; the politics that define us, as the old saying goes, ain't beanbag. I'm hard pressed to advise one group or another to unilaterally disarm and allow people who aren't dealing in good faith to seize the high ground. Still, if we want to be better, we've got to do better.

For our part, Jay Greene (head of the University of Arkansas' Department of Education Reform) and I are co-hosting a conference in Kansas City on May 22 where top education researchers are going to talk about failure. We have recruited a rock-star set of presenters who will discuss papers that are slated for publication in the near future by Rowman and Littlefield as an edited volume. Local education figures will serve as discussants, preventing any conversation from being too theoretical.

Authors will tackle many of the major topics of education policy of the last quarter century: Test-based teacher evaluation, technology in classrooms, teacher Preparation, No Child Left Behind, and more. But rather than trying to make some kind of global statement about whether or not something like evaluating teachers based on performance or having the federal government intervene in low-performing schools is a "success" or "failure," authors will dig into specific examples, what went wrong, and most importantly, what we can learn from it.

Anyone who has spent more than a day in front a classroom knows that failure is an essential part of learning. You've got to let a student get a math problem wrong so they can learn how to avoid that mistake in the future. You wouldn't tell her that she should never try and solve for a missing side of a triangle using the Pythagorean Theorem. You'd help her figure out how she applied it incorrectly, or if it was a right triangle in the first place. That's how children get better. It's how adults get better too.

We have to be humble. We are going to get stuff wrong. The more honest we can be about that, and the sooner we can admit we made a mistake, learn from it, and fail better, the better our overall system will be.

About the Author



*Michael McShane
Senior Fellow of Education Policy*

Mike McShane is Senior Fellow of Education Policy for the Show-Me Institute. He is a former high school teacher and earned his PhD in Education Policy at the University of Arkansas. Before coming to the Show-Me Institute, Mike worked at the American Enterprise Institute as a research fellow.

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Show-Me Institute

5297 Washington Place 3645 Troost Avenue
Saint Louis, MO 63108 Kansas City, MO 64109
Phone: (314) 454-0647 Phone: (816) 287-0370
Fax: (314) 454-0667

Email: info@showmeinstitute.org

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