Staking Out the Middle Ground

Policy Design for Autonomous Schools

Kelly Robson, Jennifer O'Neal Schiess, and Phillip Burgoyne-Allen

BELLWETHER
EDUCATION PARTNERS

Table of Contents

Click on each title below to jump directly to the corresponding section.

Executive Summary

The American education system has oscillated between centralization and decentralization since the first public schools opened in the early 19th century.[1] The modern push toward greater decentralization traces its roots to the late 1980s,[2] following the recommendations of several prominent national reports that called for greater school-level decision-making as part of a comprehensive effort to create a more professional working environment for teachers and to improve school performance.[3] States' early efforts at decentralization allowed schools to apply for waivers from a narrow set of policies, such as teacher certification requirements or the length of the school year.[4]

In 1992, the first charter school opened, creating a new sector of public schools based on an explicit autonomy-for-accountability exchange. Traditional districts, meanwhile, have also taken steps toward deregulation and greater school-based decision-making. The 2001 authorization of the federal No Child Left Behind Act demonstrates the traction of this policy trend: NCLB pushed states to establish "site-based management" policies in an effort to ensure the engagement of school communities in decision-making processes affecting their schools and students.

Although the terminology and policy approaches may have shifted over time, the concept of school-based decision-making, or school autonomy, has stuck. Autonomy is often viewed as a strong lever to improve student outcomes. The underlying theory of action asserts that those closest to the students, school leaders and teachers, ought to have authority over decisions that most affect students because their firsthand knowledge and understanding of their students and their needs uniquely situates them to make choices that best meet those needs. If students' specific needs are better met, their outcomes should improve.[5]

Autonomous schools occupy the middle ground between traditional district schools and charter schools.

Today's version of school autonomy is characterized by state-level policies that provide opportunities for schools and districts to gain flexibility from state and local laws, policies, and/or regulations. The autonomous schools operating under these policies occupy the middle ground between traditional district schools and charter schools. They're granted greater autonomy over school-level decisions such as budget, staffing, or curriculum. They may also operate under different governance structures that provide greater separation between the schools and the district compared to traditional district schools. Currently 24 states have policies in place that allow for the creation of autonomous schools.[6] Some places that have implemented autonomous school policies have seen promising trends in student achievement at the same time (see sidebar on page 23). However, many policies are too new to show conclusive results, and they are inherently challenging to evaluate because of the complexity of the policies themselves.

Policymakers and researchers often talk about "autonomous schools" as if there's a single, agreed-upon definition of what that means. In reality, there's no standard design for autonomous school policies, and school autonomy can mean a lot of different things. The policies that states have enacted vary widely in terms of their goals, the parameters of the flexibility that they provide, and the structure of accountability that's in place for autonomous schools. As a result, autonomous schools operate under very different contours of autonomy and accountability from one state or district to the next. In some states, for example, autonomy is only available to schools meeting certain performance thresholds. In others, any school is eligible to apply to become an autonomous school. Some states explicitly name the policies from which all autonomous schools are exempt, while others allow school leaders to pick and choose among a range of policies to waive. It's a diverse and complex policy landscape, and there's very little research on the effectiveness of different design choices.

This report aims to define the range of state and district policy structures that enable school autonomy and accountability and identify common themes in how they are being implemented, so that decision-makers have a stronger understanding of how states and districts are evolving in their approaches to school autonomy and accountability. It's based on our in-depth analysis of autonomous school policies in four states where policies are representative of structures commonly in place across the country: Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, and Massachusetts. We reviewed state laws and regulations and district policies, and interviewed dozens of state, district, and school leaders to develop a deep understanding of the design of each state's autonomous school policies and how they're being implemented on the ground, including an understanding of successes and challenges along the way.

To help make sense of the complexity and variability of the policy structures in play, we begin with a framework in Table 1 that identifies six key dimensions along which autonomous school policies vary and common design approaches to each. We then offer a summary of nine key findings and corresponding considerations for state and local leaders.

In addition to this report, readers can find accompanying documents on our website, including detailed profiles of each of the four states' autonomous school policies, a stand-alone executive summary, and briefs for state and local leaders.

Table 1

Autonomous School Policy Design Framework

Dimension	Common Variations
Policy goals	Legislators may adopt autonomous school policies for a variety of reasons; many policies are designed to pursue several goals in tandem. Common goals for autonomous school policies include: • Improving student outcomes • Responding to competition from charter schools • Intervening in low-performing schools • Strengthening local control • Providing opportunities for innovation
School eligibility	State policies specify which schools are eligible for greater autonomy. School eligibility tends to align with the policy's goals; for example, if a key goal of the policy is to intervene in low-performing schools, legislators may decide that only low-performing schools are eligible to participate. Common school eligibility requirements include: • Low-performing schools only (typically those falling into the bottom set of schools per a given state's accountability system) • Schools implementing specific programs[7] • All schools[8]
Governance structure	Under some states' policies, autonomous schools remain fully part of the school district. Others allow for different governance arrangements. Common governance arrangements for autonomous schools include: • Autonomous schools remain part of the school district; no change in governance • Districts can delegate all, or certain elements of, decision-making authority to an independent board[9] • Autonomous schools can operate as charter schools authorized by independent entities that remain tied to the district through memoranda of understanding (MOUs)[10]
The type of policy flexibility available to schools	State laws outline which policies and regulations districts and state education agencies can waive for autonomous schools. Common approaches to determining which policies are waived for autonomous schools include: • All policies and regulations that are waived for charter schools are automatically waived for autonomous schools • State law outlines which policies are eligible for waivers; individual schools select which policies to waive (waivers may be automatic or require approval) • A district and third-party organization contract to enable policy flexibility in certain matters
How eligible schools access autonomy	State policies outline how schools can access autonomous status under a given policy. Common approaches include: • Schools meeting specified eligibility criteria are automatically granted autonomous status • Schools meeting specified eligibility criteria must apply for autonomous status to the local or state board • Districts opt in to certain autonomy models and confer autonomy to some or all schools in the jurisdiction
Accountability structures	The accountability in place for autonomous schools varies widely by state. Common accountability structures for autonomous schools include: • Autonomous schools are held to the same state accountability system as other district-run schools; there are no additional accountability measures in place • Autonomous schools have goals or expectations in addition to any statewide accountability system, and receive interventions for failing to meet those goals. These goals and interventions may be included in state law, or captured in a contract or MOU with the entity that approved the school's autonomous status (typically the state or district).

This framework illustrates the ways in which autonomous school policies can and do vary and can enable stakeholders to understand the various permutations to consider in designing a policy to meet particular goals. In addition to this framework, our research surfaced nine key findings related to autonomous school policy design and implementation. These findings are organized into three categories with corresponding considerations for policymakers.
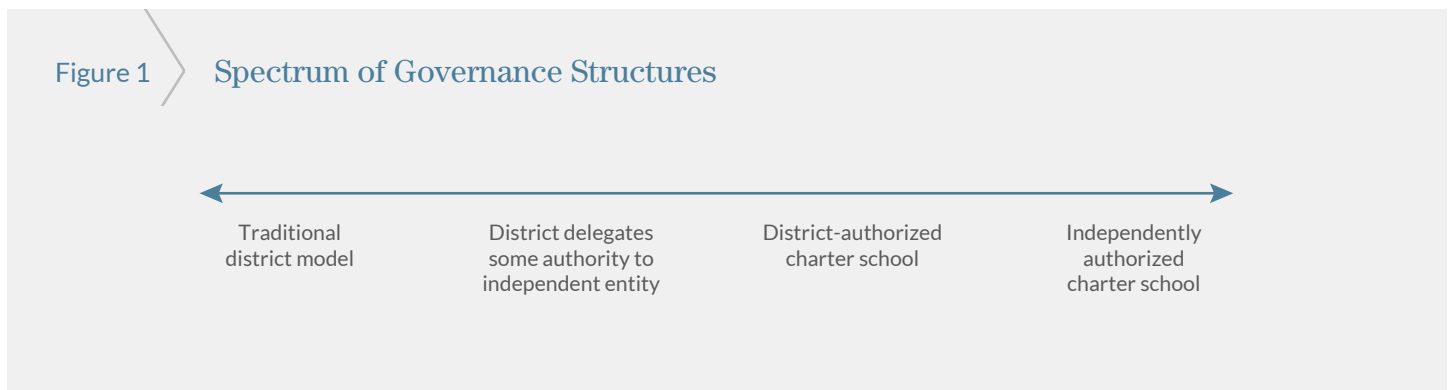
School Autonomy and Governance

There's no one-size-fits-all approach to autonomy.

Flexibility from specific state and/or district laws, policies, and regulations forms the basis of autonomous school policy design decisions. However, there's no one-size-fits-all approach to autonomy across the states in our sample. Rather, the states have adopted a number of different autonomous school policies, each with different contours related to autonomy.

Finding 1: Variance in governance structure determines the degree of independence from the district.

Governance structure describes the degree to which a school or set of schools is or is not directly managed by and accountable to a school district. Governance structure varies along a spectrum illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 > Spectrum of Governance Structures

Traditional district model — District delegates some authority to independent entity — District-authorized charter school — Independently authorized charter school

Finding 2: Variance in school-based autonomy determines the degree to which school leaders hold decision-making authority over a school's program and operations.

The degree of school-based autonomy considers the degree of decision-making authority that a principal or other school leaders have over core elements of their school's model, such as budgeting, staffing, curriculum, or professional development. Generally speaking, school-based autonomy can be low, medium, or high, as outlined in Figure 2. A low level of autonomy means that district leaders make nearly all operational and instructional decisions on behalf of schools; school leaders act primarily as managers implementing those decisions. A medium level of autonomy means that school leaders are empowered to make decisions over a defined subset of operational and instructional elements, but district leaders retain some centralized decision-making authority (e.g., maintaining standard school calendars or centralizing curriculum decisions). A high level of autonomy means that school leaders act as CEOs, making nearly all operational and instructional decisions for their schools.
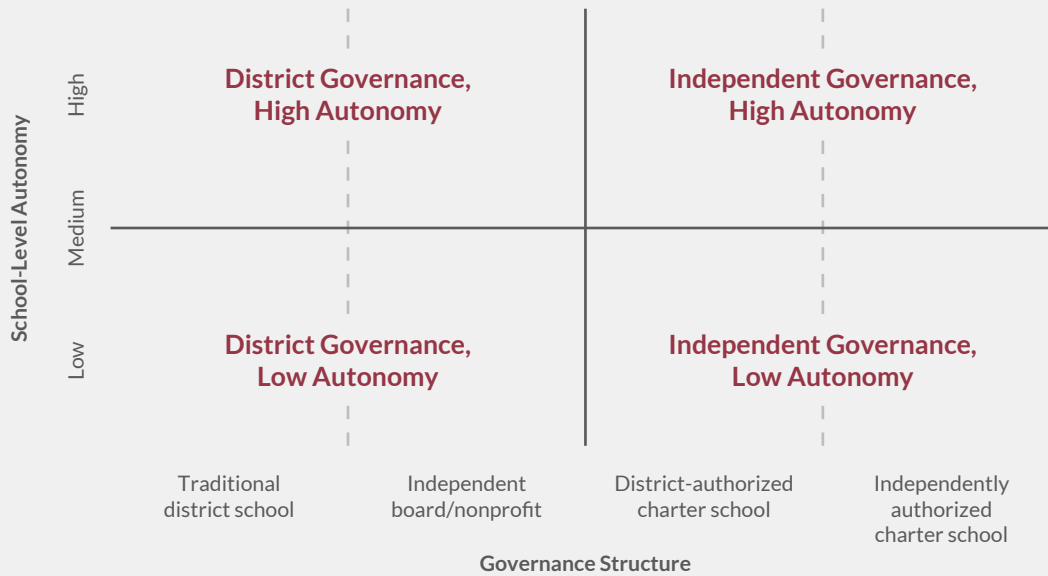
Figure 2 > Spectrum of School-Based Autonomy

Low   Medium   High

Finding 3: Governance structure and school-level autonomy interact in ways that shape how school leaders experience flexibility.

Governance structure and school-based autonomy often vary together, but they don't always.

Governance structure and school-based autonomy often vary together, but they don't always. Schools' governance structures can provide a low level of independence from the district, but the district may still provide a high degree of school-based autonomy. Schools can also govern themselves more independently from the district, but ultimately have a lower degree of school-based autonomy than traditional district schools. Figure 3 illustrates the four main categories created by the interaction of governance structure and school-based autonomy.

School-Level Autonomy

High — **District Governance, High Autonomy** | **Independent Governance, High Autonomy**

Medium

Low — **District Governance, Low Autonomy** | **Independent Governance, Low Autonomy**

Traditional district school | Independent board/nonprofit | District-authorized charter school | Independently authorized charter school

Governance Structure

Budget, staffing, and curriculum are the three major buckets of decision-making authority that have the greatest impact on school leaders' ability to make decisions in the best interest of their students.

Finding 4: State, district, and school leaders identify budget, staffing, and curriculum as critical elements for enabling meaningful school-level autonomy.

School leaders from all four states identified budget, staffing, and curriculum as the three major buckets of decision-making authority that have the greatest impact on their ability to make decisions in the best interest of their students. Budget flexibility enables principals to purchase additional resources and supplies for their students and teachers, but it also allows them to be creative in solving problems. Staffing autonomy includes a number of elements, such as having the ability to hire the type of staff a principal needs to execute her school's programmatic vision or to dismiss teachers and staff who are not meeting expectations. Finally, school leaders indicate that having the ability to choose the curricular materials that their students use is another crucial element of being able to leverage autonomy to pursue a specific vision for their schools.

School Autonomy and Governance
Recommendations for State and Local Leaders

State Leaders

- **Determine where on the 2x2 of governance structure and school-level autonomy schools need to be to meet the state's goals, and craft a policy accordingly.** There are a number of goals that a state might be pursuing by adopting an autonomous school policy. The 2x2 provided in Figure 3 can help policymakers identify the right balance of autonomy and governance to enable their states' autonomous schools to meet the policy's goals.

- **At a minimum, develop policy parameters that enable greater budget, staffing, and curriculum flexibility.** School leaders consistently identify these autonomies as critical to executing school-level decision-making, so any autonomous policy ought to include these autonomies at a minimum.

Local Leaders

- **Develop a clear theory of action for how increased autonomy will help a school achieve its goals.** School leaders, with the support of district personnel, should work to develop a clear plan for how the autonomies they are using will help them achieve their goals for their school and students. Having a clear plan and theory of action will enable school and district leaders to apply flexibility with intention and measure and evaluate progress to support course corrections as necessary.

School Accountability

Accountability is the other half of the autonomy-for-accountability bargain. While the charter theory of action encompasses a relatively straightforward approach to accountability — in strong charter sectors, schools that fail to meet the expectations outlined in their contracts face increasing interventions up to and including closure — the breadth of autonomous school policy designs complicates the design of accountability structures. Determining whether autonomy is "working," and thus whether a school ought to be subject to interventions, isn't straightforward. The variety of policy goals, coupled with a lack of data, make it challenging for policymakers to hold autonomous schools accountable, or even clearly define accountability structures consistent with policy design elements.

Finding 5: The breadth of autonomous school policy designs complicates the development and implementation of appropriate accountability structures.

Designing accountability structures for autonomous schools is not as clear-cut as it is for charter schools. For example, in some states, autonomy is an intervention for persistently low-performing schools; in those cases, what should accountability look like? Policymakers must consider carefully the purpose of the policy, the types of schools that are participating, and other accountability structures already in place in the state in order to craft an accountability system that supports autonomous schools in meeting the goals of the policy.

Finding 6: States collect limited data on the implementation of their autonomous school policies, which limits both understanding of how districts and schools are using autonomy and any measure of impact on student learning.

Developing a structure that holds autonomous schools accountable for meeting their goals requires having a nuanced understanding of the level of autonomy and decision-making authority a school leader has over various elements of her school, the degree of fidelity with which that autonomy is being implemented, and the extent to which those elements are related to student outcomes (or any other goals an autonomous school has in place). Gathering this information requires robust data collection policies and sophisticated data analysis procedures. Only then can policymakers begin to determine when and how to intervene in a struggling autonomous school.

School Accountability
Recommendations for State and Local Leaders

State Leaders

- **Develop accountability structures that are clearly tied to the policy's goals and the needs of participating schools.** Accountability for autonomous schools is not straightforward. Policymakers must create accountability systems that meet the different needs of participating schools. For example, a policy aimed at supporting turnarounds might need an accountability system that relies on growth and improvement metrics, while revocation of autonomy might be a meaningful accountability measure for a policy that provides autonomy as a "privilege" to high-performing schools.

- **Develop a system to collect and use data on the autonomies that schools are implementing and the results they are achieving.** Collecting and analyzing data on autonomous schools will help schools, districts, and policymakers both evaluate individual schools' performance and assess the efficacy of the policy overall. States should collect data on the number of schools participating in the policy, the type of autonomy they're implementing, and the degree of implementation, as well as student test scores, demographics, and other data relevant to the policy's goals (e.g., school culture data).

Local Leaders

- **Ensure alignment between school-based autonomies and school goals.** In contexts where school districts are empowered to approve autonomous school plans, districts need review processes that ensure tight alignment between a school's goals and the autonomies it is requesting. This will enable districts to conduct quality evaluations of schools' plans and progress over time.

- **Develop high-quality data collection, reporting, and analysis procedures.** Schools and districts need to develop good data policies and procedures to support their own evaluation and continuous improvement and to facilitate the state's data collection and policy evaluation efforts.

Implementation

The findings related to policy design discussed above can help policymakers think through key considerations during the policy design process. But policymakers' work does not end with designing the autonomy and accountability facets of the policy. Our research surfaced several other factors related to on-the-ground implementation that policymakers should consider as they craft autonomous school policies and that local leaders must consider in their implementation.

Finding 7: Most traditional school leader preparation programs do not prepare candidates with the skills and mindsets necessary to run autonomous schools.

Effectively leveraging autonomy as a school leader requires different skills and mindsets compared to leading a traditional district school.

Effectively leveraging autonomy as a school leader requires different skills and mindsets compared to leading a traditional district school. Leaders must have not only a proven track record of quality school leadership, but they must also be up for a new challenge, ready to try new things, able to work through complexity and ambiguity, and willing to think strategically about their goals for their students and their schools and how to achieve them.[11] Most traditional school leader preparation programs do not train school leaders in these skills and mindsets; as a result, school leaders may need additional training and support as they take on a new role.

Finding 8: Shared services between school districts and autonomous schools can be an incentive for some leaders and operators, but can also create additional challenges.

School districts typically provide a number of services for their traditional schools, including enrollment, facilities maintenance, food service, and transportation. They often provide the same services for autonomous schools, but they don't always. Some districts have opted for arrangements that allow autonomous schools to purchase their own services, either from the district or from independent vendors. These various arrangements can have pros and cons for autonomous schools. In some cases, shared services boost the efficient provision of necessary infrastructure, but in others, centralizing these functions can unintentionally constrain the ability of schools to exercise autonomies critical to their vision. As a result, whether and how the district and its autonomous schools will share services ought to be a critical discussion point.

Finding 9: Autonomous school policies can be an avenue for creating community buy-in and support for local schools.

Many of the leaders we spoke with indicated that delegating decision-making authority to the most local entity possible — the school — can help reestablish community support for and input in the local education system. Some autonomous school polices require approval or input from teachers and community members before autonomous status can be granted.

Implementation
Recommendations for State and Local Leaders

State Leaders

- **Provide resources for implementation.** Running an autonomous school requires different skills and knowledge than running a traditional public school. Many school and district leaders noted this as a pain point for implementing autonomous school policies. State leaders can help mitigate this challenge by providing additional resources, such as funding or technical assistance, to support leaders as they embrace their new responsibilities.

Local Leaders

- **Provide support for school leaders and central office staff as decision-making shifts to the school level.** Both school and district leaders require different approaches to leadership and decision-making to effectively implement school autonomy. District leaders may want to consider creating a separate office to oversee and support autonomous schools, given their differing needs. District leaders should work to understand the skills and mindsets that currently exist at the district and school level, and develop training and support for staff to hone the skills necessary to successfully implement an autonomous school model, especially since district staff roles may shift as schools take on greater decision-making authority.

- **Be explicit about which services will and won't be shared between the district and its autonomous schools, and understand how the chosen approach will impact both entities.** While shared services between school districts and autonomous schools can be an incentive for participation in some contexts, it can also create challenges. District leaders should facilitate a thoughtful conversation about the extent to which autonomous schools will or will not have access to district services, such as food service, transportation, or facilities management.

- **Create opportunities for community input in autonomous schools.** Autonomous schools can provide school systems with an opportunity to engage community members in meaningful local control of schools. If this is a goal for local leaders, districts ought to develop structures, such as local school governance teams, that enable community members to work closely with school staff and district leaders in the creation and ongoing operation of autonomous schools.

School autonomy has a long history, and these policies continue to proliferate, whether as a tool for turnaround, a mechanism for strengthening local control, or as a means of providing district schools with similar flexibility to charter schools with which they compete for students. With the success of high-quality charter schools and some promising examples of autonomous district schools, it is likely that an increasing number of states and districts will adopt and implement autonomous school policies.

We hope that a stronger understanding of key policy design elements along with insight into how these policy design decisions play out will help leaders, authorizers, and advocates better understand the challenges and opportunities of these policies to enable strong policy design and implementation support in pursuit of them.

Introduction

Since the first charter school opened nearly three decades ago in Minnesota, the concept of "school autonomy" has become nearly synonymous with the charter school sector, reflected in the exchange of increased autonomy for increased accountability that is the foundation of the charter school theory of change. By definition, charter schools are public schools that are freed from many of the rules and regulations that govern schools operating in traditional school districts. Charter schools manage their own budgets, choose or design their own instructional programs and curricula, hire and fire teachers, define their own school day and school year calendars, and more. They're also typically responsible for managing all of the operational elements of the school, such as transportation, facilities, food services, human resources, and finances. In exchange for this freedom, or autonomy, charter schools are held accountable for their outcomes by authorizers, entities that approve charter schools' applications and provide them with oversight and support. Charter schools are often subject to regular review cycles and must be renewed to continue operation. Authorizers may support expansion or replication of high performers. On the flip side, if charter schools fail to meet the goals outlined in their charter, authorizers have the authority to intervene in any number of ways, up to and including closing the school.

This structure is quite different from how traditional public school districts operate. School districts typically centrally manage most of the operational components of schools, such as facilities, transportation, food service, human resources, and more, with oversight by a school board (most often locally elected). A district's central office also often manages

programmatic elements of schools, such as choosing curriculum for all subjects and grade levels in the district, prescribing teacher professional development, and setting a districtwide calendar and daily bell schedules. Typically, all schools within a district adhere to the district's policies, such that, for example, all schools operate on the same calendar and all fifth-graders use the same math textbook and materials. District schools' test scores are reported annually, and struggling schools may face interventions from the state or district. But they're not accountable to the district in the same way that charter schools are accountable to their authorizers. While school districts track school performance and may provide supports or interventions to underperforming schools, district schools are not required to qualify for periodic renewal based on performance in the same way as charter schools. Further, school districts rarely close schools for poor performance, but schools may face consequential interventions from the state under state accountability systems.

States are increasingly adopting policies that create "autonomous" schools, which fall somewhere between traditional district and charter schools.

While these two management and oversight models seem mutually exclusive on paper, new school models make the distinction less explicit. In particular, states are increasingly adopting policies that create "autonomous" schools, which fall somewhere between traditional district and charter schools. Autonomous school policies encourage and formalize greater school-level autonomy and flexibility over things like budget, staffing, or curriculum decisions. Sometimes they create new governance structures as well, such as when a district delegates operational control and oversight over a set of schools to an independent nonprofit organization.

Autonomy is often viewed as a strong lever to improve student outcomes. It draws on the promise of the autonomy-for-accountability model that has seen some success in the charter sector, and is a deliberate effort to transfer decision-making over core school-level decisions to those closest to the students. The theory of action underlying this model asserts that those closest to the students, school leaders and teachers, ought to have authority over decisions that most affect students because their firsthand knowledge and understanding of their students and their needs uniquely situates them to make choices that best meet those needs. If students' specific needs are better met, their outcomes should improve.[12]

States' approaches to autonomous school policies vary considerably. In some states, for example, autonomy is only available to schools meeting certain performance thresholds. In other states, any school is eligible to apply to become an autonomous school. Some states develop an explicit set of policies from which all autonomous schools are exempt, while others provide school leaders the opportunity to apply for waivers from specific policies. States' autonomous school policies vary along these and other dimensions, creating an incredibly diverse landscape. But it also means that the field lacks a standard definition of an "autonomous school." The lack of a standard definition of or approach to autonomy complicates the accountability side of the equation. It also makes it tough to answer the question, "Does autonomy work?"

We believe that the field would benefit from greater nuance and clarity on questions of how these policies are constructed and implemented, for what purposes or goals, and what features or structures of these policies support the most promising implementation.

This report aims to define the range of state and district policy structures that enable school autonomy and accountability and identify common themes in how they are being implemented in order to provide decision-makers with a stronger understanding of how states and districts are evolving in their approach to school autonomy and accountability. We do not attempt to make an argument for or against autonomous school policies or determine whether they are "working." Rather, our starting point is the fact that more and more states are pursuing these kinds of policies. We believe that the field would benefit from greater nuance and clarity on questions of how these policies are constructed and implemented, for what purposes or goals, and what features or structures of these policies support the most promising implementation. We hope that a stronger understanding of the extent to which schools are empowered to make a difference for students will help leaders, authorizers, and advocates better understand the challenges and opportunities of these policies and make more strategic decisions in the pursuit of them.

The discussion that follows is based on our in-depth analysis of autonomous school policies in four states with policies that are representative of models found across the country: Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, and Massachusetts. We reviewed state laws and regulations and district policies and interviewed dozens of state, district, and school leaders to develop a deep understanding of the design of each state's autonomous school policies and how they're being implemented on the ground, including an understanding of successes and challenges along the way. We begin with a framework to help policymakers understand the key components of autonomous school policy designs. We then move into a discussion of nine key findings that surfaced in our analysis. These findings are organized into three categories; each category concludes with a set of recommendations for state and local leaders.

In addition to this report, readers can find accompanying documents on our website, including detailed profiles of each of the four states' autonomous school policies, a stand-alone executive summary, and briefs for state and local leaders.

The Landscape of Autonomous School Policies

The American education system has swung back and forth between centralization and decentralization since the first public schools opened in the early 19th century.[13] Today's push toward greater decentralization traces its roots to the late 1980s[14] and the recommendations of several prominent national reports.[15] The 1986 Carnegie report "A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century," for example, recommended that states and districts give educators greater decision-making authority over how best to meet state and local standards as part of a comprehensive effort to create a more professional working environment for teachers and improve school performance.[16] States' early efforts at deregulation typically included offering waivers from policies such as teacher certification requirements or the length of the school year. These waiver programs were often narrow in scope and only modestly affected school practice.[17]

Though the terminology and policy approaches have shifted over the intervening years, the concept of school-based decision-making, or autonomy, has stuck.

In 1992, the first charter school opened, creating a new sector of public schools based on an explicit autonomy-for-accountability exchange. Traditional school districts, meanwhile, have continued to take steps toward devolving greater decision-making authority to the school level. For example, following the authorization of No Child Left Behind in 2001, states began to experiment with school-based decision-making, sometimes called "site-based management." By 2005, 34 states had statutes in place related to site-based decision-making, 17 of which mandated site-based decision-making statewide.[18] Though the terminology and policy approaches have shifted over the intervening years, the concept of school-based decision-making, or autonomy, has stuck.[19]

*Today's version of
school autonomy
is characterized by
policies that provide
opportunities for schools
and districts to gain
flexibility from certain
state and/or district laws
and regulations.*

Today's version of school autonomy is characterized by policies that provide opportunities for schools and districts to gain flexibility from certain state and/or district laws and regulations. Currently 24 states have policies in place that allow for this type of school-level flexibility.[20] These policies vary widely in terms of their goals, the parameters of the flexibility that they provide, and the structure of accountability that's in place for participating schools. Even so, policymakers and researchers often talk about "autonomous schools" as if there's a single, agreed-upon definition of what that means. In reality, there's no standard design for autonomous school policies; school autonomy is actually a lot of different things.

The landscape is complex, and we're certainly not the first to try to make sense of it. In 2017, for example, the Center for Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) examined what it calls partnership schools — schools that enjoy charter-like flexibility but remain more tightly tied to a local district.[21] It found that these schools offer a "third way" to improve education while assuaging community and political fears that often plague the charter sector.[22] In 2019, Public Impact created a framework to categorize different autonomous school models. Its framework offered three categories of autonomous schools: 1) district-run, in which schools may have waivers from some district policies but maintain a traditional relationship with the district otherwise; 2) partner-led, in which the district devolves some operational authority over the school to an independent organization; and 3) partner-run, in which the district devolves full operational authority to an independent organization and maintains governance over that school only as specified in a performance contract.[23]

Our own research surfaced six core design elements that shape autonomous school policies: the policy's goals, school eligibility rules, the resulting governance structure, the type of policy flexibility available to schools, how eligible schools access autonomy, and the accountability structures that are in place for participating schools. These six design elements provide a framework for policymakers and researchers as they seek to design and study autonomous school policies. Table 1 summarizes common approaches to these six dimensions.

These dimensions manifest differently across our four states' autonomous school policies. In Massachusetts, for example, one type of autonomous school, Horace Mann charter schools, automatically receives the same autonomies as the state's independently run charter schools. In Colorado, on the other hand, the state's autonomous schools, called innovation schools, each apply for waivers from specific policies rather than being granted a standard set of autonomies. Some states have more than one policy, with each policy approaching these policy design dimensions differently. Indiana, for example, has one

Table 1

Autonomous School Policy Design Framework

Dimension	Common Variations
Policy goals	Legislators may adopt autonomous school policies for a variety of reasons; many policies are designed to pursue several goals in tandem. Common goals for autonomous school policies include: • Improving student outcomes • Responding to competition from charter schools • Intervening in low-performing schools • Strengthening local control • Providing opportunities for innovation
School eligibility	State policies specify which schools are eligible for greater autonomy. School eligibility tends to align with the policy's goals; for example, if a key goal of the policy is to intervene in low-performing schools, legislators may decide that only low-performing schools are eligible to participate. Common school eligibility requirements include: • Low-performing schools only (typically those falling into the bottom set of schools per a given state's accountability system) • Schools implementing specific programs[24] • All schools[25]
Governance structure	Under some states' policies, autonomous schools remain fully part of the school district. Others allow for different governance arrangements. Common governance arrangements for autonomous schools include: • Autonomous schools remain part of the school district; no change in governance • Districts can delegate all, or certain elements of, decision-making authority to an independent board[26] • Autonomous schools can operate as charter schools authorized by independent entities that remain tied to the district through memoranda of understanding (MOUs)[27]
The type of policy flexibility available to schools	State laws outline which policies and regulations districts and state education agencies can waive for autonomous schools. Common approaches to determining which policies are waived for autonomous schools include: • All policies and regulations that are waived for charter schools are automatically waived for autonomous schools • State law outlines which policies are eligible for waivers; individual schools select which policies to waive (waivers may be automatic or require approval) • A district and third-party organization contract to enable policy flexibility in certain matters
How eligible schools access autonomy	State policies outline how schools can access autonomous status under a given policy. Common approaches include: • Schools meeting specified eligibility criteria are automatically granted autonomous status • Schools meeting specified eligibility criteria must apply for autonomous status to the local or state board • Districts opt in to certain autonomy models and confer autonomy to some or all schools in the jurisdiction
Accountability structures	The accountability in place for autonomous schools varies widely by state. Common accountability structures for autonomous schools include: • Autonomous schools are held to the same state accountability system as other district-run schools; there are no additional accountability measures in place • Autonomous schools have goals or expectations in addition to any statewide accountability system, and receive interventions for failing to meet those goals. These goals and interventions may be included in state law, or captured in a contract or MOU with the entity that approved the school's autonomous status (typically the state or district).

policy for "transformation zones," which currently focuses only on turnaround efforts, and another that provides for autonomous "innovation network" schools. (More details about each state's approach to these dimensions are available in the state profiles document available on our website.)

This framework provides a way for stakeholders to understand the ways in which autonomous school policies can and do vary. With this structure in mind, the following section presents key themes and findings that offer insight into how different design decisions can shape how a policy is implemented on the ground.

Autonomous School Policies and Student Outcomes

There's no conclusive evidence on the question of whether autonomy "works." There are several reasons for this. Paramount is the fact that autonomy is not a single thing; there are myriad iterations of autonomous school policies with different goals, contexts, and constraints. Because there's no common definition of an "autonomous school," it's impossible to determine whether autonomous schools writ large improve student outcomes. Related to that is the fact that states have different goals and set different eligibility criteria for schools. In some states, all schools can participate in an autonomous policy while in other states, only the lowest-performing schools are eligible. The dramatically different purposes and starting points of participating schools complicates researchers' ability to determine whether autonomy "works" for what purposes and under what circumstances. Finally, there's limited data on the implementation of autonomous school policies. It's not clear the extent to which these policies are being implemented with fidelity, making it difficult to control for degree of implementation in determining whether and how these policies meet their goals.

Despite the variability in policy design and resulting challenges, there are several studies that have attempted to answer the question, "Does autonomy work?" The results are largely inconclusive, but there are some promising trends that merit continued attention:

- Recent research analyzing the performance of Denver's district, charter, and innovation (autonomous) schools finds that over the past three years, a higher percentage of students attending traditional district schools met or exceeded expectations on the statewide mathematics assessment compared to those attending charter or innovation schools.[28] However, the percentage of students meeting or exceeding expectations in math has increased over the past three years for both innovation and district-run schools, while it has remained relatively flat for those attending charter schools.

- A recent report from the Public Policy Institute found an overall positive relationship between school autonomy and student achievement in four cities, when controlling for variables including ethnicity, race, language proficiency, socioeconomic status, and special education status.[29] However, while students attending autonomous schools outperform their peers in traditional district schools on average, they tend to lag the performance of charter schools. And performance tends to vary within a given city by type of autonomous school.[30]

Analyses of policies aimed at turning around low-performing schools have been inconsistent, with a mix of inconclusive or negative outcomes and promising results:

- Analysis of six years of performance data from schools participating in Tennessee's iZones, which are intra-district networks of a district's lowest-performing schools, found that on average iZone interventions have had a statistically significant, positive impact on students' math and science scores.[31] However, these positive effects are not consistent from year to year and appear to dwindle after the second year of the intervention.

- Analysis of data from the Lawrence Public School district in Lawrence, Massachusetts, which entered into state receivership as a result of persistent poor performance and received greater school-level autonomy as one component of a multifaceted turnaround effort, found promising early results after two years of implementation, especially for students' math achievement and among English language learner students.[32]

- A state progress report on the first two years of the Springfield Empowerment Zone in Springfield, Massachusetts, where the district delegated operational control over a set of low-performing schools to an independent nonprofit, suggests that students attending schools in the zone were growing faster in reading outcomes compared to other urban middle schools in the state.[33]

- Student test scores from the first year of Transform Waco, where the Waco, Texas school district delegated operational control over a set of low-performing schools to an independent nonprofit, demonstrate mixed results: After their first year, three of the five Transformation Waco schools saw improved math and reading scores.[34] The other two schools, however, received a rating of "failing" from the state department of education.[35]

Although evidence to date doesn't conclusively point to autonomy as "working," as the examples above illustrate, there is positive progress in student outcomes in several cases, including in some turnaround situations where improvement has been elusive over the years. As a result, we suggest that it's a promising lever for improving student outcomes despite many moving pieces, open questions, and many opportunities for additional research.

Key Findings

This section presents nine key findings from our research, organized into three overarching categories: School autonomy and governance, school accountability, and implementation. The first category considers the policy design decisions related to school autonomy and governance, in particular how decisions in these two areas affect how school leaders experience autonomy on a day-to-day basis in their schools. The second category looks at policy design decisions related to accountability. The diverse nature of autonomous school policy designs complicates the accountability side of the equation, both in terms of the actual accountability structures put in place and the type of data that need to be collected in order to answer critical questions about the success of a given policy.

The final category highlights key considerations for the implementation of autonomous school policies. Once policymakers have crafted the autonomy and accountability components of the actual policy, factors such as training and support for school leaders, the structure of shared services between districts and autonomous schools, and the relationship between autonomous schools and their communities remain critical places for consideration.

School Autonomy and Governance

Flexibility from specific state and/or district laws, policies, and regulations forms the basis of autonomous school policy design decisions. However, there's no one-size-fits-all approach to autonomy across the states in our sample. Rather, states have adopted a number of different autonomous school policies, each with different contours related to autonomy.

The variations in policy design related to school autonomy matter for policymakers and advocates looking to promote decision-making at the school level, because these design choices affect how much school-level decision-making authority a charter school or an autonomous district school truly has. That decision-making authority will determine how responsive school leaders can be to the specific needs of their students and how well a system of schools can work to create a range of quality school options to meet the needs and preferences of students and families.

Finding 1: Variance in governance structure determines the degree of independence from the school district.

Governance structure, or the degree to which a given school (or set of schools) is or is not directly managed by and accountable to a school district, varies along a spectrum.

Governance structure, or the degree to which a given school (or set of schools) is or is not directly managed by and accountable to a school district, varies along a spectrum illustrated in Figure 1. At the far left of the spectrum is the traditional school district model. In this model, the district has complete authority to manage its schools in whatever manner district leaders think is best. The district also has full accountability for the outcomes of the schools it governs.

Moving slightly to the right on the spectrum brings us to schools or sets of schools (zones) that are operated by an independent board. In these models, the schools typically remain part of the district in terms of accountability and reporting of student data, but the district delegates certain management authorities to an independent board, usually established through a nonprofit organization. The degree of management control that the independent board exercises varies from state to state and even district to district within a given state, but is determined through contracts, MOUs, or other agreements with the district.

There are a few permutations of this second model. Public Impact, for example, differentiates between partner-led schools, where the district transfers some operational authority to an independent entity but maintains control of core operational elements of the school, and partner-run schools, in which the district transfers nearly all operational authority to an independent entity and maintains oversight only insofar as is outlined in a performance contract.[36] CRPE calls these schools "partnership schools."[37] Regardless of their name, schools operating at this point on the spectrum have governance structures that provide some independence from the district compared to traditional district schools.

Moving one more step to the right brings us to charter schools that are authorized by a school district. By virtue of being a charter school, district-authorized charter schools have greater operational independence from the district as specified in their charter or contract with the district, and accountability falls squarely on the charter school board, not the district. However, as some research suggests, district-authorized charter schools may not be fully independent from district management and oversight. The Fordham Institute, for example, found that school districts were more likely to place additional restrictions on the schools they authorize compared to independent authorizers, such as nonprofit authorizers or state boards of education.[38] We heard this echoed in our own research, as well. In Colorado, for example, the vast majority of charter schools are authorized by local school districts. Each district chooses for itself which policies it will and won't consider waiving for the charter schools it authorizes. Some districts require their charter schools to abide by the district's safety policy, others require charter schools to use the district's business services, while others must use the district's special education services to serve their students.[39] All of these district-imposed requirements have the ability to limit the autonomy of district-authorized charter schools.

At the far other end of the spectrum from traditional school districts are independently authorized charter schools. Across all of our states, these charter schools are authorized by entities other than school districts (e.g., the state board or a nonprofit organization) and are governed by independent boards. Independently authorized charter schools operate separately from the district in which they are geographically located, functioning instead as their own districts. The school district has no input into how these charter schools operate; it also has no accountability for their outcomes.

Figure 1 > Spectrum of Governance Structures

Traditional
district model

District delegates
some authority to
independent entity

District-authorized
charter school

Independently
authorized
charter school
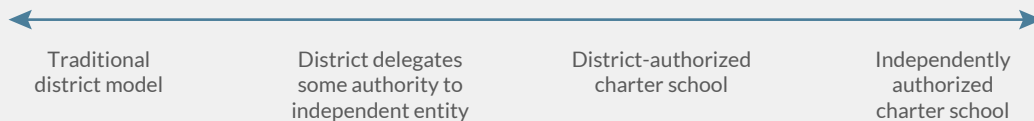
Finding 2: Variance in school-based autonomy determines the extent to which school leaders hold decision-making authority over a school's program and operations.

The degree of school-based autonomy considers the degree of decision-making authority that a principal or other school leaders have over core elements of their school's model, such as budgeting, staffing, curriculum, or professional development. Generally speaking, school-based autonomy can be low, medium, or high, as outlined in Figure 2. The degree of school-based autonomy is influenced by the school's governance structure, but even within a given governance structure, school-level autonomy can vary.

Schools operating in a traditional district model generally have a low degree of school-based autonomy. This means that district leaders make nearly all operational and instructional decisions on behalf of schools; school leaders act primarily as managers implementing those decisions. For example, many districts adopt textbooks and materials districtwide for all subjects and grade levels. As a result, all third-graders in a traditional district, regardless of which elementary school they attend, receive instruction based on the same curriculum. These decisions may, in turn, influence decisions about what professional development opportunities are provided to teachers. In traditional districts, the central office often makes all or most budget decisions and may determine schools' staffing levels or even make specific hiring decisions, as well as other core decisions.

While this level of centralization is typical of traditional school districts, it's not uncommon to find elements of it in the charter sector as well. For example, a charter management organization (CMO) may select curricular materials for use networkwide or design or determine professional development opportunities for teachers across its network. So while charter schools fall on the right half of the governance structure spectrum, with independence from a school district, individual charter school principals may not necessarily have more school-based autonomy than a principal in a traditional district school.

Under a medium degree of school-based autonomy, school leaders are empowered to make decisions over a defined subset of operational and instructional elements, but district leaders retain some centralized decision-making authority (e.g., maintaining standard school calendars or centralizing curriculum decisions). In Denver, for example, the district gives principals in its traditionally operated schools control over approximately 75% of their budgets.[40] These principals determine how to spend these dollars based on what they believe their students need. The remaining 25% of funds are budgeted centrally to pay for central operations and administration.[41]

A high degree of school-based autonomy means that school leaders act as CEOs, making nearly all operational and instructional decisions for their schools. In the Springfield Empowerment Zone, for example, school leaders can hire and evaluate teachers, and with input from school-based, majority-elected Teacher Leadership Teams, can set the calendar

and schedule, choose curriculum and purchase associated materials, and make other programmatic decisions as makes sense for the school's and students' needs.[42]

Spectrum of School-Based Autonomy

Low   Medium   High
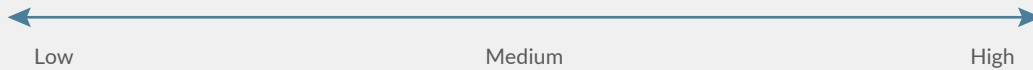
How schools experience autonomy is not uniform; it's unlikely that a district autonomous school will have a high degree of autonomy over *every* school-based decision. It's much more likely that the degree of autonomy will vary for different types of decisions, meaning that a given school may have a high level of autonomy over some decisions while having much less autonomy over others. This is the case in Atlanta, where school leaders possess a high degree of autonomy over curricular decisions, with the ability to choose and purchase materials unique to their school. They have a medium degree of control over their budget, receiving a substantial portion of their per-student funding and the ability to spend it as they see fit, within some broad guardrails provided by the district. But Atlanta's school leaders have a low degree of autonomy over their school calendar — while they can make some changes to the daily bell schedule, all Atlanta schools must follow the same districtwide school-year calendar.[43]

The degree of autonomy over a given element of a school's operation may even vary from school to school within a state.

The degree of autonomy over a given element of a school's operation may even vary from school to school within a state. In Colorado, for example, schools seeking innovation status must develop a plan for their school, which includes a list of the policies and regulations from which they are seeking waivers. They submit this plan to the local school district, which can either approve or deny it. The discretion given to school districts results in substantial variation across the state. For example, innovation schools can apply for waivers from the district's school-year calendar policies. The Denver Public School system has approved several innovation school plans that include calendar waivers, which has resulted in a number of innovation schools operating on a different school-year calendar than the district's traditionally run schools.[44] South of Denver, District 49 also has a large number of innovation schools. Early on, several of these schools applied for and were granted calendar waivers by the district. However, logistical complications related primarily to transportation resulted in the district rolling back the approval of these waivers. Currently,

no innovation schools in District 49 operate with a calendar waiver, and district officials indicate that they are unlikely to approve a plan that includes a calendar waiver.[45]

These variations create a complex and evolving environment in a given district, much less statewide or across states. Even in places like Atlanta, where the schools all operate under a traditional governance model, there's likely to be substantial variation in the day-to-day experiences of students attending different schools across the district. That's even more likely in Denver, where innovation schools apply for individual waivers from policies, so no two innovation schools are set up the same. And the discretion given to districts to approve or deny applications leads to even further variation in day-to-day school experiences.

This variation and flexibility under the policy can allow for districts to be responsive to the needs and preferences of their specific communities. However, the Colorado example illustrates the flip side — that with that flexibility, some districts may be unwilling or unable to grant certain autonomies even when they are desired by school communities. Policymakers should consider constraints that may drive districts to limit school-level decision-making and how the policy or additional supports could enhance that potential.

Finding 3: Governance structure and school-level autonomy interact in ways that shape how school leaders experience flexibility.

Governance structure and school-based autonomy often vary together, but they don't always.

Governance structure and school-based autonomy often vary together, but they don't always. Schools' governance structures can provide a low level of independence from the district, but the district may still provide a high degree of school-based autonomy. This is the case in Boston's pilot schools, for example. The district manages these schools and retains accountability for them; however, the Boston Public School district (BPS) has opted to transfer decision-making authority in a number of categories (e.g., hiring, budget, curriculum, etc.) over to school principals.[46]

Schools can also govern themselves more independently from the district, but ultimately have a lower degree of school-based autonomy than traditional district schools. Strive Prep, for example, is a CMO that operates 11 charter schools in Denver, Colorado. As charter schools, they are overseen and operated by an independent board. That board is held accountable for the schools' performance outcomes. But all of Strive Prep's schools are authorized by the Denver Public Schools (DPS) district, which keeps them connected in some ways to the district. For example, DPS engages in a modified insurance model for special education services with its charter schools, such that elements of both programming and oversight are shared between the district and charter schools. Based on this arrangement, Strive Prep would fall on the right-hand side of the governance structure spectrum. Interestingly, however, the network falls on the lower end of the school-based autonomy spectrum. The network initially started out very decentralized, with principals having full autonomy over school-based decisions, but with a strong commitment to

collaboration. As the network has grown, it has begun to re-centralize some of its core functions. For example, the entire network uses a common curriculum for grades 6 through 10 in ELA, math, and social studies.[47]

Figure 3 Interaction of Governance Structure and School-Based Autonomy
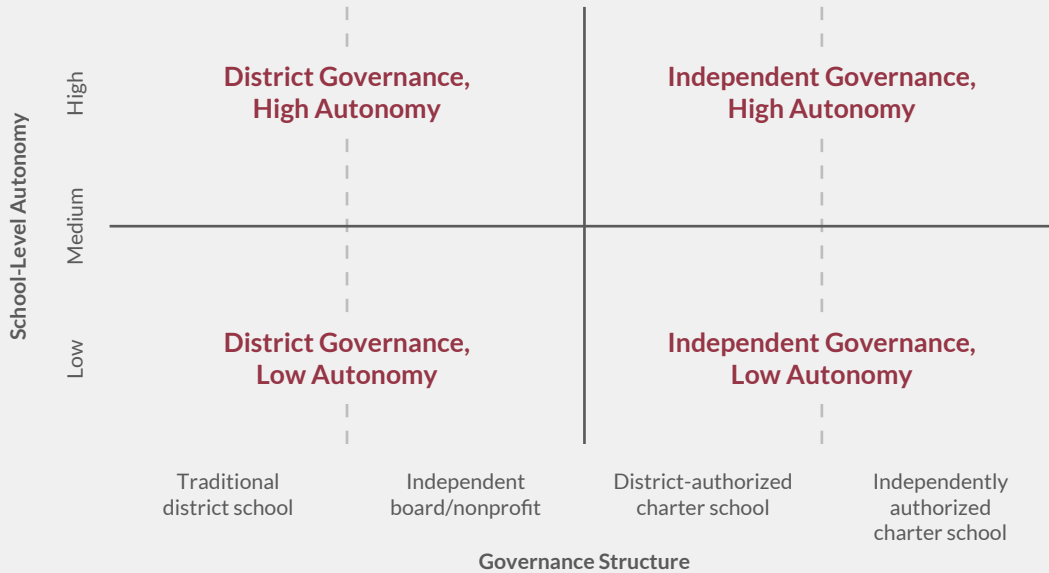
The interaction of these two elements creates an interesting spread of schools, one that is not as distinct as labels like "district" and "charter" makes it seem.

The interaction of these two elements creates an interesting spread of schools, one that is not as distinct as labels like "district" and "charter" makes it seem. As Figure 3 demonstrates, the "charter" or "district" binary gives little meaningful information about how a given school operates or where decision-making or accountability actually lies.

Understanding governance structure and school-based autonomy is critical for the state, district, and school leaders who are pursuing autonomous school models. Which dimension is most critical for accomplishing the intended goals? What degree of governance independence or autonomy is required for success? It's also important for policymakers and other stakeholders in general to understand the differences here. Simply saying a school is "autonomous" doesn't provide a full picture of how that school operates. And the overlap between these two dimensions further blurs the line between the district and charter sectors. What does it mean if charter schools are governed independently but do not have school-based decision-making power, as can be the case when a school is part of a large network with a standardized school model? What does it mean if district

school principals have full control over core elements of their schools but remain fully under the governance of the district? These are open questions and critical discussion points as policymakers at the state and local levels pursue these policies in an attempt to improve student outcomes and create quality school options responsive to the needs and preferences of students and families.

Another point of consideration is the political sustainability of the combination of governance and school-based autonomy. School districts can, on their own, provide their schools with a high degree of autonomy over certain aspects of school-level decision-making. However, these autonomies may be subject to changing political dynamics. If a district gets a new superintendent with a different approach to school-level decision-making, schools may lose (or gain) autonomy. One way to make school-level autonomy more durable over time is by coupling it with a change in governance. A change in governance typically includes an MOU or a contract that outlines the autonomy that an independent entity has over a set of schools.

Moreover, the interaction of these elements and what that interaction means for individual schools, coupled with the variability in outcomes discussed above, suggests that perhaps it's not the level of autonomy or structure of governance itself that makes a difference for outcomes, but instead what schools and districts do with their autonomy. While the evidence doesn't yet point to a specific model or set of actions that "works," qualitative evidence from our conversations with state and local leaders suggests that there are common features of autonomous school models that lead to success.

Finding 4: State, district, and school leaders identify budget, staffing, and curriculum as critical elements for enabling meaningful school-level autonomy.

School leaders from all four states identified budget, staffing, and curriculum as the three major buckets of decision-making authority that have the greatest impact on their ability to make decisions in the best interest of their students.

There are any number of elements over which school principals could have autonomy: budget, staffing, curriculum, school calendar, class size, teacher certification requirements, and more. But if meaningful school-based autonomy is the goal — that is, autonomy that empowers school principals to make decisions that significantly affect how their schools operate — we need to understand which buckets of autonomy give school leaders the greatest ownership and control.

School leaders from all four states identified budget, staffing, and curriculum as the three major buckets of decision-making authority that have the greatest impact on their ability to make decisions in the best interest of their students. Budget flexibility enables principals to purchase additional resources and supplies for their students and teachers, but it also allows them to be creative in solving problems. Principals can use budget flexibility to do things like offer bonuses to incentivize staff retention or make tradeoffs in staffing decisions to support students' highest priority needs, such as opting to hire a full-time occupational therapist instead of a full-time librarian.

School and district leaders also identify staffing flexibility as critical to true school-based autonomy. Staffing autonomy includes a number of elements: having the ability to hire the type of staff roles a principal needs to execute her school's programmatic vision (e.g., a special education teacher, a music teacher, a literacy coach, a school psychologist, or an educational aide); having the ability to hire the specific individuals who are best suited to those roles; and having the ability to dismiss teachers and staff who are not meeting expectations.

Staffing Autonomy and Collective Bargaining

Staffing flexibility is important to autonomous school leaders. Depending on a given state's labor context, exercising staffing autonomy may or may not require freedom from collective bargaining agreements. The four states we analyzed have very different labor contexts, and thus collective bargaining affects their autonomous school policies differently. Georgia, for example, prohibits collective bargaining for public-sector workers, including teachers.[48] As a result, collective bargaining does not play a major role in the state's autonomous school policy.

In Colorado, collective bargaining is permissible, and school districts have the authority to enter into collective bargaining agreements with representatives of their employees, but it is not required.[49] Colorado's Innovation Schools Act allows innovation schools to waive provisions in a district's collective bargaining agreement if 60% of the members of the collective bargaining unit who are employed at the school approve the waiver.[50]

Both Indiana and Massachusetts require collective bargaining if a majority of teachers vote for union representation.[51] However, Indiana teachers are only able to bargain over salary, wages, and related benefits like health care, retirement benefits, and paid time off. Bargaining over the school calendar, teacher dismissal procedures and criteria, and other subjects is explicitly prohibited.[52] Under state law, employees of an innovation network school are not bound by their district's collective bargaining unit; however, they may choose to organize and create a separate bargaining unit.[53] Schools in the state's transformation zones are subject to collective bargaining agreements unless they have received an F rating from the state for three or more consecutive years immediately prior to being assigned to the transformation zone. In that case, under state law, these schools are not subject to existing collective bargaining agreements, unless the school district voluntarily recognizes a bargaining unit at the school.[54]

In Massachusetts, meanwhile, teachers' unions can bargain over a much broader range of subjects, including standards of productivity and performance, class size, hours, and any other terms and conditions of employment.[55] Teachers' unions also play a more substantial role in the state's autonomous school models than in our other states. For example, certain types of Horace Mann charter schools require approval from the local collective bargaining unit or school staff in order to be established and operate under a memorandum of understanding with the local collective bargaining unit.[56] Horace Mann charter schools may be exempt from some provisions of local collective bargaining agreements and regulations, depending on the terms of their charters,[57] but their charter renewal applications must include certification of a majority vote of the local collective bargaining unit.[58]

For the state's innovation schools, state law explicitly lists "waivers from or modifications to contracts or collective bargaining agreements" as an area in which these schools can seek additional autonomy through their innovation plans.[59] But before an innovation plan is approved by the local school board, schools converting to innovation status must obtain a two-thirds vote of the teachers to approve the plan, and new innovation schools must negotiate waivers or modifications to the applicable collective bargaining agreement with the local union and superintendent.[60]

Teachers' unions also play an important role in Massachusetts' locally created autonomous school models. Boston's pilot schools are exempt from most work conditions in the local collective bargaining agreement.[61] However, these schools are approved and overseen by a joint steering committee between the Boston Teachers Union and Boston Public Schools, and the BTU president and BPS superintendent have veto power over any particular pilot school.[62] And Springfield's Empowerment Zone has a separate collective bargaining agreement with the Springfield Education Association, which allows working conditions to be set at the school level by the principal in collaboration with a teacher-elected Teacher Leadership Team.[63]

The package of autonomies and how they work together is an equally important consideration.

School and district leaders indicate that having the ability to choose the curricular materials that their students use is another crucial element of having true school-based autonomy. Just as research underscores the importance of highly effective teachers and school leaders on student achievement,[64] there's substantial evidence to suggest that high-quality curricular materials can have a large impact on students' academic outcomes.[65] So it is not surprising that school leaders identify autonomy around staffing and curriculum, in particular, as essential to their ability to leverage autonomy to create an instructional model and culture conducive to driving strong outcomes based on the specific needs of their students.

It's not enough, however, to simply consider the individual autonomies that a principal might have at her disposal. The package of autonomies and how they work together is an equally important consideration. For example, having the autonomy to select a curricular program requires both the budgetary flexibility to purchase that program and related resources and the staffing flexibility to make human resources decisions in support of the selected curricular program. Without these additional flexibilities, curricular autonomy would be constrained.

As state and district leaders design and implement the autonomy side of autonomous school policies, they must consider both the buckets of potential autonomies and the interaction of those buckets. This will help ensure that, if greater school-level decision-making is the goal, school leaders have the authority they need to make and execute school-level decisions.

School Autonomy and Governance
Recommendations for State and Local Leaders

State Leaders

- **Determine where on the 2x2 of governance structure and school-level autonomy schools need to be to meet the state's goals, and craft a policy accordingly.** There are any number of goals that a state might be pursuing by adopting an autonomous school policy. As policymakers craft the policy, they must consider how the parameters they put in place related to school-level autonomy and school governance serve the policy's overarching goal(s). For example, if state leaders hope to use autonomy to spur innovation, they ought to consider structures that provide a high degree of school-level autonomy over many elements (e.g., budget, staffing, curriculum, calendar, and professional development). If state leaders hope to encourage districts to partner with other educational providers, they ought to craft a policy that enables new governance models. The 2x2 graph provided in Figure 3 can help policymakers identify the right balance of autonomy and governance to enable autonomous schools to meet the policy's goals.

- **Develop policy parameters that enable greater budget, staffing, and curriculum flexibility at minimum.** School leaders consistently identify these three autonomies as critical to executing meaningful school-level decision-making. State policymakers should ensure that an autonomous school policy clearly provides for these autonomies at minimum, whether automatically or by allowing school leaders to apply for waivers from state and district policies in these three areas.

Local Leaders

- **Develop a clear theory of action for how increased autonomy will help a school achieve its goals.** State, district, and school leaders indicate that budget, staffing, and curriculum are core elements of autonomy. However, it's not enough for school leaders to simply have these autonomies. They need a clear understanding of how the autonomies they seek will help them achieve their school's goals, especially in contexts where autonomous school policies allow school leaders to apply for specific waivers. School leaders must be explicit

Continued on next page

about the goals they are pursuing — improved student outcomes, greater student and family satisfaction, etc. — and articulate how specific autonomies will support them in meeting those goals. Many policies require autonomous schools to develop plans that outline this theory of action. In these cases, district leaders can be particularly helpful in supporting school leaders to develop a coherent theory of action. But even in places where they don't, school leaders should develop this road map for themselves so that they can measure progress and evaluate the efficacy of the autonomies they have.

School Accountability

Accountability is the other half of the autonomy-for-accountability bargain. While the charter theory of action encompasses a relatively straightforward approach to accountability — in strong charter sectors, schools that fail to meet the expectations outlined in their contracts face increasing interventions up to and including closure — the breadth of autonomous school policy designs complicates the design of accountability structures. Determining whether autonomy is "working," and thus whether a school ought to be subject to interventions, isn't straightforward. The variety of policy goals, coupled with a lack of data, make it challenging for policymakers to hold autonomous schools accountable, or even clearly define accountability structures consistent with policy design elements.

The variety of policy goals, coupled with a lack of data, make it challenging for policymakers to hold autonomous schools accountable, or even clearly define accountability structures consistent with policy design elements.

Finding 5: The breadth of autonomous school policy designs complicates the development and implementation of appropriate accountability structures.

Accountability is the critical second half of the autonomy-for-accountability model. In strong charter sectors, accountability structures tend to be well developed and clear. Authorizers typically enter into performance contracts with their schools, which outline clear academic, operational, and financial performance expectations.[66] Associated accountability policies clearly delineate the consequences for failing to meet those contracted expectations, and considerable resources exist to support authorizers in developing high-quality application, oversight, renewal, and closure procedures.[67] Charter school accountability is by no means simple, or implemented with fidelity across the board, but the field largely understands what it takes to do it well.[68]

This is not the case for accountability for autonomous schools. These policies rarely include the same renewal or closure processes that are common in the charter sector. It's a much messier conversation, for many reasons. Paramount is that, despite the overlap across sectors in how schools look and feel to the students and teachers in them, autonomous school policies tend to apply to schools that are legally under the governance of the district. As a result, the default accountability structure is that which is used for all district schools. These policies generally include an escalating set of interventions for persistent failure, but they don't specifically address situations where schools have been granted greater autonomy. As a result, autonomous schools often receive greater autonomy with little to no change in accountability.

Some policies do include additional accountability measures for autonomous schools. Revocation of autonomy — meaning that a school would lose its status as an autonomous school and revert back to following all of the district's policies and procedures — is the most common form of accountability. Colorado's law, for example, requires districts to review innovation schools' plans every three years. Upon persistent failure to meet performance expectations, the district can revoke the school's innovation status.[69] The same is true in Georgia, though under that policy so-called "charter districts," rather than individual schools, are granted autonomy from state laws and regulations. If a charter district fails to meet performance goals, the state can revoke the district's status. The district would then lose all of its flexibility and be required to abide by all state policies and regulations, which would in turn affect individual schools.[70]

What complicates the conversation about accountability even further is that, in many states, autonomy is itself an accountability intervention for persistently low-performing schools.

What complicates the conversation about accountability even further is that, in many states, autonomy *is itself an accountability intervention for persistently low-performing schools*. In these cases, it's not at all clear what accountability in exchange for autonomy should look like. These schools have likely already faced a series of escalating interventions and haven't improved; if they don't improve with greater autonomy, what's next? Revoking autonomy and returning that school to full district control is unlikely to produce improvement, since that prior structure is the thing that autonomy was intended to disrupt. Revoking a school's autonomy may not make common sense, either. As a district official in Denver explained, "If a school has a calendar waiver that allows them to operate on a longer school day, it's hard to imagine that school making dramatic improvement if they lose innovation status, which may require them to go from a longer day to a shorter day."[71] In other words, autonomy may not be fixing a school's persistent failure, but it also may not be hurting it. Taking away additional flexibility for already-failing schools in the face of continued failure isn't an obviously effective accountability measure. Moreover, returning a school to a structure that previously wasn't working defies logic; accountability in these circumstances ought to be something new and different.

A reflexive response might be to hold autonomous schools to the same accountability structures as charter schools. They do, after all, have more autonomy than traditional district schools and may even have a similar level of autonomy as charter schools. But using the charter school approach to accountability for autonomous schools is also complicated. Autonomous schools may face limits to their autonomy in ways that charter schools do not. In Massachusetts, for example, innovation school plans may have to be approved by school staff or the local union. Boston's pilot schools are subject to approval by a steering committee with union representation and can be vetoed by the president of the Boston Teachers Union.[72] If school staff or local unions are opposed to specific elements of a school's plan, they won't approve the plan. In Colorado, school districts have the power to approve or deny innovation school plans. If a district does not want to grant certain autonomies, they have the right to deny them. These kinds of limits do not exist for charter schools, and thus it's an open question as to whether the same accountability structures make sense in the face of different contexts around school autonomy.

There aren't clear answers here, but there are important questions for policymakers to consider as they design and implement accountability structures for autonomous schools: What is the purpose of the policy, and how does that shape the kind of accountability that makes sense? To what degree does the proposed accountability structure align with existing statewide accountability structures? Are there redundancies or competing priorities?

The answers to these questions and the specifics of the policy context may suggest that accountability structures be customized to the purpose of the policy. For example, an autonomous school policy targeting low-performing schools as a tool for improvement might rely on accountability metrics focused on growth and improvement, and consequences under such a structure might reflect a continuous improvement model, with actions determined based on detailed analysis of how autonomies are implemented and tie to outcomes. In contrast, a policy under which autonomy is offered as a "reward" for high performance could rely on revocation of autonomy as a consequence if performance declines under an autonomous structure.

The challenges here are not a reason for policymakers to forego accountability for autonomous schools altogether.

It's also important for policymakers to consider the broader policy design, and elements that could hinder or facilitate the ability of autonomy to lead to improved student outcomes: What supports are in place to help school leaders implement autonomy? To what level of fidelity is the policy being implemented? To what degree do a school's struggles post-autonomy result from that autonomy?

The challenges here are not a reason for policymakers to forego accountability for autonomous schools altogether. Accountability is the other half of the autonomy-for-accountability bargain. However, these challenges and the questions that they raise must be considered carefully so that whatever accountability structures are put in place will support autonomous schools in achieving their goals.

Finding 6: States collect limited data on the implementation of their autonomous school policies, which limits both understanding of how districts and schools are using autonomy and any measure of impact on student learning.

Developing a structure that holds autonomous schools accountable for meeting their goals requires having a nuanced understanding of the level of autonomy and decision-making authority a school leader has over various elements of her school, the degree of fidelity with which autonomy is being implemented, and the extent to which those elements relate to student outcomes (or any other goals an autonomous school has in place). Gathering this information requires robust data collection policies and sophisticated data analysis procedures. Only then can policymakers begin to determine when and how to intervene in a struggling autonomous school.

Strong data and analysis can help policymakers answer questions about autonomous school policies.

Strong data and analysis can help policymakers answer other questions about autonomous school policies as well, such as: Which autonomies are schools using most often? How are schools using these autonomies? To what extent are certain autonomies correlated with improved student outcomes? How does implementation vary by schools' initial performance level or other factors? In what ways are school leaders struggling to implement autonomy? How do these challenges affect how well these autonomies are "working"? What changes to the overarching policy might improve implementation?

Unfortunately, none of the states included in our analysis has particularly robust data collection or analysis procedures in place. Colorado is farthest down this path. The state currently collects data on the number of innovation schools operating statewide and tallies the policies that innovation schools have waived.[73] State reporting also includes data on schools' annual ratings as well as student proficiency and growth data.[74]

Understanding the degree of implementation is trickier, though. Because local school districts approve schools' innovation plans, monitoring their implementation is really a district-level effort, which varies across contexts. For example, Colorado's District 49 runs a review process that requires schools to demonstrate how they're using each autonomy they applied for. If they're not using it, they have to relinquish it.[75]

Similarly, Indiana's innovation network schools and Massachusetts' innovation schools are established in state law, but the actual innovation school plans are approved locally. As a result, neither state collects data on the specific autonomies being implemented in these schools.[76]

Due to this limited data, it is difficult for policymakers to develop structures that meaningfully hold autonomous schools accountable for their flexibilities. Moreover, the dearth of data makes it difficult to fully understand the type and extent of autonomy being provided to various school models, as well as the variation in implementation across schools of the same model. And the lack of data on how policies are being implemented stymies the ability of states to evaluate their impact because outcomes cannot be linked clearly to one structure or another.

School Accountability
Recommendations for State and Local Leaders

State Leaders

- **Develop accountability structures that are clearly tied to the policy's goals and the needs of participating schools.** As discussed above, accountability for autonomous schools is not as straightforward as it might be for charter schools. The breadth of autonomous school policy design possibilities complicates the development and implementation of appropriate accountability structures. Policymakers must recognize this complexity and take care to craft an accountability structure that aligns to the goals of the autonomous policy. Policymakers may need to develop multiple accountability structures if the autonomous school policy has multiple aims. What makes sense for turnaround schools is likely different than what makes sense for schools that earn autonomy as a result of meeting or exceeding expectations.

  For example, if a state's autonomous school policy is focused on helping the lowest-performing schools improve, an accountability structure might focus on growth and improvement metrics or on other "leading indicators" of successful turnarounds (such as lower rates of violence, lower dropout rates, and higher retention of effective staff).[77] On the other hand, if a state's policy provides autonomy as a "privilege" for high-performing schools, revocation of that autonomy in light of failure to meet expectations might be an effective accountability measure.

  Policymakers must also consider the overlap between existing state accountability systems and new systems for autonomous schools to ensure that there are not competing priorities or conflicting incentives for schools.

  There are a number of key questions that policymakers ought to consider as they craft accountability structures for autonomous schools:

  - What is the purpose of the policy, and how does that shape the kind of accountability that makes sense?

  - To what degree does the proposed accountability structure align with existing statewide accountability structures?

  - Are there redundancies or competing priorities?

- What supports are in place to help school leaders implement autonomy?

- To what level of fidelity is the policy being implemented?

- To what degree do a school's struggles post-autonomy result from that autonomy?

Answering these questions and developing high-quality accountability structures will require robust data collection and analysis (see the following recommendation). However, armed with clarity around the policy's purpose and good data, policymakers can develop clear and meaningful accountability systems for autonomous schools.

- **Develop a system to collect and use data on the autonomies that schools are implementing and the results they are achieving.** Currently, states collect minimal data on the implementation of their autonomous school policies, which limits both understanding of how districts and schools use autonomy and any measure of impact on student learning. Improving data collection will help policymakers address two key issues: First, having good data on core elements such as the number of schools and/or districts implementing the policy, what autonomies they've applied for or accessed, how they're implementing their autonomies, and relevant student performance data will enable high-quality evaluations of the policy itself.

Second, having access to good data can also help policymakers craft appropriate accountability structures for schools, as discussed in the previous recommendation. Knowing what schools are doing and how they are performing as a result will make it easier for district or state leaders to hold schools accountable to performance expectations.

At a minimum, a state's data collection should include the number of autonomous schools operating in each district statewide, the specific autonomies they are implementing and whether they change over time, the degree of implementation of those autonomies over time, student test scores over time, student demographic data over time, and teacher quality and demographic data over time. There are likely other data points tied to specific policy goals that policymakers will want to include. For example, school culture data might be important for policies aimed at school turnaround.

Ideally, policymakers include parameters around quality data reporting and collection in the policy itself, to set up good practices from the beginning and to enable ongoing evaluation of the policy over time.

Good data collection and analysis policies will enable policymakers to evaluate the success of individual autonomous schools and hold them accountable when necessary, as well as evaluate the overall success of the policy.

Local Leaders

- **Ensure alignment between school-based autonomies and school goals.**
  Accountability for autonomous schools is a knotty problem, as discussed in detail above. In places like Colorado, Indiana, and Massachusetts, where school districts are empowered to approve autonomous school plans, one way that district leaders can set the stage for quality accountability systems is to develop high-quality application review processes. A core component of these review processes ought to be ensuring that a school's plan, including the waivers it is requesting, is tightly aligned to its goals. This alignment will enable district and state leaders to conduct quality evaluations of those schools' plans and determine whether or not their autonomies are supporting them in meeting their goals.

- **Develop high-quality data collection, reporting, and analysis procedures.**
  While state policymakers ought to be collecting data on all autonomous schools statewide, school and district leaders can support those efforts by developing their own high-quality data collection, reporting, and analysis procedures. The data collected should be aligned to that required by the state; however, with good data analysis procedures in place, schools and districts can use those data to evaluate their own progress and support continuous improvement, rather than waiting for statewide reports.

  Moreover, schools and districts can collect additional data to support them in tracking progress toward their own goals that might be separate from the state's goals. For example, some research shows that teachers and principals who report higher levels of autonomy are more likely to report high levels of job satisfaction.[78] While talent retention may not be an explicit goal of the state's autonomous school policy, a district may choose to implement

autonomy as one component of a talent retention strategy. In this instance, the district and participating schools should set up data collection and analysis procedures that will enable them to measure whether or not this goal is being met.

Having high-quality data collection and analysis processes in place at the school and district level can also help local leaders hold themselves accountable, by identifying challenges early and making necessary adjustments.

Implementation

The findings related to policy design discussed in the previous two sections can help policymakers think through key considerations during the policy design process. But policymakers' work does not end with designing the autonomy and accountability aspects of a policy. Our research surfaced several other factors related to on-the-ground implementation that policymakers should consider as they craft autonomous school policies and that local leaders must consider in their implementation.

Finding 7: Most traditional school leader preparation programs do not prepare candidates with the skills and mindsets necessary to run autonomous schools.

Effectively leveraging autonomy as a school leader requires different skills and mindsets compared to leading a traditional district school.

Effectively leveraging autonomy as a school leader requires different skills and mindsets compared to leading a traditional district school. Leaders must not only have a proven track record of quality school leadership, but they must also be up for a new challenge, ready to try new things, work through complexity and ambiguity, and think strategically about their goals for their students and their schools and how to get there.[79] This work requires developing a strong vision and communicating that vision to a range of stakeholders that can include students, families, staff, board members, and district leadership.

District leaders consistently identified the importance of building the capacity of principals and other school leaders to use their new autonomy. For example, in Indiana, Evansville Schools operates a transformation zone comprising five schools, which remains part of the district. According to Carrie Hillyard, the district's chief transformation officer, "One of the first things we had to do was work through habits

of compliance from prescriptive NCLB sanctions. Even with school improvement funds or Title I funds where principals have discretion, it was hard at first for them to think about how to best leverage those funds for their schools in a way that targeted the most critical levers of improvement."[80]

Evansville superintendent David Smith agreed: "We've found that with additional autonomy comes additional responsibilities for principals to make decisions that had previously been made for them."[81]

Similarly, leaders of the Springfield Empowerment Zone highlighted the need for supporting principals and teacher leaders in the decision-making process. According to Colleen Beaudoin, the Empowerment Zone's co-executive director, "Teacher and principal preparation programs don't equip leaders for the extent of school-based autonomy found in the Zone. Principals don't know what they don't know and typically act as middle managers executing someone else's change ideas. Our zone team helps fill knowledge gaps by providing guidance and support to show them the way; how to set a vision and execute on it." For example, a teacher in one of the zone's schools wanted to use an 80-minute block schedule, which left little time for other student interventions required by the zone's board. Rather than denying the request, the zone's leadership worked with the school's principal to modify the school schedule in order to accommodate more intervention time.[82]

In situations where districts delegate some authority to an independent board or other entity, school leaders may need support in learning how to manage that board relationship. Traditional principal training programs do not train school leaders in board management, so it's paramount to provide explicit support in understanding the role of the board, how to build a strong board, and how to develop role clarity among board members and between the board and the school leadership.[83]

Even if there's not an independent board in place, lots of autonomous schools have teacher-leader teams, governance teams (often including parents and other members of the community), or other structures in place that require leaders to gather input to inform decisions. In Atlanta, for example, school-level governance teams, called "Go" teams, are made up of parents and community members. School principals meet with these teams regularly to provide updates and solicit input on budget or other decisions. These teams also helped create an initial strategic plan for their respective schools. As a result of the district's autonomous status, school leaders must now manage a relationship with a new entity — one that they likely were not specifically trained to navigate.

District leaders can do a lot to set autonomous school leaders up for success. Districts can provide the time and resources for leaders to engage staff, families, and community members in developing a vision for the school and training and coaching as they orient to a new role. Districts can provide tools and resources — such as calendaring support and work planning tools — and a forum to network with other leaders.

Providing Financial and Capacity-Building Support for Autonomous School Networks in Texas

Texas is one of many states across the nation adopting autonomous school policies. In recent years, the Texas legislature has adopted two relevant policies:

- House Bill 1842, enacted in 2015, enables districts to apply to become "districts of innovation." These districts can use waivers to opt out of substantial portions of the Texas Education Code.[84]

- Senate Bill 1882, enacted in 2017, creates "partnership schools," schools operated by external charter or nonprofit partners over which the district retains ultimate responsibility.[85]

While these policies are similar to many of those implemented by the states profiled in this report, Texas provides additional financial resources and technical assistance to build capacity among district and school leaders through two mechanisms in place since 2017:

- Transformation Zone Planning Grants provide winning applicants with planning grants to support the implementation of "transformation zones," groups of low-performing district schools operated by a district or independent entity.[86]

- The System of Great Schools (SGS) Network provides technical assistance to school districts across Texas interested in pursuing strategies for systemwide reform.[87]

The SGS Network in particular addresses a key barrier to implementation of autonomous school policies: An underinvestment in building the capacity of leaders.[88] This challenge emerged in the conversations we had with state, district, and school leaders during our research. In addition, several of our Bellwether colleagues noted it as an ongoing challenge in their work serving as technical assistance advisers to SGS Network districts. The SGS Network addresses this challenge for the 18 participating districts[89] by:

- Supporting capacity-building of district staff in existing or newly created Offices of Innovation through professional development opportunities

- Offering free consultative services from experienced executive advisers

- Providing access to a vetted pool of technical assistance providers to support the planning and execution of an SGS strategy[90]

As technical assistance advisers, Bellwether Education Partners team members work closely with school and system leaders. These leaders identified several key elements as particularly useful in supporting their transition to leading and managing a system of autonomous schools:

- Training from former leaders of autonomous school networks who can provide practical coaching on the role
- Tools and resources to effectively manage their networks, including calendaring and work planning support
- Connections with other network leaders to enable thought partnership, the ability to share and discuss similar concerns, and the ability to build networks and relationships[91]

The additional funding and capacity-building support that the Texas Education Agency offers to participating districts will likely have a substantial impact on those districts' ability to strategically leverage school-level autonomy in service of goals for students. While both programs are relatively new and districts are still in the early stages of implementation, the state's approach addresses a key implementation challenge. As Texas school districts get a little farther down the implementation road over the coming years, researchers and policymakers should monitor their progress in an effort to understand whether and how the state's built-in supports facilitate high-quality implementation and strong student outcomes.

Finding 8: Shared services between school districts and autonomous schools can be an incentive for some leaders and operators, but can also create additional challenges.

Generally, school districts approach shared services with their autonomous schools in one of two ways: They either mandate that all autonomous schools use specific services the district offers, or districts create a structure where autonomous schools can opt in or purchase certain district services.

School districts typically provide a number of services for their traditional schools, including enrollment, facilities maintenance, food service, and transportation. The same is often true for autonomous school models. Because they typically do not operate separately from the district in which they are located, like an independently authorized charter school would, shared services between the district and its autonomous schools is likely to be an important discussion point. Generally, school districts approach shared services with their autonomous schools in one of two ways: They either mandate that all autonomous schools use specific services the district offers, or districts create a structure where autonomous schools can opt in or purchase certain district services. There are pros and cons to each approach.

Boston and Atlanta are examples of districts that have opted for the former. In all three contexts, autonomous school principals continue to use district-provided services. For example, there is no opportunity for them to hire an independent transportation company.

While this arrangement certainly eases some of the burden on school principals to manage additional services and contracts, it can also hinder school-based autonomy. Changing the length of the school day or year gets tricky when transportation service is centralized. In Colorado, for example, District 49 initially approved some calendar waivers for its innovation schools to extend or alter their school years, but had to roll them back because organizing transportation for schools on different calendars became unwieldy for the district.

Even when schools aren't contractually required to use the district's services, sometimes the market demands it. In Denver, for example, where there's currently a shortage of buses and drivers,[92] it's nearly impossible for charter schools to find independent transportation companies. As a result, many charter schools purchase this service from the district, which can be complicated from an operational point of view since Denver's district-authorized charter schools do have the freedom to set a school calendar that's different from the district's. As a result, Denver's charter schools can't truly exercise *full* autonomy over their school day and year calendars, as that flexibility is constrained by the transportation needs the district is reasonably able to accommodate. Charter school leaders are making it work, but it has required some compromise. Denver's charters face a similar challenge related to food service; again, a lack of independent food service companies leaves the district as the only true choice. Charter leaders continue to explore the potential of working with third-party food vendors, in order to have greater flexibility over this particular operational component.[93]

Districts in Indiana have taken a slightly different approach to the issue of shared services. In Indianapolis, innovation network schools can operate with or without charters. Innovation schools operating without a charter are required to participate in district services, like facilities maintenance, food service, and transportation. Those with charters may choose to use such services from the district, but they are not required. Access to these services, as well as district facilities, is a huge incentive for some operators. According to Earl Martin Phalen, founder and CEO of Phalen Leadership Academies, a CMO that operated the city's first innovation network school, "Having facilities, food service, and transportation included in the innovation network model sets you up for success and mitigates a lot of the financial challenges of charter schools. We've had some tense relationships with the district, but financially, the benefit is so much better that it allows us to pour more resources into schools and kids."[94]

Elsewhere in Indiana, the South Bend Empowerment Zone, one of the state's transformation zones, is currently in its first year of operation. During this school year, budgeting autonomy is more limited as the schools that are part of the zone are required to pay for nearly all district services. However, the district is using this year to determine a list of optional and non-optional services and the actual cost of these services. Beginning next year, the Empowerment Zone will receive those funds directly from the district, and

the zone will have the autonomy to purchase optional services either from the district or from independent vendors. It remains to be seen how this plays out — there are real challenges to determining the true cost of a given service and questions about whether it's practical or cost-efficient for just a few schools to independently build and run functions such as human resources, transportation, or food services. There are also political considerations related to the optics of a subset of district schools opting out of key district services. Doing so may create division within the community, something district and zone leaders want to avoid. Moreover, zone schools opting out of large percentages of district services may impact the district's central staffing needs, as staff in charge of these services would manage a smaller set of schools. This could lead to a reduction in staff at the district's central office, a proposition that could be difficult to navigate with staff and community members. All of these factors will need to be carefully weighed over the next year in South Bend.

While sharing services can help maintain consistency across districts and help autonomous schools operate effectively, it can also impede schools' autonomy to make decisions about when and how they serve their students.

While sharing services can help maintain consistency across districts and help autonomous schools operate effectively, it can also impede schools' autonomy to make decisions about when and how they serve their students.

Finding 9: Autonomous school policies can be an avenue for creating community buy-in and support for local schools.

State and local leaders most often cite improving student outcomes as the primary purpose behind the adoption and implementation of autonomous school policies. And while this remains at the forefront, several leaders indicated that these policies can also help return a greater sense of local control over education to community members.

The idea of "local control" is deeply embedded in the American education system. State governments tend to give substantial deference to communities to determine the contours of their local education system. Communities hold elections for local school board members; this board then governs the local district and its schools. As a result, the decisions that one district makes can vary substantially from its neighboring districts, reflecting the idea that the community knows best what its children need in order to be successful.[95]

In more recent years, however, states have exerted greater authority over local schools and districts, often through interventions for persistent low performance. At the extreme, policies such as state takeover effectively strip communities of control over their schools altogether.[96] Autonomous school policies are one way that policymakers are attempting to return to a truer sense of local control while also focusing on improving student outcomes.

Many of the leaders we spoke with indicated that devolving decision-making authority to the most local entity possible — the school — can help reestablish community support for and input in local education systems. Some autonomous school polices require approval or input from teachers and community members before autonomous status can be granted. In Colorado, for example, when innovation schools apply to the district for approval, their application must demonstrate community support for the plan.[97] In Georgia, districts apply to the state to obtain charter status, which gives them, and subsequently the schools within their jurisdiction, freedom from nearly all state policies. Charter districts are required to create school-level governance teams that consist of school personnel, parents, and community members. These teams must meet regularly to provide input on school-level decisions and monitor progress against schools' improvement plans.[98] The increased community involvement in schools that accompanies charter district status in Georgia was a key factor in Atlanta Public Schools' decision to become a charter district.[99] Charter district status is one of many components of an ongoing effort to rebuild trust between the community and the school system following the 2009 cheating scandal.[100]

In some communities, growth in the charter sector has created sentiment that local control has been lost. While charter schools are required to have boards, those board members aren't elected and, in some cases, aren't even required to live in the community. Moreover, while some charter schools are started by community members, many aren't. National CMOs can open schools in communities across the country, leaving some community members feeling that they've lost input into the local education system. Autonomous schools can create an avenue to harness some of the potential for success experienced by high-performing charter schools without the political baggage that charters carry in some communities.

The ability of autonomous schools to bridge gaps with the community is especially clear in Massachusetts. The state, particularly Boston, is well-known for its high-quality charter schools. However, voters have been less than enthusiastic about creating a large charter school sector,[101] and the state's charter law places a cap on the number of independent charter schools that can operate (known as Commonwealth charter schools), thus limiting growth in the sector. But state law enables two other school types that mirror some of the same autonomies as typical charter schools. Horace Mann charter schools, for example, are a hybrid district-charter model. They're authorized by and operate with a charter from the state board of education, but must gain approval from the local school board, and in some cases from the local union or school staff. Similarly, innovation schools are created through a locally based process requiring approval from the local school board and school staff.[102] Both of these policies help expand autonomy to more schools, while also ensuring they have local buy-in and support.

Done well, autonomous school policies can help rebuild or establish trust and support between a community and its school system by involving the community around a single school or set of schools.

Implementation
Recommendations for State and Local Leaders

State Leaders

- **Provide resources for implementation.** Running an autonomous school requires different skills and knowledge than running a traditional public school. Many school and district leaders noted this as a pain point for implementing autonomous school policies. State leaders can help assuage this challenge by providing additional resources, such as funding or technical assistance, to support leaders as they embrace their new responsibilities. Moreover, if state leaders desire widespread adoption of the policy, they ought to consider providing additional incentives — financial or otherwise — for participation. Although none of the four states in our sample provides any sort of resources or incentives to participating schools, Texas' policy, which is profiled on page 45, does. These implementation resources may be partly responsible for the widespread uptake of the policy. It's too early to determine whether the resources provided under Texas' policy lead to strong implementation, but it's a promising structure.

Local Leaders

- **Provide support for school leaders and central office staff as decision-making shifts to the school level.** Most traditional school leader preparation programs don't prepare school leaders to lead autonomous schools. As a result, it's likely that leaders will need some support as they transition from leading traditional district schools to leading autonomous schools. Research demonstrates that successful autonomous school leaders need to be flexible and creative, but they also need hard skills — like how to manage a budget or a board — that aren't typically taught in traditional educator preparation programs.[103] They'll need training and ongoing support to learn and develop these competencies.

  District leaders may want to consider creating a separate office to oversee and support autonomous schools, given their differing needs. The questions, challenges, and needs that arise for autonomous school principals will likely be very different from those that traditional school principals face. Having a separate office designated to manage these unique needs may help facilitate more seamless and flexible problem-solving.

Beyond school leaders, however, a shift toward greater school-level autonomy may also affect the work that district leaders do. If school leaders are managing curriculum, staffing, and budget decisions rather than district leaders, central office staff may experience a change to the work that they do. They may need to shift into a role of supporting and enabling school leaders to make school-based decisions rather than making the decisions themselves. This, too, may require training and support for central office staff members. District leaders should work to understand the skills and mindsets that currently exist at the district and school level, and develop training and support for staff to hone the skills necessary to successfully implement an autonomous school model.

- **Be explicit about which services will and won't be shared between the district and its autonomous schools, and understand how the chosen approach will impact both entities.** While shared services between school districts and autonomous schools can be an incentive for participation in some contexts, it can also create challenges. District leaders ought to be prepared to have a thoughtful conversation about the extent to which autonomous schools will or will not have access to district services, such as food service, transportation, or facilities. District leaders should consider the following questions as they determine their approach: What services will schools be required to use from the district and why? Which will they be able to opt in or out of and why? How might sharing services affect schools' school-based decision-making? How might allowing schools to opt out of services affect how the district provides these services to its traditionally operated schools?

- **Create opportunities for community input in autonomous schools.** Autonomous schools can provide school systems with an opportunity to engage community members in meaningful local control of schools. If this is a goal for local leaders, districts ought to develop systems, such as local school governance teams, that enable community members to work closely with school staff and district leaders in the creation and ongoing operation of autonomous schools.

Conclusion

School autonomy has a long history, and these policies continue to proliferate, whether as a tool for turnaround, a mechanism for strengthening local control, or as a means of providing district schools with similar flexibility to the charter schools with which they compete for students. With the success of high-quality charter schools and some promising outcomes associated with autonomous schools, it is likely that an increasing number of states and districts will adopt and implement autonomous school policies.

However, no two autonomous school polices are alike; there's wide variation in how policymakers can craft these laws. The framework we offer in this report provides policymakers with six key dimensions along which these policies tend to vary: the policy's goals, school eligibility criteria, the resulting governance structure, the types of policy flexibility available to schools, how eligible schools access autonomy, and the accountability structures that are in place for participating schools. We also provide common approaches to each of these dimensions, to help build greater understanding of the range of options available to policymakers.

And while the choices that policymakers make will vary from place to place based on each state's unique context, underlying principles emerge that are instructive for both state and local leaders:

- **Align policy design, both on the autonomy and the accountability side, to the goals of the policy**

- **Support implementation, both in building strong local strategies and in developing leaders**

- **Establish strong data collection and evaluation plans from the outset, to enable state and local leaders to measure progress toward goals and facilitate improvement**

These principles, coupled with the framework and detailed recommendations discussed throughout this report, can provide state and local education leaders with a better understanding of the breadth of autonomous school policy design elements and help guide their decision-making as they develop and implement autonomous school policies.

Endnotes

1   Jane Hannaway and Martin Carnoy, *Decentralization and School Improvement: Can We Fulfill the Promise?* § 2 (New Brunswick, NJ: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 1993), https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED359627.pdf.

2   Jennifer Dounay, "Site-Based Decisionmaking: State-Level Policies," Education Commission of the States, April 2005, http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/61/13/6113.pdf.

3   "A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century. The Report of the Task Force on Teaching as a Profession," Carnegie Corp. of New York, NY, May 1986, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED268120.

4   Susan Fuhrman and Richard Elmore, *Ruling Out Rules: The Evolution of Deregulation in State Education Policy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, March 1995), https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED383057.pdf.

5   Janet Hansen and Marguerite Roza, "Decentralized Decisionmaking for Schools: New Promise for an Old Idea?," occasional paper series, RAND Corporation, 2005, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2005/RAND_OP153.pdf.

6   "State Progress Toward Next Generation Learning: A National Landscape," Foundation for Excellence in Education, June 2019, https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ExcelinEd.Innovation.NextGenerationLearning.NationalLandscape.Report.pdf.

7   Some states provide greater autonomy for schools that are implementing certain programs. Florida law, for example, provides for "innovation schools of technology." Eligible schools are granted flexibility from specific state statutes and rules. To be eligible, schools must adopt and implement a blended learning education program. See: Florida Statutes § 1002.451 (2019), http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?mode=View%20Statutes&SubMenu=1&App_mode=Display_Statute&Search_String=1002.451&URL=1000-1099/1002/Sections/1002.451.html.

8   In states where all schools are eligible, there is typically still an application process through which the school leaders must develop a plan that explains how the school will use greater autonomy to improve student outcomes.

9   These arrangements vary by state. In some places, the district cedes full governance control over the schools to an independent board; in others, the district cedes only partial decision-making rights to an independent board. The exact contours of these arrangements are typically drawn up in contracts or MOUs between the board and district.

10   In Indiana, for example, many of the innovation schools operating in Indianapolis are charter schools, authorized by the mayor's office or another independent authorizing entity. However, through an MOU with the district, these schools can access certain district services such as transportation or facilities. The students in these schools are counted as part of the district's enrollment, and their test scores contribute to the district's overall performance.

11   Mary Wells and Tresha Ward, "Autonomous District Schools: Lessons from the Field on a Promising Strategy," Bellwether Education Partners, October 29, 2019, https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/autonomous-district-schools-lessons-field-promising-strategy.

12   Hansen and Roza, "Decentralized Decisionmaking for Schools: New Promise for an Old Idea?," https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2005/RAND_OP153.pdf.

13   Hannaway and Carnoy, *Decentralization and School Improvement: Can We Fulfill the Promise?* § 2, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED359627.pdf.

14   Dounay, "Site-Based Decisionmaking: State-Level Policies," http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/61/13/6113.pdf.

15   Fuhrman and Elmore, Ruling Out Rules: The Evolution of Deregulation in State Education Policy, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED383057.pdf.

16   "A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century. The Report of the Task Force on Teaching as a Profession," Carnegie Corp. of New York, NY, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED268120.

17   Fuhrman and Elmore, *Ruling Out Rules: The Evolution of Deregulation in State Education Policy*, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED383057.pdf.

18   Dounay, "Site-Based Decisionmaking: State-Level Policies," http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/61/13/6113.pdf.

19   Hansen and Roza, "Decentralized Decisionmaking for Schools: New Promise for an Old Idea?," https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2005/RAND_OP153.pdf.

20   "State Progress Toward Next Generation Learning: A National Landscape," Foundation for Excellence in Education, https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ExcelinEd.Innovation. NextGenerationLearning.NationalLandscape.Report.pdf.

21   Sean Gill and Christine Campbell, "Partnership Schools: New Governance Models for Creating Quality School Options in Districts," Center on Reinventing Public Education, October 2017, https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-partnership-schools.pdf.

22   Ibid.

23   Juli Kim, Tim Field, and Bryan Hassel, "Autonomous District Schools: A New Path to Growing High-Quality, Innovative Public Schools," Public Impact, February 2019, https://publicimpact.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Autonomous_District_Schools_A_New_Path_to_Growing_High-Quality_Innovative_Public_Schools.pdf.

24   Some states provide greater autonomy for schools that are implementing certain programs. Florida law, for example, provides for "innovation schools of technology." Eligible schools are granted flexibility from specific state statutes and rules. To be eligible, schools must adopt and implement a blended learning education program. See: Florida Statutes § 1002.451 (2019), http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index. cfm?mode=View%20Statutes&SubMenu=1&App_mode=Display_Statute&Search_String=1002.451&URL=1000-1099/1002/Sections/1002.451.html.

25   In states where all schools are eligible, there is typically still an application process through which the school leaders must develop a plan that explains how the school will use greater autonomy to improve student outcomes.

26   These arrangements vary by state. In some places, the district cedes full governance control over the schools to an independent board; in others, the district cedes only partial decision-making rights to an independent board. The exact contours of these arrangements are typically drawn up in contracts or MOUs between the board and district.

27   In Indiana, for example, many of the innovation schools operating in Indianapolis are charter schools, authorized by the mayor's office or another independent authorizing entity. However, through an MOU with the district, these schools can access certain district services such as transportation or facilities. The students in these schools are counted as part of the district's enrollment, and their test scores contribute to the district's overall performance.

28   "Denver's Next Journey: Charters, Innovation Schools, and School Budgeting," A+ Colorado, December 2019, 19, http://apluscolorado.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/A_Charters-Innovation-Schools-and-School-Budgeting.pdf.

29   David Osborne and Emily Langhorne, "Can Urban Districts Get Charter-Like Performance with Charter-Lite Schools?," Progressive Policy Institute, August 2018, https://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/PPI_Charter-Lite_2018.pdf.

30   Ibid.

31   Lam Pham et al., "School Turnaround in Tennessee: Insights After Six Years of Reform," Tennessee Education Research Alliance, July 2019, https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/TERA/files/School_Turnaround_After_Six_Years.pdf.

32   Beth Schueler, Joshua Goodman, and David Deming, "Can States Take Over and Turn Around School Districts? Evidence from Lawrence, Massachusetts," NBER working paper no. 21895, January 2016, https://www.nber.org/papers/w21895.pdf.

33   Jeff Wulfson, "Progress Report on Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership," Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, December 8, 2017, http://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/FY2018/2017-12/item1.html.

34   Brooke Crum, "Transformation Waco Schools Show Significant Progress on STAAR Exams," *Waco Tribune-Herald*, June 25, 2019, https://www.wacotrib.com/news/education/transformation-waco-schools-show-significant-progress-on-staar-exams/article_fb3a103b-e312-566e-98e2-91fe574a528b.html.

35   Brooke Crum, "Transformation Waco, First Partnership of Its Kind, Marks First Year," *Waco Tribune-Herald*, August 17, 2019, https://www.wacotrib.com/news/education/transformation-waco-first-partnership-of-its-kind-marks-first-year/article_044be066-8bc7-5019-8f0d-60a9e87184d1.html.

36   Kim, Field, and Hassel, "Autonomous District Schools: A New Path to Growing High-Quality, Innovative Public Schools," https://publicimpact.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Autonomous_District_Schools_A_New_Path_to_Growing_High-Quality_Innovative_Public_Schools.pdf.

37   Gill and Campbell, "Partnership Schools: New Governance Models for Creating Quality School Options in Districts," https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-partnership-schools.pdf.

38   Jacob Rosch and Dana Brinson, "Charter School Autonomy: A Half-Broken Promise," Thomas B. Fordham Institute, May 2010, https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/charter-school-autonomy-half-broken-promise.

39   Interview with Dr. Terry Croy Lewis, executive director, Colorado Charter School Institute, conducted by phone, October 31, 2019.

40   "The Budget Transparency Guidebook: School Support Services," Denver Public Schools, May 2018, https://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/AYFAZC7D0D6B/%24file/Budget_Transparency_Guidebook_FINAL.pdf.

41   Ibid.

42   Interview with Colleen Beaudoin, co-executive director, Springfield Empowerment Zone, conducted by phone, October 30, 2019.

43   Interview with Kara Stimpson, principal, Jean Childs Young Middle School, conducted by phone, November 5, 2019.

44   "Calendars and Publications," Denver Public Schools, accessed December 2019, https://www.dpsk12.org/resources/.

45   Interview with Peter Hilts, chief education officer, District 49, conducted by phone, October 24, 2019; interview with Dr. Mike Pickering, superintendent, POWER Zone, District 49, conducted by phone, October 31, 2019.

46   "School Types," Boston Public Schools, accessed December 2019, https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/Page/941.

47   Interview with Chris Gibbons, founder and CEO, STRIVE Preparatory Schools, conducted by phone, November 1, 2019.

48   Milla Sanes, "Barriers to Freedom of Contract in the Public Sector," issue brief, Center for Economic and Policy Research, November 2014, 4, http://cepr.net/documents/public-rtw-2014-10.pdf.

49   "Collective Bargaining Laws," National Council on Teacher Quality, January 2019, https://www.nctq.org/contract-database/collectiveBargaining.

50   "Overview of the Innovation Schools Act," Colorado Department of Education, https://www.cde.state.co.us/choice/innovationschoolsfactsheet.

51   "Collective Bargaining Laws," National Council on Teacher Quality, https://www.nctq.org/contract-database/collectiveBargaining.

52   "Summary of Rights and Benefits for Indiana Teachers," Office of the Indiana Attorney General, July 2018, 24–25, https://www.in.gov/attorneygeneral/files/Teachers%20Rights%20Manual%20-%202018.pdf.

53   Indiana Code § 20-25.7-4-7 (2019), http://iga.in.gov/legislative/laws/2019/ic/titles/020#20-25.7-4-8.

54   Indiana Code § 20-31-9.5-9.5 (2019), http://iga.in.gov/legislative/laws/2019/ic/titles/020#20-31-9.5-9.5.

55   "Collective Bargaining Laws," National Council on Teacher Quality, https://www.nctq.org/contract-database/collectiveBargaining.

56   Massachusetts General Laws ch. 71 § 89 (2019), https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter71/Section89.

57   "Questions and Answers about Charter Schools," Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, March 2019, p. 10, http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/new/2019-2020qanda.docx.

58   Massachusetts General Laws ch. 71 § 89(dd) (2019), https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter71/Section89.

59   Massachusetts General Laws ch. 71 § 92(b) (2019), https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter71/Section92.

60   Massachusetts General Laws ch. 71 § 92(l) (2019), https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter71/Section92.

61   "Comparison of Innovation Schools, Pilot Schools, Horace Mann Charter Schools, and Commonwealth Charter Schools in Massachusetts," Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, April 2016, http://www.doe.mass.edu/redesign/innovation/AutonomousComparison.docx.

62   "BTU 2016-2018 Contract Book," Boston Teachers Union, August 2018, 16–18, https://btu.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/BTU-2016-2018_Contract_Book_for_website.pdf.

63   Jeff Wulfson, "Progress Report on Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership," Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, December 8, 2017, http://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/FY2018/2017-12/item1.html.

64   Isaac Opper, "Teachers Matter: Understanding Teachers' Impact on Student Achievement," RAND Corporation, 2019, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4312.html; "Leadership Matters: How to Help Principals Promote Teaching Effectiveness," RAND Corporation, 2013, https://www.rand.org/pubs/corporate_pubs/CP693z6.html.

65   "What the Research Says About Quality Instructional Materials," Achieve, June 21, 2017, https://www.achieve.org/imresearch.

66   "7. Performance-Based Charter Contracts Required," National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, https://www.publiccharters.org/our-work/charter-law-database/components/7.

67   "Leadership, Commitment, Judgment: Elements of Successful Charter School Authorizing," National Association of Charter School Authorizers, March 2018, http://www.qualitycharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/LJC_Elements_of_Successful_Charter_School_Authorizing_FINAL_02.27.2018.pdf.

68   "Quality Practice Project," National Association of Charter School Authorizers, https://www.qualitycharters.org/research/quality-practice-project/.

69   "Overview of the Innovation Schools Act," Colorado Department of Education, https://www.cde.state.co.us/choice/innovationschoolsfactsheet.

70   "IE2, Charter, and Status Quo School Systems: A 'Nuts and Bolts' Comparison," Georgia Department of Education, September 12, 2014, https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/Charter-Schools/Documents/School%20System%20Flexibility%20and%20Charter%20Schools%20in%20Georgia%20-%20September%2012,%202014%20-%20FINAL.pdf.

71   Interview with a district official, Denver Public Schools, conducted by phone, October 2019.

72   "BTU 2016-2018 Contract Book," Boston Teachers Union, August 2018, 16–18, https://btu.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/BTU-2016-2018_Contract_Book_for_website.pdf.

73   Bill Kottenstette and Kady Lanoha, "2019 Innovation Schools Annual Report," Colorado Department of Education, March 2019, https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdedepcom/2018innovationschoolsannualreport.

74   Kottenstette and Lanoha, "2019 Innovation Schools Annual Report," https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdedepcom/2018innovationschoolsannualreport.

75   Interview with Dr. Mike Pickering.

76   Interview with state officials, Indiana Department of Education, conducted by phone, October 2019; interview with Alyssa Hopkins, new schools development manager, and Brenton Stewart, school development and data specialist, Office of Charter Schools and School Redesign, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, conducted by phone, October 17, 2019.

77   Jeff Kutash et al., "The School Turnaround Field Guide," The Wallace Foundation, September 2010, 15–18, https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/The-School-Turnaround-Field-Guide.pdf.

78   Catharine Warner-Griffin, Brittany Cunningham, and Amber Noel, "Public School Teacher Autonomy, Satisfaction, Job Security, and Commitment: 1999–2000 and 2011–12," Statistics in Brief, National Center for Education Statistics, March 2018, https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018103.pdf.

79   Wells and Ward, "Autonomous District Schools: Lessons from the Field on a Promising Strategy," https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/autonomous-district-schools-lessons-field-promising-strategy.

80   Interview with David Smith and Carrie Hillyard, superintendent and chief transformation officer, Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation, conducted by phone, October 25, 2019.

81   Interview with David Smith and Carrie Hillyard.

82   Interview with Colleen Beaudoin.

83   Wells and Ward, "Autonomous District Schools: Lessons from the Field on a Promising Strategy," https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/autonomous-district-schools-lessons-field-promising-strategy.

84   "Districts of Innovation," Education Code, Title 2: Public Education, Texas Constitution and Statutes, https://statutes.capitol.texas.gov/Docs/ED/htm/ED.12A.htm.

85   "2018–2019 Texas Partnership Guide," Texas Education Agency, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1quMPWG9oj 0Ky2oLWfh8GBDJo2zmma2-I/view.

86   Christina Steiner and Larkin Tackett, "Empowered Educators: A Design Guide for Texas Transformation Zones," Texas Education Agency, October 6, 2017, https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/Design_Guide_ TZ_100617.pdf.

87   "System of Great Schools," Texas Education Agency, https://tea.texas.gov/Texas_Schools/District_Initiatives/ System_of_Great_Schools.

88   Wells and Ward, "Autonomous District Schools: Lessons from the Field on a Promising Strategy," 8, https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/autonomous-district-schools-lessons-field-promising-strategy.

89   "The System of Great Schools Strategy: How to Get More Kids in Great Schools Every Year," Texas Education Agency, https://www.systemofgreatschools.org/explore.

90   "System of Great Schools Network: Building the Capacity of School Districts to Create High-Quality, Best-Fit School Options for Their Students," Texas Education Agency, https://www.systemofgreatschools.org/home.

91   Wells and Ward, "Autonomous District Schools: Lessons from the Field on a Promising Strategy," 22, https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/autonomous-district-schools-lessons-field-promising-strategy.

92   Interview with Chris Gibbons.

93   Interview with Chris Gibbons.

94   Interview with Earl Martin Phalen, founder and CEO, Phalen Leadership Academies, conducted by phone, October 17, 2019.

95   Jack Schneider, "The Problem with Generalizing About 'America's Schools,'" *The Atlantic*, July 5, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/07/americas-schools/564413/.

96   Lyndsey Layton, "GOP-Led States Increasingly Taking Control from Local School Boards," *The Washington Post*, February 1, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/gop-led-states-increasingly-taking-control-from-local-school-boards/2016/02/01/c01a8e4e-bad3-11e5-b682-4bb4dd403c7d_story.html.

97   "Innovation School Applications and Supporting Documents: Archive by District," Colorado Department of Education, https://www.cde.state.co.us/choice/innovationschoolsarchive.

98   "IE2, Charter, and Status Quo School Systems: A 'Nuts and Bolts' Comparison," Georgia Department of Education, https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/Charter-Schools/Documents/School%20 System%20Flexibility%20and%20Charter%20Schools%20in%20Georgia%20-%20September%2012,%20 2014%20-%20FINAL.pdf.

99   Interview with a district official, Atlanta Public Schools, conducted by phone, October 2019.

100   In 2009 the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* published an analysis of test scores in Atlanta Public Schools that showed statistically unlikely gains in a single school year. A trial followed, and 11 of 12 teachers were convicted on racketeering charges. See more here: Alan Blinder, "Atlanta Educators Convicted in School Cheating Scandal," The New York Times, April 1, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/02/us/verdict-reached-in-atlanta-school-testing-trial.html.

101   Katie Lannan, "State Board Opts Against Approving New Charter Schools," *South Coast Today*, February 12, 2019, https://www.southcoasttoday.com/news/20190212/state-board-opts-against-approving-new-charter-schools.

102   "Comparison of Innovation Schools, Pilot Schools, Horace Mann Charter Schools, and Commonwealth Charter Schools in Massachusetts," Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, April 2016, http://www.doe.mass.edu/redesign/innovation/AutonomousComparison.docx.

103   Wells and Ward, "Autonomous District Schools: Lessons from the Field on a Promising Strategy," https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/autonomous-district-schools-lessons-field-promising-strategy.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the many individuals who gave their time and shared their knowledge with us to inform our work on this project. We are particularly grateful to the dozens of state, district, and school leaders for the time they took to speak with us in interviews and by email.

The contributions of these individuals significantly enhanced our work; any errors in fact or analysis are the responsibility of the authors alone.

About the Authors

Kelly Robson

Kelly Robson is an associate partner at Bellwether Education Partners.
She can be reached at kelly.robson@bellwethereducation.org.

Jennifer O'Neal Schiess

Jennifer O'Neal Schiess is a partner at Bellwether Education Partners.
She can be reached at jennifer.schiess@bellwethereducation.org.

Phillip Burgoyne-Allen

Phillip Burgoyne-Allen is an analyst at Bellwether Education Partners.
He can be reached at phillip.burgoyne-allen@bellwethereducation.org.

About Bellwether Education Partners

Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice.

Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.