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The Road to Autonomy: Can Schools, Districts, and Central Offices Find Their Way?

By Erin Dillon



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The success of internet giant Google is a tribute to the philosophy that workers work best if left to themselves. Employees at the search engine's headquarters in Mountain View, Calif., are famously given 20 percent of their workweek to brainstorm ideas for new projects, free of management restraint and central office interference. White boards throughout the campus invite employees to share random ideas and suggestions, and perks like beach volleyball and electric scooters help keep the creative juices flowing.

The culture of autonomy appears to work: Employees have used that free time to come up with some of Google's most popular products, including Gmail, Google News, and Google Talk. As Google's former CEO Eric Schmidt has said, "Innovation always has been driven by a person or a small team that has the luxury of thinking of a new idea and pursuing it."¹

Drawing a lesson from the business world, many educators and policymakers have decided that to do their best work, schools need the luxury of freedom as well. Just as autonomous cultures in the business world have improved employee morale, increased innovation, and encouraged a more nimble, customer-focused workforce, greater autonomy can free educators to try new approaches with instruction, staffing, and schedules so they can respond quickly and more effectively to student needs. With expanded autonomy, districts let the schools themselves—the principals and the teachers—make big decisions like how to spend the budget, what curriculum to use, and how to hire and train teachers. Those who know students best, the theory goes, are best able to direct resources and take actions on students' behalf.²

That philosophy has not only helped drive the recent boom in charter schools, it has also spurred the rapid growth of charter-like schools that enjoy expanded autonomy while remaining part of the school district. The recent competition for federal Race to the Top funds favored states that supported policies allowing for district-created autonomous schools, as well as for the expansion of charters. And several large urban districts, including Chicago, New York City, and New Orleans, have aggressively expanded autonomy

as part of the reform strategy known as "portfolio management." Under portfolio management, districts don't directly operate all schools. Instead, they oversee and hold accountable a collection of schools, some that are operated by the district and others that are independently operated, including charters and district schools operated by outside organizations.³

Experience with charter schooling and other autonomous school reforms has shown that granting schools more flexibility can yield more innovation in school management, staffing, and instruction, bringing high-performing schools to neighborhoods that greatly need them. But experience has also shown that not all schools have the capacity to fill the space created by autonomy with actions that actually improve student learning. Unlike Google, which hires employees specifically for their ability to thrive on their own—and which can easily fire those who can't—schools often don't have the leaders, the staff, or the vision to make good independent decisions, and they just as often lack the ability to build that capacity. Decades of research on school autonomy show that without those tools, autonomy is unlikely to improve student achievement.

And so school districts entertaining this increasingly popular strategy for school reform face a dilemma: Should autonomy be limited to already successful schools, thereby reducing the risk that schools will crash and burn as they try to govern themselves? Or, should districts use autonomy as a spur to get low-performing schools to improve? Put another way, should autonomy be a catalyst or a reward?

The District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) is one of many districts around the country struggling to answer this question as it implements three different programs for expanding autonomy. Its experience suggests that using autonomy only as a reward—limiting it to a handful of the most successful schools—reduces the risk that schools will be unable to manage additional flexibility, but also produces small changes for the district as a whole.

DCPS has also learned that using autonomy as a catalyst—expanding it to schools in need of greater improvements—requires taking significant steps, such as bringing in outside operators and creating principal support networks, to ensure those schools can make the most of their freedom. In both cases, DCPS has learned that expanding autonomy systemwide requires a substantial shift in the orientation of the central office, from one of telling schools what to do to helping them do things on their own.

More Freedom for More Schools

Increasing school autonomy as a reform strategy is not new. The many districts that are experimenting with it are continuing at least three decades of reforms that have cycled regularly between centralization and decentralization. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, districts that included Chicago, New York City, Prince William County, Va., and Jefferson County, Ky., implemented “site-based management,” a strategy that called for the central office to cede control of many functions to school-based councils.⁴ In the early 1990s, DCPS joined this movement and gave schools more power over their operations.⁵ But enthusiasm for site-based management waned in the wake of concerns over balkanized curricula and standards, lack of accountability, bureaucratic encroachment from the district, and general confusion among teachers, principals, and central office staff over their responsibilities.⁶

There was also little evidence that the strategy worked. One review of 77 studies on site-based management found “virtually no firm, research-based evidence of either direct or indirect effects of site-based management on students.”⁷ Across the Atlantic, researchers in England also found no

evidence that status as an autonomous school led to higher student performance.⁸ And research on charter schools here in the United States fails to show a direct connection between autonomy and achievement.⁹ Indeed, the uneven performance of charter schools across the country, and even within districts, indicates that success demands far more than just regulatory freedom.¹⁰

And yet, despite these cautions, many of these same districts are again trying expanded autonomy. Previous reforms focused on increasing community input, improving efficiency in schools, and boosting school performance. This time, autonomy is also

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being embraced as a strategy for both turning around low-performing schools and for rewarding successful ones. In its winning application for federal Race to the Top funds, DCPS, for example, touted its three models for autonomous schools: The aptly named “Autonomous Schools,” which are granted autonomy as a reward for high performance; “Partnership Schools,” which are run by outside organizations that are granted autonomy in the hope of dramatically improving performance; and the “DC Collaborative for Change,” or DC3, a joint effort of some of the district’s highest- and lowest-performing schools that have been granted autonomy as a tool for innovating with curriculum and professional development.¹¹ (Meanwhile, highly autonomous charter schools, a growing presence in the District of Columbia, educate almost 40 percent of the city’s public school students.)

DCPS and other districts attempting to expand autonomy must make two key determinations. First, over which areas should schools have control (budgets, staffing, etc.)? Second, how much control over those areas should they have (what percentage

of their budget, what staff positions) and how much should be retained by the central office? Districts making these determinations also have to be mindful of how well schools are likely to be able use their newfound flexibility to boost student achievement.

Advocates of autonomy generally argue for as expansive a set of freedoms as possible. William G. Ouchi, professor at the UCLA Anderson School of Management and a proponent of autonomy, says that to be truly autonomous, a school must have “four freedoms”: control over budget, control over staffing, control over curriculum, and control over scheduling.¹²

Research indicates that granting schools additional flexibility can be an effective strategy for encouraging innovation and change in educational practice.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, based on interviews with the leaders of five highly successful charters, identified seven “autonomies” essential to success: freedom to develop a great team; freedom to manage teachers as professionals (including giving them merit-based raises); freedom to change curriculum and classroom structure; autonomy over scheduling; financial freedom; freedom of school boards to focus on education instead of politics; and freedom to define a school culture.¹³ Just as important, the charter school leaders said, is the freedom to say “no”—the power to reject the pet reform projects that new school board members, mayors, and superintendents often bring.

Research indicates that granting schools additional flexibility can be an effective strategy for encouraging innovation and change in educational practice. Charter schools, for example, are more likely to try new governance structures, to use different staffing models, and to experiment with merit pay and extended school days.¹⁴ Autonomous schools also often adjust staffing to lower the number of students each teacher sees each day or week.¹⁵ When D.C.’s Key Elementary was granted autonomous status, for

example, Principal David Landeryou shifted money from positions required by the district, such as slots for a guidance counselor and a full-time social worker, to positions he thought Key needed more, such as a full-time math specialist and full-time reading specialist. “There are a lot of required positions and programming as a non-autonomous school,” he says, “but as an autonomous school I don’t have to follow that.”¹⁶ (Key now employs a part-time social worker and uses a peer-driven program for counseling.)

Despite such potential benefits, far-reaching autonomy might not always be desirable. The district central office can serve a useful purpose: It can deliver services and order supplies more efficiently than schools can on their own, for instance. And many central offices standardize curriculum, instruction, and scheduling to make sure students are getting a measure of consistency as they move from one school to the next. Standardization also serves as a hedge against the risk that a school might make decisions that send achievement in the wrong direction. “You can’t just give schools money, let them do what they want, and hold them accountable at the end,” says Michael Cordell of Friendship Public Charter Schools, a highly independent charter management organization with a track record of success. “You can’t have anarchy within goals.”¹⁷

As at non-autonomous schools, union contracts, legal constraints, and financial realities can also limit autonomy, preventing schools from making substantial changes.¹⁸ In D.C., autonomous schools are free to expand their school day, but, according to the union contract, they must first negotiate terms, including compensation, with the Washington Teachers’ Union. And even if they get approval from the union and its teachers, they don’t receive extra funds to pay teachers for the extra time.

Autonomous schools can also change their curricula, but they receive funds for new textbooks and other materials only when the entire district adopts its curriculum, limiting when schools can afford to make a textbook or curriculum change. This policy has kept Landeryou waiting for an opportunity to change the school’s curriculum and replace the textbooks now collecting dust. “We don’t need to have Houghton-Mifflin textbooks,” he says. “We can invest in a whole curriculum that is unique to Key.”

Striking a Balance

The key question for districts considering autonomy, then, is not just *how much* freedom to give schools, but *what balance* to strike; it's determining which operations are best left to individual schools and which are best controlled by the central office. Finding this balance is especially important for districts in which students move often and which have common ways of measuring achievement, says Justin Cohen, president of the School Turnaround Group at Mass Insight and former director of the DCPS Office of Portfolio Management. "You can't give absolute autonomy to every school," he says. "The question is autonomy over what? If you're going to expect that students are going to move and switch schools, you have to have some consistency across schools."¹⁹

Cordell, whose network has partnered with DCPS to take over one of its troubled high schools, says districts can learn about balance from successful charter management organizations (CMOs), which manage multiple schools sometimes across districts and states. Research from the Center on Reinventing

If autonomy is defined in terms of school-level capacity, then the role of the central office shifts, from one of simply loosening the reins to one of providing more support, such that all schools can eventually make their own decisions.

Public Education found a range of approaches among CMOs, with 84 percent rated "moderate" to "highly" prescriptive in managing their schools. Many of the CMOs followed a "tight-loose" strategy: They standardized a few areas of school operation while leaving others to school discretion. CMOs tended to be most prescriptive in how they direct schools to support struggling students and evaluate and compensate teachers; they exert less control over teacher hiring and professional development.²⁰ This

approach is similar to how Josh Edelman, director of the DCPS Office of School Innovation, describes autonomy: "Autonomy is being clear up front about the box existing and defining the walls clearly. Autonomy is the space to do what you want within the box."²¹ Along with defining this "box," districts must help build the capacity of schools to work within it to improve student achievement.

University of Washington researcher Meredith Honig studied Oakland, Calif.'s, small autonomous schools and site-based management reforms and found that schools' ability to make decisions that benefit student performance was an important part of their success, along with the regulatory flexibility they were granted. Oakland schools at first focused on clarifying what operations they had control over and how much control they had—essentially defining the autonomy "box." As the reforms were implemented, the schools shifted their focus away from clarifying regulatory freedom and moved toward building their capacity to use those freedoms well. "We were thinking of autonomies as something to be given and that things [policies and procedures] had to change to make that possible," one administrator told Honig. "Now we are viewing autonomies more as a capacity."²²

As Honig writes, if autonomy is defined in terms of school-level capacity, then the role of the central office shifts, from one of simply loosening the reins to one of providing more support, such that all schools can eventually make their own decisions. In D.C., staff members from the district's Office of School Innovation act as brokers for the autonomous schools and help provide this support by communicating with other district offices that handle such matters as human resources and instruction. These liaisons, known as "boundary spanners," play an essential role in the early stages of district reform, research shows.²³ They keep other departments informed about how district policies affect a school's ability to operate autonomously, and they can suggest policy changes. In the other direction, the boundary spanners help the schools understand central office requirements and provide other assistance to improve school performance.²⁴

In New York City, where all the schools have control over budgets, professional development, and curriculum, external networks help add this support. Each network team consists of an achievement

coach, who helps schools understand the city's accountability system and achievement data; a business services manager, who helps schools navigate central office operations like human resources and purchasing; a special services manager, who helps with special education students and English language learners; and an instructional mentor, who helps principals with professional development and mentoring for teachers.²⁵ The New York City Department of Education also helped establish a leadership academy specifically to give educators “the knowledge, skills, capacity, and disposition” to successfully lead schools in a more autonomous environment.²⁶

But capacity is a difficult concept to pin down. While there has been substantial research on what autonomous schools need to be successful—strong leadership, a clear instructional vision, a culture focused on continuous improvement—experience offers few lessons in how districts can distinguish between schools for which autonomy will boost performance and schools that need more guidance.

Essential Supports

The school district of Chicago provides some insight into what this capacity looks like. Under its policy of decentralization, Chicago granted substantial authority to “Local School Councils,” decision-making bodies made up of the principal, teachers, parents, and other members of the community. The councils had the power to hire the principal and to approve (or not) the school improvement plan and the budget for discretionary funds. The empowerment of the councils was supposed to lead to school improvement. And, in some cases, it did. The Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago found that decentralization had “broad, positive effects on many of Chicago’s elementary schools,” with over 80 percent showing some improvement in math and nearly 70 percent improving in reading.²⁷

But the researchers also found that some low-income communities failed to benefit from the new governing model. They cite two elementary schools with similar student demographics and similarly low student achievement but very different outcomes from decentralization. The first school, “Hancock

Whether schools have autonomy or not, factors such as strong leadership and professional capacity are vital to success.

Elementary School,” benefited from strong leadership that focused on improving instruction and teacher effectiveness, and its performance surged. By contrast, “Alexander Elementary School,” despite its similar ambitions, lacked a coherent improvement plan and had little parent or community support, and it stagnated.

Looking across the entire Chicago school system, CCSR identified five “essential supports” that help schools such as “Hancock” succeed, where schools such as “Alexander” do not. They are consistent instruction across the school; strong professionals who welcome feedback and focus on continual improvement; solid ties with parents and community; a student-centered learning environment with safe, orderly classrooms, and high expectations; and leaders focused on sharing responsibility for instructional improvement.²⁸ Schools that were strong in these five areas were 10 times more likely to improve than schools that were weak. And it wasn’t enough for schools to be strong in one or two areas; to improve, they needed all five.

These five supports roughly align with the DCPS wish list for its schools. The Effective Schools Framework, as it is known, focuses on six areas: teaching and learning, leadership, professional development, resources, the learning environment, and family and community engagement. For each, the framework spells out what is expected from individual schools—such as instruction aligned with DCPS academic standards or a clear instructional vision—and the supports that are expected from the district, such as accurate data and sound evaluations.²⁹ There is nothing revolutionary about any of these; whether schools have autonomy or not, factors such as strong leadership and professional capacity are vital to success. But in the absence of guidance from the central office, they become even more important.

Flexibility as a Reward: The Autonomous Schools Program

Among DCPS's three initiatives that use autonomy, the Autonomous Schools program treats autonomy as a reward for performance, thereby minimizing the risk that low-capacity schools will be freed to make decisions or take over functions for which they are unprepared. Specifically, a school can apply for autonomous status if 75 percent of its students are proficient in both math and reading, or if the school has averaged 10 percent growth in reading and math over the previous three years. If the school also demonstrates strong teaching and learning, as determined by a district review based on the Effective Schools Framework, it wins increased control over funds, the option to forgo districtwide professional development, and the freedom to choose its curriculum.³⁰

Murch Elementary, in an affluent neighborhood of Northwest D.C., is one school that has gained status as an Autonomous School and made changes as a result. Principal Dawn Ellis jumped at the opportunity, for instance, to deviate from the district's standardized professional development. "Our teachers don't have the same needs as other district teachers," Ellis explains, "and the canned program provided by the district wasn't working."³¹ Now, instead of holding team meetings at the district-mandated time of 8 a.m. ("not the best time for teachers to collaborate" she observes), Ellis reserves that time for individual planning. And the content for professional development, instead of being determined by the district, is now driven by data on student and teacher performance and by the school's own strategic plan, developed by Ellis in collaboration with parents and teachers. (To support the plan's first goal, to improve student performance on the D.C. math assessment,

the school sent two teachers to a national mathematics conference.) Likewise, Landeryou of Key Elementary, which is also autonomous, has swapped a district-scheduled professional development day for a parent-teacher conference day. "Prior to autonomy, we wouldn't have switched....," he says, "but we still would have delivered our own professional development in addition to the district's. We just might have done it on a Saturday instead."

As a reward, DCPS's Autonomous Schools program is well-targeted. Both Murch Elementary and Key Elementary have the high test scores DCPS is seeking to reward through the program—over 80 percent of the students at both schools score proficient in both math and reading. And Ellis and Landeryou, by using student assessment data, teacher evaluations, and input from teachers and parents to guide their decisions, demonstrate the type of leadership that DCPS seeks to encourage through the program. But this sort of targeting can also minimize impact: Schools that were already successful under the old rules have less incentive to make dramatic changes under new ones. A 1994 Government Accountability Office report on regulatory flexibility in schools bears that out: It found that many schools that earned flexibility as a reward for high performance did not see a need to change because they were satisfied with their current performance levels.³² Likewise, research on Chicago's "Autonomous Management and Performance Schools" (AMPS) program, which rewards high-performing schools with expanded autonomy, found that many of the freedoms granted these schools were "akin to what [schools] were already doing" and that staff "did not see AMPS as having much effect on their schools."³³

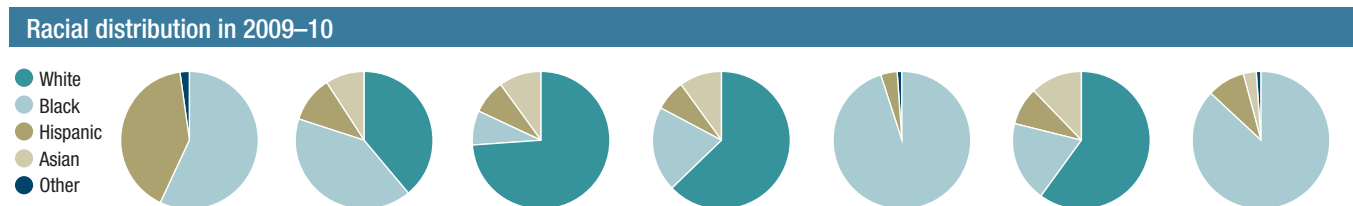
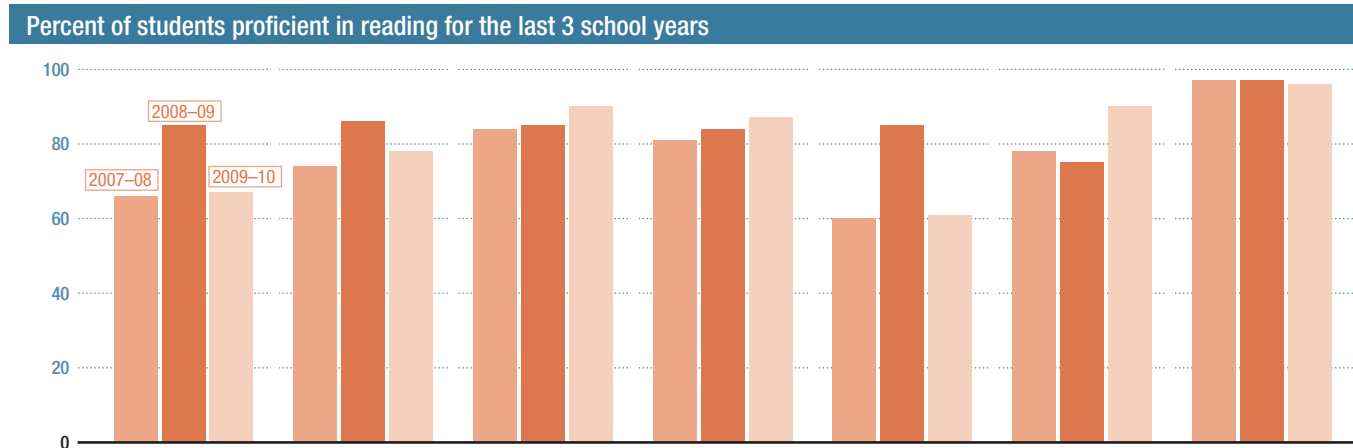
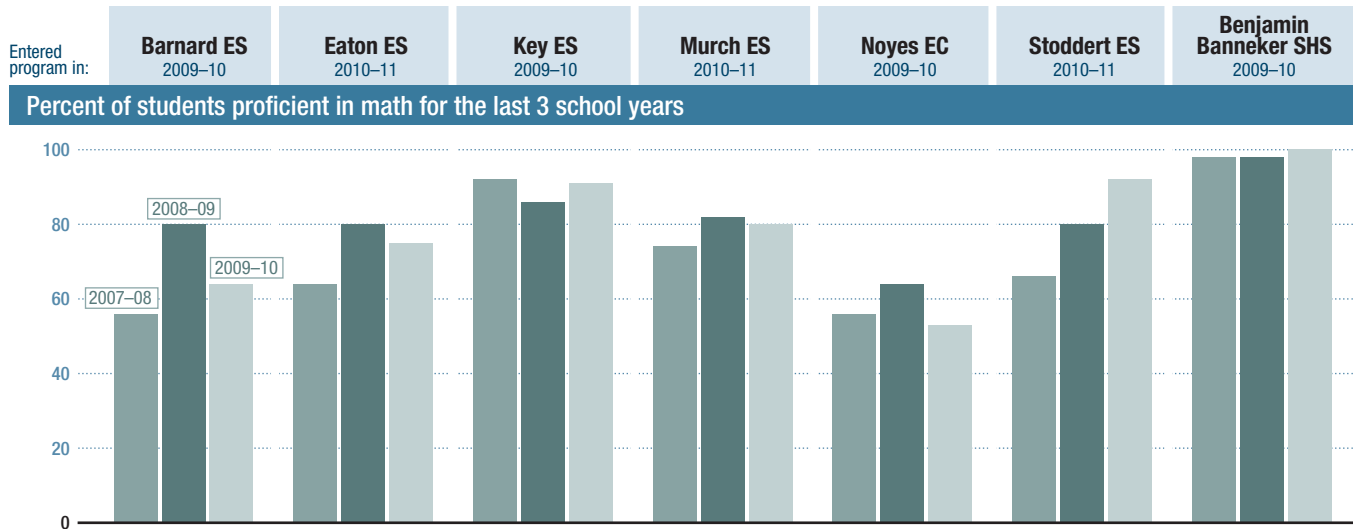
Districts don't even need to make autonomy a formal designation. Principals of high-performing schools often already enjoy de facto autonomy or, in the case of particularly assertive or well-connected principals, they essentially seize it. In Oakland, Honig found that in the absence of formal agreements, "site-based decision-making schools generally have had to create their own flexibility by relying on previously cultivated personal/professional relationships with central office staff."³⁴

In a study of principals' perceptions of autonomy, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute reported similar findings. "The principals who were veterans tended to feel a

Schools that were already successful under the old rules have less incentive to make dramatic changes under new ones.

Figure 1. Snapshot of Autonomous Schools

The District of Columbia's "Autonomous Schools" are given flexibility in several areas, such as textbook adoption, budget allocation, scheduling, professional development, and curriculum, as a reward for past success. Success is determined by test scores and an on-site quality school review. In 2009–10, four schools were designated as Autonomous Schools and in 2010–11, another three earned that designation.



Demographics in 2009–10						
Special education	12%	5%	5%	6%	13%	4%
Free/reduced lunch	82%	18%	7%	12%	95%	14%
English language learners	24%	15%	8%	12%	4%	33%

Source: District of Columbia Public Schools, "School Profiles and Directory," <http://profiles.dcps.dc.gov/>; District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, "District of Columbia Assessment and Accountability Data Reports: AYP Reports," <http://www.nclb.osse.dc.gov/>.

greater de facto sense of autonomy,” the authors said, “because they understood the district and community and had formed long-term professional relationships there.” School success was also a factor. “Principals of higher-performing schools felt that they had more autonomy than those of lower-performing schools.”³⁵ Landeryou echoed these findings, saying that autonomy was “putting a name to what we were already doing. Before it was under the radar, but now the district recognizes that Key is unique and doing things differently. It adds legitimacy to our efforts.”

Help for Low-Performers: The Partnership Schools Model

While the Autonomous Schools program gives D.C.’s high-performing schools the opportunity to try new, innovative practices, autonomy can be even more valuable for low-performing schools, even if it is counterintuitive. “We usually put more constraints on lower-performing schools and impose top-down solutions,” says Cohen, “but the challenges these schools face are much more complex. So we have to give them the flexibility to respond to their more turbulent and urgent needs.” In its 2007 report *The Turnaround Challenge*, Mass Insight argues for autonomy for these troubled schools, saying that success depends on changing the conditions under which they operate. Such conditions, the report says, include creating “a protected space free of bureaucratic restrictions and overly stringent collective bargaining agreements.”³⁶ DCPS has tried to create these conditions under its “Partnership Schools” program by giving outside management organizations control of its lowest-performing schools and then granting them more flexibility to change instructional practices and select staff and leadership, and by exempting them from certain provisions of the union contract.

But here again, flexibility alone is not enough. Cohen notes that the lowest-performing schools also tend to lack experienced leaders and strong teachers. For autonomy to work at such schools, he says, “you have to do two things at once: completely revamp the operating structure and infuse human capital capacity.” To do that, DCPS has turned to outside operators such as Friendship Public Charter Schools. In addition to running its own six schools, the network

now is working to turn around one of the lowest-performing high schools in D.C.—Anacostia High School—and three turnaround schools in Baltimore. At Anacostia, Friendship brought in its own leaders and replaced nearly all the staff. It also imported instructional strategy, professional development, and classroom organization from its successful charter high school, Collegiate Academy.

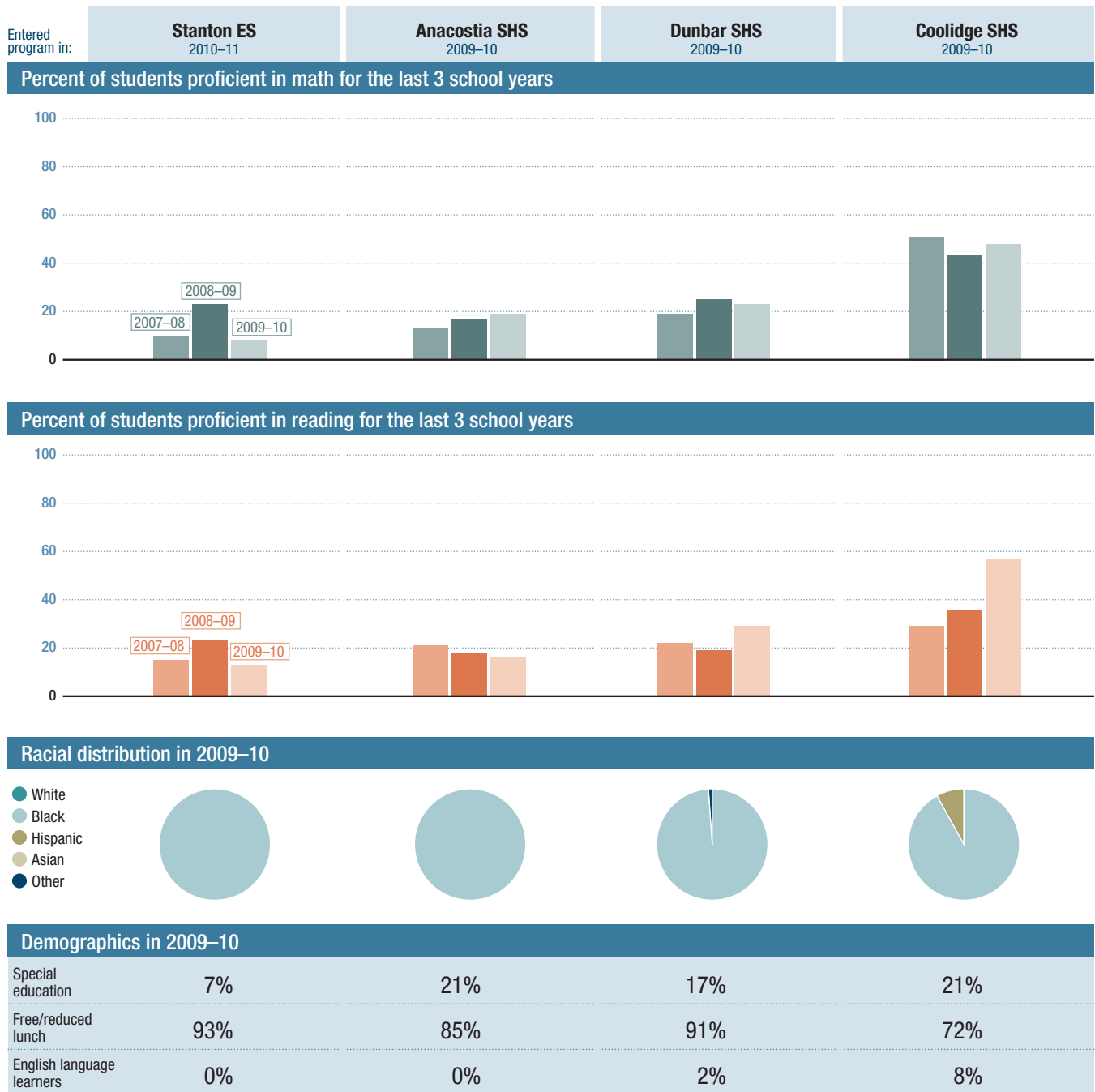
Although outside operators can boost capacity, the supply of good ones is limited. Former D.C. Chancellor Michelle Rhee originally planned to divide DCPS schools approximately into thirds: The bottom would undergo turnaround, the middle would be targeted for less radical improvements, and the top would be granted expanded autonomy. Four years later, the number of schools that have been turned over to outsiders like Friendship—four—is much smaller than anticipated. “We would like to have turned over more high schools,” Cohen says, “but there just weren’t enough good organizations available and willing to do the work.”

Other districts, including New York City and New Orleans, have created charter schools to lure outside operators. Restarting a low-performing school as a charter allows districts to grant school operators full autonomy, often including exemption from the teachers union contract. But DCPS legally cannot authorize charter schools, so it relies on the partnership schools model, which gives it more control than it would have over charters. This arrangement cuts both ways: It makes for a stronger connection between the partner and the district, it eases student transitions among schools, and it encourages systemwide coherence in instruction and curriculum. But it also makes it harder for the partner to quickly change teaching practice, curriculum, or staff. And unlike with charter schools, which typically operate under five-year contracts that are hard to break, the district can fire a partner on relatively short notice. Last year, for instance, the partner Friends of Bedford was released from its contract to manage Dunbar High School after the school struggled with leadership and safety problems.³⁷

Like Dunbar, Anacostia High remains a DCPS school, so Friendship must accept more restrictions and oversight than it has at its independent charters. Further, it is bound by parts of the DCPS union contract which, because it prevents operators from

Figure 2. Snapshot of Partnership Schools

The goal of the District of Columbia Public Schools' Partnership Schools program is to turn around the lowest performing schools by turning management of the schools over to outside school management organizations with a track record of success. These organizations are granted additional flexibility in staffing, budgeting, and instruction, with the flexibility in staffing and scheduling written into the latest D.C. teachers union contract. In 2009–10, three high schools were turned over to two management organizations, Friendship Public Charter Schools and Friends of Bedford. In 2010–11, one elementary school was turned over to Scholar Academies, a management organization that operates charter and turnaround schools in Philadelphia.



Source: District of Columbia Public Schools, "School Profiles and Directory," <http://profiles.dcps.dc.gov/>; District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, "District of Columbia Assessment and Accountability Data Reports: AYP Reports," <http://www.ncslb.osse.dc.gov/>.

“substantially changing working conditions” during the school year, keeps it from changing the school schedule or extending the school day or year.³⁸ Cordell says district schools “can’t problem-solve like charter schools.” They are “bound by time and the union contract.” The most recent partner to take over a DCPS school, Scholar Academies, also operates a turnaround school in Philadelphia, where CEO Lars Beck says he has more autonomy because the school became a charter school. But Scholar Academies agreed to work with DCPS because the district gave them considerable freedom over hiring, curriculum, and behavioral management. Beck also saw a larger benefit to keeping turnaround schools as district-operated schools: “Not all schools are going to become charters, and to see some scalability in this work, we need to show an ability to work within a district-union environment and without.”³⁹

Sharing Capacity: DC Collaborative for Change

Bringing in outside management can be an effective strategy for boosting the capacity of a district’s lowest-performing schools, those headed for a turnaround. For other low-performers, those that

need support but don’t warrant a complete takeover, districts must increase the schools’ capacity in other ways. The DC Collaborative for Change provides one such approach.

Early in her tenure, former Chancellor Michelle Rhee charged a select group of principals from high-performing DCPS schools with finding innovative ways to spread their influence to other schools. Three of them came up with what has come to be known as DC3, a network of 10 schools (now nine) from across the city and across performance levels that are committed to working together to improve professional and leadership capacity at the schools.⁴⁰ In exchange for a promise to improve results, the central office granted these schools expanded freedom over their operations.

This approach—granting schools autonomy without first requiring a minimal level of performance—is a risky one, an “outlier,” according to Edelman, head of the Office of School Innovation. And, according to Liz Whisnant, a founding principal of DC3, it was not one favored by Rhee. “Rhee sees autonomy as a reward,” Whisnant says, “so she was not enthusiastic about lower-performing schools in the group having the same autonomy.”⁴¹ Originally, Rhee had intended for the high-performers to guide the

Glossary

Site-based management (or school-based management): A school reform that gained popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s that shifts control over school operations from the central office to the school site. Decisions are made by the school principal or by a school site council, which could include the principal, parents, teachers, students, and community members. The operations that move to the school site can vary considerably, but they often include budgeting and curriculum and sometimes—as in the case of school site councils—control over hiring and firing the principal or other school personnel. In some cases, schools receive blanket waivers from many regulations; in others, schools must request individual waivers.

Small autonomous schools: This reform movement combines two theories about school improvement: One is that smaller schools allow teachers to know their students better, thus engaging them better and improving achievement; the other is that autonomy at the school site can lead to better educational decisions. In the early and mid-2000s, several districts, including Chicago, Los

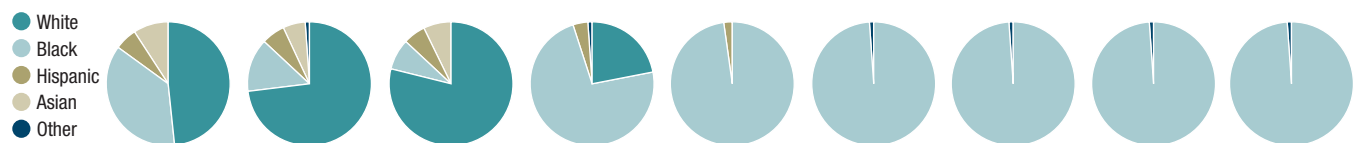
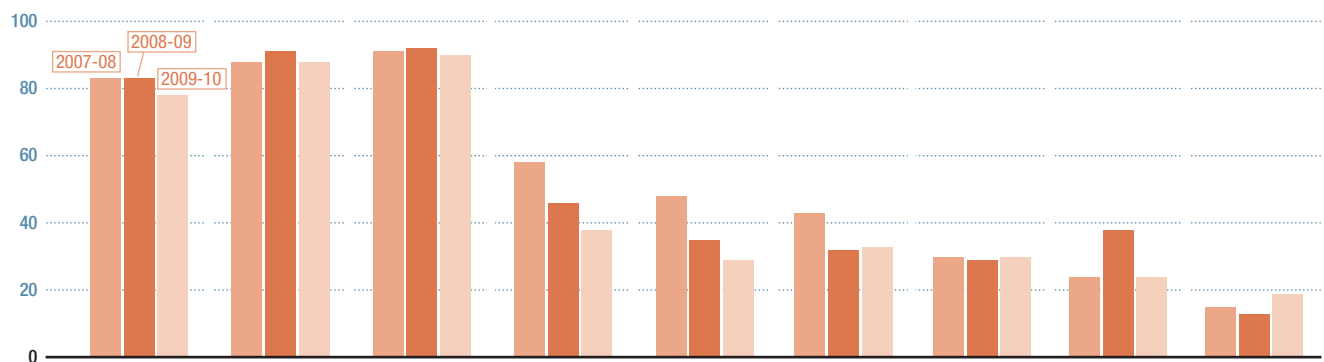
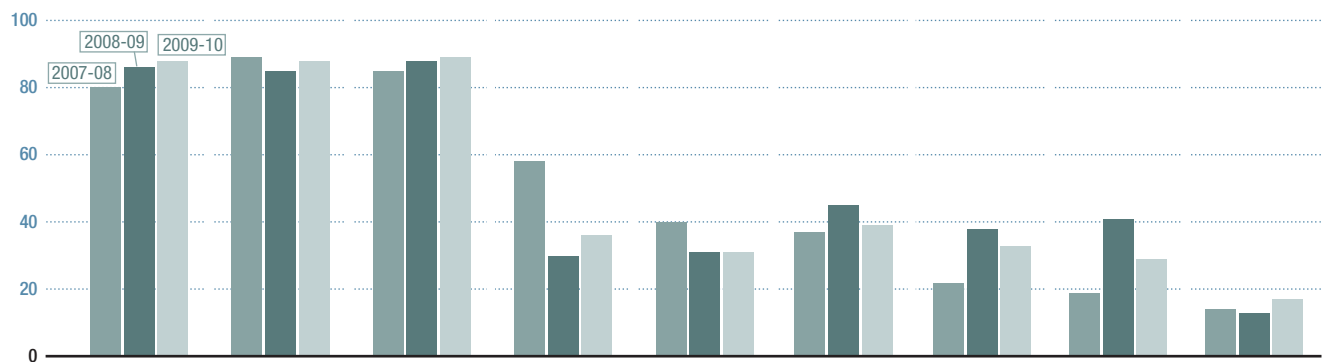
Angeles, New York City, and Oakland, Calif., began new small, autonomous schools or broke up existing schools into smaller, autonomous schools.

Charter schools: With 5,000 schools across the country, the charter school movement is one of the most prominent examples of autonomous schools reform. Charter schools are public schools that are independently operated and freed from many of the regulations of traditional public schools, including scheduling, budget requirements, curriculum, and staffing. The extent of the schools’ autonomy, and the areas in which they receive it, vary from state to state.

Decentralization: A general term that refers to many different efforts to shift decision-making power to a local level. This can include charter schooling, site-based management, or small autonomous schools. Decentralization can also refer to shifting authority from the state to school districts or from districts to local education units that oversee multiple schools, such as neighborhood councils or area superintendents.

Figure 3. Snapshot of DC3 Schools

DC Collaborative for Change (DC3) was formed in 2008 by the principals of 10 elementary schools that, despite different performance levels and student populations, came together with a like-minded approach to instruction and agreed to share materials and intellectual resources across the schools. DC3 schools were also granted more control over areas such as budgeting and professional development. Flexibility over staffing and scheduling is written into the latest D.C. teachers union contract. In the 2010–11 school year, nine schools still participate in DC3.



Demographics in 2009–10									
Special education	4%	6%	6%	8%	18%	8%	7%	16%	11%
Free/reduced lunch	18%	2%	0%	46%	87%	92%	88%	91%	93%
English language learners	19%	5%	8%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Source: District of Columbia Public Schools, "School Profiles and Directory," <http://profiles.dcps.dc.gov/>; District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, "District of Columbia Assessment and Accountability Data Reports: AYP Reports," <http://www.nclb.osse.dc.gov/>.

lower-performers, but the principals saw themselves more as partners. “Both types of schools have something to learn from one another, and the model is egalitarian,” Whisnant explains. So the principals each assumed responsibility for different tasks—one would set up professional development days, for instance, another would communicate with the central office—but no single principal was the official leader.

Not surprisingly, this arrangement did not lack for challenges. DC3 at first did not have a clear vision or

One benefit of the collaborative is that it provides a valuable instructional network, helping teachers and principals share ideas and instructional strategies across schools.

identity. Nor did the network have clear short-term outcome goals or a strong sense of accountability. Its early documents articulate shared values and broad goals, and they include a rubric for assessing practice, but they don’t state concrete performance targets or provide a clear plan for building capacity in areas identified as weak.⁴² “DC3 lacked leadership,” Cohen says. “[It] wanted autonomy, but would come to the central office for direction.” This might have been anticipated, he suggests: “Principals already have the hardest day job in the world, so it was unreasonable to expect them to design a new management organization at the same time [they were] running schools.”

In response to these concerns, DCPS clustered all the DC3 schools under a single instructional superintendent. The district also helped the group create a strategic plan with specific year-end goals and ways to achieve them, such as assessing students regularly and analyzing student data across schools to help teachers improve outcomes. The plan is aligned with the teaching and learning, leadership, and professional development elements of DCPS’s Effective Schools Framework.⁴³ With the new plan in

place, DC3 instructional superintendent Eric Redwine, formerly with the KIPP charter schools, believes that DC3’s leaders and teachers will improve. “I think the collaborative is incredibly valuable to folks who are invested and have a like-minded vision,” he says.⁴⁴

One benefit of the collaborative is that it provides a valuable instructional network, helping teachers and principals share ideas and instructional strategies across schools. “Professional development is so much richer because we are sharing resources,” says Carolyn Albert-Garvey, a DC3 principal. “My instructional coach gets to work very closely with and bounce ideas off of 15 other coaches.”⁴⁵ The networks also help relieve the isolation that educators often feel. “Just like kids, adults need to be known, valued, and connected,” says Whisnant. “The collaborative is a way to do that.”

DC3 schools share responsibility for community activities and grant applications as well as professional development. For the first time this year, they can even pool funds for professional development and supplies. Principals use a special code in their budget to allocate funds to a separate, DC3 budget. But this system brings two continuing challenges: getting independent principals to surrender some control, and making sure that schools are fulfilling their own needs while meeting the goals of the group. “There’s a good resource in every school and always something to share with each other,” says Redwine. “But what works in one school may not work in another.” He notes, for instance, that student populations vary widely by income, special education status, parental involvement, and other measures. “How do you provide support for such vast differences?” Redwine asks. He answers by giving different principals different kinds of support: “It’s like Phil Jackson when he coached Michael Jordan or Kobe Bryant—sometimes you give them directions and sometimes you give them the ball and let them do what feels right.”

Differentiation—adjusting the support that schools get from the central office based on their performance—may be the biggest challenge for districts overall. Says Edelman: “We need a differentiated approach to schools, just like principals need to differentiate support to teachers, and teachers need to differentiate instruction to students.” Yet central offices, including DCPS’s, are generally not equipped to make these

distinctions. “District bureaucracies don’t handle the [gray areas] and the one-offs as well as they should,” says Edelman.

The research contains many examples of central offices stifling reform because they are unable or unwilling to shift their relationship with schools from one of compliance and regulation to one of support and flexibility.⁴⁶ “Most districts are designed to empower district superintendents to tell schools what to do,” explains Cohen. “Autonomy limits the role of superintendents and threatens to expose how the best intentions of districts end up as compliance headaches and misaligned services that hamper the best school leaders.” Districts wonder why they would give schools freedom, Cohen says, when “they think it’s their job to tell [schools] what to do.”

Indeed, for many districts, telling schools what to do—by increasing centralization and *reducing* autonomy—has led to improvement. Boston Public Schools, which has seen notable increases in achievement, provides one example. Under Superintendent Tom Payzant, the district increased centralization, particularly in instruction and curriculum. According to Payzant, student success depends on common learning expectations across schools. “We won’t be able to reach the goals that standards-based reform have for all students by having 90,000 schools bloom by themselves,” Payzant told researcher Heather Zavatsky.⁴⁷ Other urban districts that have succeeded by centralizing school operations and increasing consistency include Aldine Independent Schools in Texas and the Garden Grove Unified School District in California. They confirm that despite the strengths of individual principals, there is no consensus as to whether more autonomy will improve an entire system of schools. (See “Is Centralization Better?” on page 14.)

DCPS likewise has seen value in centralizing some areas of operation even as it grants autonomy in others. For example, all schools, including DC3, Autonomous Schools, and Partnership Schools, must use the recently developed DC IMPACT system for evaluating teachers. Even charter schools that signed on to the winning Race to the Top application agreed to base at least 50 percent of their teacher evaluations on a common value-added measure of teacher effectiveness used by DCPS.⁴⁸

For many districts, telling schools what to do—by increasing centralization and *reducing* autonomy—has led to improvement.

As DCPS demonstrates by mixing a centralized evaluation system with expanded flexibility at selected schools, districts can balance a strong central office with autonomy at the school site. But again, this requires defining the role of the central office in a complex way.

And it means changing the operation of more departments than just those offices responsible for “school reform” or “innovation”—it demands that the entire central office actively supports autonomous schools.⁴⁹

Directions for the Future

If autonomy is limited to being a reward, it is less important to have the entire central office take on this complex role: Autonomy as a reward necessarily limits the number of schools included by ensuring that schools themselves have the capacity to make decisions, thereby reducing the burden on the central office. But autonomy under the most recent iteration of decentralization reforms—“portfolio management”—is not limited to being a reward for a few schools. Instead, autonomy is viewed as a catalyst for improvement. Districts using portfolio management don’t directly manage all schools; instead, they contract with independent operators to run schools and grant them more flexibility. But the central office still plays an important role—it focuses on evaluating school performance, issuing requests for proposals for new schools, and closing down low-performers.

Indeed, what sets portfolio management apart from past efforts to use autonomy in school reform is that it articulates a clear role for the central office, albeit one very different from the current operation of most school districts. The central office needs to determine

Is Centralization Better?

In 2006, Boston Public Schools won the coveted Broad Prize for Urban Education, a \$1 million annual award to an urban district demonstrating high student achievement and progress in closing racial and economic achievement gaps. The prize capped 10 years of sustained and coherent reforms under the leadership of Superintendent Tom Payzant. During that time, Boston saw test scores rise among all students, particularly among low-income and minority groups, with both Hispanic and Black high school students posting gains of approximately 50 percentage points in math.¹ Boston also saw consistent gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in both fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math. These improvements have so far been sustained: Boston scored above average among large city school districts on the 2009 NAEP mathematics and reading assessments.²

But these improvements did not come from granting schools more autonomy. On the contrary, Payzant instead sought to standardize practice across the district and increase central office control. The Broad Prize review of Boston's reforms highlights strategies such as establishing districtwide curriculum standards and "pacing" guides to direct teachers' instruction throughout the year, curriculum implementation reviews to assess instruction, and minimum requirements for instructional time in reading and math. Schools also had little control over their budgets, except for a small pot for supplementary materials.³

A review of Boston's school reforms in a book by Heather Zavadsky on Broad Prize-winning districts shows that by standardizing practice, Payzant created unprecedented coherence across schools in curriculum, instruction, professional development, and student expectations.⁴ Of the uniform curriculum, one teacher told Zavadsky, "It brings consistency throughout the district. No matter if a child comes from a different school, that child is familiar with the content we are using." Previously, a report by the Aspen Institute said, each school essentially chose its own curriculum, a practice that resulted "in what one [educator] called 'Greek city-states' that produced wide variations in quality."⁵

Boston isn't the only successful urban district increasing centralization, particularly in curriculum and instruction. Zavadsky's profile of four other Broad Prize-winning districts includes similar examples. Aldine Independent School District in Texas, for example, began its curriculum development process by getting input from teachers on what students should learn at each grade level, then required that everyone follow the curriculum. It included six-week benchmark assessments and goals, pacing guides, and model lessons. One teacher at Garden Grove Unified School District in California said that her district's

aligned curriculum and common pacing guides were beneficial. "If a student moves anywhere in the district and is in Algebra I, I'm confident that child will know 'XYZ' because the teachers all follow the pacing guide," she said.

Does the success of Boston Public Schools and the other Broad-prize winning districts mean that centralization, rather than autonomy, is the most effective strategy for school reform? Yes and no. Autonomy is a mantra among highly successful schools, and few leaders of the most successful charter schools and district schools would say they could achieve similar results under typical district rules and regulations. Stories of maverick principals and teachers are regularly celebrated, including Morgan Freeman's character Joe Clark in the 1980s movie *Lean on Me* or math teacher Jaime Escalante, played by Edward James Olmos in *Stand and Deliver*. But these successful stories of autonomy are generally limited to a single school, or even a single teacher, with the capacity to make better decisions than the central office.

While we may celebrate the individual principal who breaks the rules, there is far less consensus on the ability of autonomy to improve an entire system of schools. And it is this challenge—bringing reform to scale across a school system—that led superintendents like Payzant to opt for centralization and standardization. In a recent report on the world's most improved school systems—which includes Boston—the consulting firm McKinsey & Company notes that school systems that are going from "poor to fair" or "fair to good" tend to benefit from increased centralization, while systems moving from "good to great" or "great to excellent" allow more flexibility in school and teacher practice. "Lower-performing systems focus on raising the floor," the authors say, "while higher-performing ones focus on opening up the ceiling".⁶

"... The main challenge of systems engaged in the poor-to-fair and fair-to-good stages is to minimize performance variation between classes and across schools. This requires ensuring that lower-skill teachers are given the support of high-quality teaching materials and lesson plans that can closely guide what they do on a daily basis ... However, when teachers achieve a higher level of skill, as is the case in good-to-great and great-to-excellent improvement journey stages, such tight central control becomes counterproductive to system improvement. Rather, school-level flexibility and teacher collaboration become the drivers of improvement because they lead to innovations in teaching and learning.

School capacity, then, is the critical factor when deciding how much flexibility schools should be given, something

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Is Centralization Better?, cont.

that Payzant has acknowledged about his reforms in Boston. “Schools also vary widely in their capacity to carry out reform,” he told Education Sector. “So in Boston we sought a middle ground. When we set out to improve reading instruction, for example, I gave schools autonomy within a narrow range to select the literacy program they would use. We went from everybody doing their own thing to, ‘Here are three or four programs to pick from.’”⁷

Districts pursuing autonomy need to address this vital issue of capacity by hiring and preparing more effective school leaders and teachers and providing schools with supports that recognize their different needs. Until they have those supports, as Boston has found, centralization may be a better route to take.

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which areas to give schools control over and what boundaries to set on schools’ autonomy. It also needs to assess schools’ capacity to make good decisions and provide support based on individual schools’ needs.

The tough question remaining is how DCPS, as well as other school districts across the nation struggling to make autonomy work, can reach the point where individual, autonomous schools are capable of making decisions to improve student performance and where the district can give them the support they need to do so. Says Cohen: “An autonomous district or portfolio management district is probably the right way to go; decisions made close to the kids are best. But what no one has articulated yet is a theory of change—how you get from where we are now to that.”

Districts currently attempting portfolio management are using different strategies to reach this end goal.⁵⁰ New York City established formal “school support networks” to provide autonomous schools with guidance and support separate from the central office. Chicago, which has yet to take autonomy districtwide, has concentrated much of its school supports in the Office of New Schools and the Autonomous Management and Performance Schools department, both new sections within the central office. And New Orleans is using a more laissez-faire approach by

relying on informal, outside organizations to provide much of the support to its schools. These different strategies for establishing a portfolio system give researchers and policymakers the opportunity to find the right balance between school autonomy and district control and determine which support systems work best. Based on these lessons, we can start building a roadmap for districts interested in creating a system of autonomous schools.

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