

Autonomous District Schools



A NEW PATH
TO GROWING
HIGH-QUALITY,
INNOVATIVE
PUBLIC
SCHOOLS

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Across the United States, a movement to create a new kind of public school — “autonomous district schools” — is giving districts the freedoms charter schools receive. Like charter schools, autonomous district schools are freed from innovation-inhibiting state and district policies, allowing talented educators to make academic and operational changes that better serve students. But rather than operating under a charter that is completely independent from the district, these autonomous schools remain part of the district. Thus, autonomous district schools let districts try to do what charters have done in cities such as New Orleans and Indianapolis: grow high-quality, innovative schools and diversify public school options at scale.

Given the increasing interest in and proliferation of autonomous district school initiatives,¹ this report provides a framework, language, and specific examples to describe different approaches for implementing district autonomous schools; and highlights design decisions that affect the effectiveness and sustainability of autonomous district schools.

Autonomous District Schools Explained

On a continuum of public school models, autonomous district schools fall between traditional district and charter schools (see Figure 1, page 2). Autonomous district school models may vary from one another depending on the governance relationship with the district (see “Categories of Autonomous District Schools,” page 7), but like charter schools, they are exempt from certain state and district policies that govern the operation of state-funded schools,

and may exercise similar autonomies regarding staffing, curriculum, budget, and operations. They may be operated or supported by external school management organizations or operators, but the school district still holds them accountable for their performance through contracts or alternative governance structures. Unlike most charter schools, they typically must follow district enrollment policies; their performance is included in ratings of the home district’s performance; and they can use district resources (facilities and operational services, such as transportation and maintenance, for example) that charter schools usually cannot.

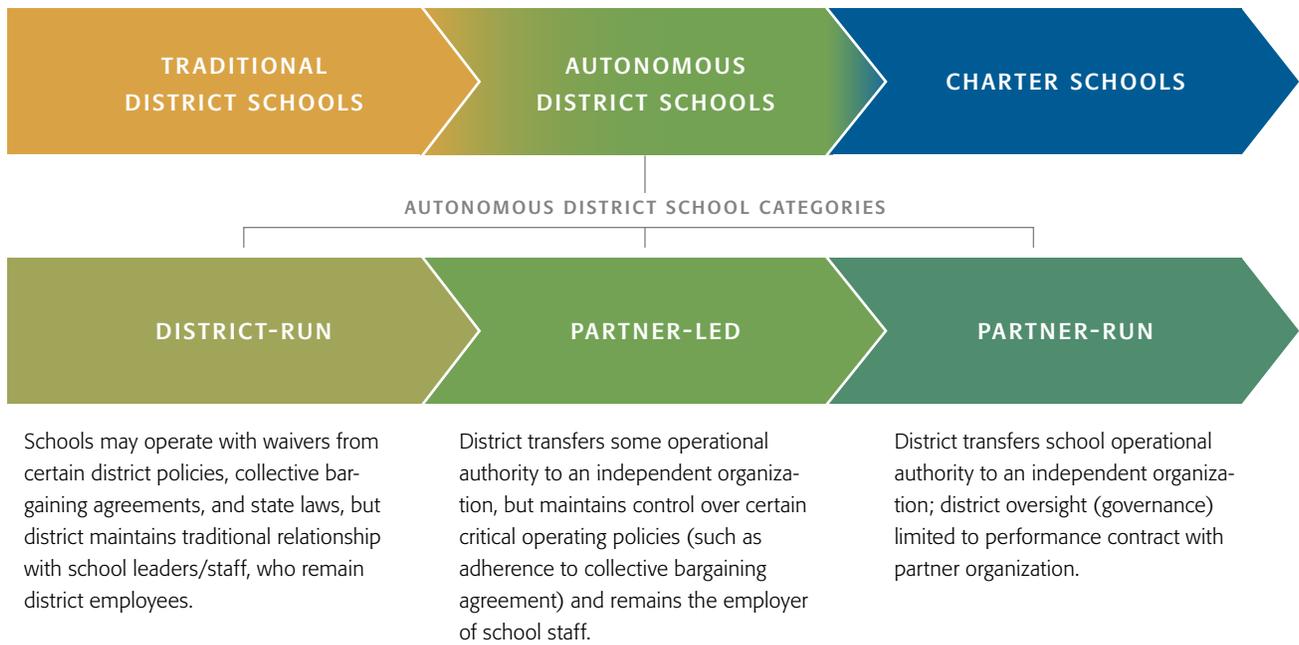


Figure 1. Public School Models

Though research on the performance of autonomous district schools is limited, some data suggest that student outcomes in autonomous district schools improve over time more than in other district schools.² Though most autonomous district school initiatives have been driven by political and accountability pressures to improve low-performing schools, the experience of early adopters suggests that autonomous district school models also offer school districts untapped potential to pursue innovation in school design, by providing a way for district schools to overcome state and district rules and policies that have historically impeded entrepreneurial educators.

This opportunity is significant for districts given the increasing demand for a broader range of public school options. The charter sector has produced some schools implementing school design innovations that have shown success in improving outcomes, especially in urban, high-poverty communities, but observers have expressed concern about the limited range of innovations in most charter schools.³

Nor has the charter sector been able to grow or replicate successful models at a rate sufficient to meet the demand for better or more diverse school options. In 2017–18, nearly 3.2 million students were enrolled in charter schools, though

some reports suggest that over 5 million more students would enroll in charters if seats were available.⁴

Autonomous district schools can also help a district attract and retain talented educators. Autonomous schools provide a way for districts to create high-quality and diverse school options that attract not only students and families but also educators seeking a more innovative and flexible school operating environment.

Autonomous district schools also offer a route for districts to seize the opportunity presented by chartering even when actual chartering may be limited by policy or politics. Many districts exist in states without strong charter school laws. Even in places with laws that support growth of high-quality charter schools, many districts face political constraints on how eagerly they can embrace charters. Autonomous district schools give them a way to sponsor independent innovation without the “charter” label.

Autonomous district schools also let districts promote district-charter collaboration. By enlisting charter organizations to operate autonomous district schools, districts can build and diversify a portfolio of school designs and operators. Charter

operators that collaborate with districts to develop or operate autonomous district schools gain access to district facilities and resources while expanding their impact and building bridges with traditional district school supporters. Alternatively, autonomous district school initiatives push charters to improve or innovate at scale. Either path potentially leads to innovative and better school options for more students, which, over time, improves public school opportunities for all students.

Anatomy of Autonomous District School Initiatives⁵

Based on state law, district policy, and school operating agreements, autonomous district schools differ from one another and from traditional district and charter schools in three ways:

- **District-school relationship**—the governance connection between a district and school as defined by state or district policy. State or district policy provides a framework for establishing autonomous schools, identifies district schools eligible to exercise autonomy, defines their autonomies, and provides for mechanisms and organizational systems that both enable and protect those autonomies.
- **School-based autonomies**—areas of critical school management and operation (such as staffing, academic program, budget, operations) over which district schools gain decision-making authority to exercise flexibility from traditional state and district policy.
- **Design and implementation strategies**—the process and procedures the district directs, supports, or enables so district schools can use school-based decision-making authority.



Figure 2. Dimensions of Autonomous School Initiatives

District-school relationship

Autonomous district school initiatives alter the traditional relationship between a district and school by transferring decision-making authority from the district to the school. State or district policy redefines the governance connection between a district and school by establishing a vision for the creation of autonomous district schools, defining autonomies that they may exercise, and providing for mechanisms that both enable and protect those autonomies. Five key indicators evidence this new relationship (see Table 1, page 5):

- **Legal authority.** Typically, the establishment of this new district-school relationship arises from a legal authority, such as state law or district policy, that provides the local school board and superintendent authority to establish autonomous district schools.
- **Eligible schools.** In defining the purpose of autonomous district schools, the law or policy defines schools eligible to become autonomous district schools. To date, most districts have implemented autonomous schools as an intervention for turning around low-performing schools individually or as part of a “turnaround” zone. But a few are offering autonomy to other schools to foster innovation.
- **School-based authority.** With autonomous district school initiatives, the district transfers decision-making authority to an organization (such as a single or multi-school operator organization) or school-based committee (see “School Governance Committees,” page 6) that oversees day-to-day operations and management, including performance of the school leader, school budget, and strategic planning.
- **Student enrollment.** Generally, the state law or district policy enabling autonomous district schools prescribes the enrollment policy they must adopt. Frequently, autonomous district schools must abide by the existing enrollment policy. For example, those operating within a district with set attendance boundaries must guarantee seats for all students within the school’s attendance zone; schools operating within choice zones must establish policies and processes that comply with the district’s school choice policies. However, autonomous district schools are frequently authorized to exercise district-wide enrollment for any seats remaining after students within the schools’ attendance zone are served.
- **Governance relationship.** Usually, a contract, memorandum of agreement or understanding, or district-approved

plan documents the new relationship between the district and the school-based entity with decision-making authority. The critical change is that the school-based entity gains authority to make or approve decisions traditionally made by district leadership; in exchange, it is held accountable for exercising that autonomy. Despite the transfer of authority to the school-based entity, the district remains accountable for the school’s performance. However, a governance shift occurs when a district transfers all oversight of the school’s exercise of autonomy to an independently incorporated entity without the possibility of revocation except for cause. A governance shift does not occur when the district oversees a school-based entity’s exercise of decision-making authority.

The experience of charters suggests that autonomous district schools are ideally governed by operators independent of the district, under the terms of contracts revocable only for cause. Many autonomous school advocates view a governance shift as essential to making district school autonomy viable. But state or district policy or politics may constrain the degree to which districts can emulate that governance model. In these cases, districts try to establish the conditions that allow district schools to manage themselves with autonomy without a governance shift (see “Categories of Autonomous District Schools,” page 7).

Though autonomous district schools may be implemented without a complete governance shift, this change does indicate the highest level of assurance that district schools will, in fact, be allowed to manage themselves without interference from the district. Without a governance shift, the ability of an autonomous school to make school-based decisions independent of the district depends on the mechanisms in place to enforce the terms of the new district-school relationship, including its exercise of autonomy. Legal authority, such as state law, and mechanisms such as contractual agreements provide the greatest protection. District policy or a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the district and school are more susceptible to interpretations influenced by changes in district leadership, priorities, or internal organization. For example, MOUs with Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) enable Pilot Schools and the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools to exercise autonomy over some staffing and curriculum issues (see “Categories of Autonomous District Schools,” page 7). However, as LAUSD has faced

Table 1. Indicators of the new relationship between districts and autonomous district schools	
Legal authority for school autonomy	State law or district policy outlines the legal framework for enabling school-based autonomy, defines autonomies that autonomous schools may exercise, and provides for mechanisms that both enable and protect those autonomies.
School eligibility	Legal authority defines which schools are eligible to become autonomous district schools—such as all schools, turnaround/low-performing schools, or other select schools (for example, only new or high performing schools).
School-based authority (school management / oversight agent/ entity)	An organization (such as a single or multi-school operator organization) or school-based committee that exercises decision-making authority with autonomy from the district and is responsible for day-to-day oversight of school operations and performance of school leader, fiscal management, etc. (not accountability).
Student enrollment	Legal authority defines students eligible to enroll in autonomous district schools, and may require schools to abide by district enrollment policies, which could include maintaining geographic attendance zones or becoming a district-wide enrollment option.
Governance relationship	District is accountable for school performance but transfers key decision-making and oversight responsibilities to a school-based decision maker. A contract, memorandum of understanding or agreement, or district-approved plan documents the district-school relationship. State may be a party to the agreement, reflecting state approval of autonomies.

budget challenges, the district has limited Pilot Schools' autonomy to select and hire teaching staff. Similarly, since the adoption of Common Core State Standards, the Partnership has had to negotiate specific waivers to use curricula not prescribed by the district, even though its MOU with LAUSD authorizes it to develop a "complete educational program" including a curriculum framework for all students.

Further, autonomous schools established without a governance shift are also less protected from political and administrative changes. Interest in giving schools autonomy within a district tends to ebb and flow. When it ebbs, schools that are not operated by independent organizations with legally enforceable contracts have little leverage to maintain their status.





School Governance Committees in Autonomous District Schools

Some autonomous school model designs require that schools establish a school-based committee composed of school leaders, teachers, students, and parents charged with certain oversight responsibilities, such as selecting school leaders and approving school budgets. The committee structure is intended to empower members of the school community to participate in governance-like activities and to protect the school's operational autonomy, even as the local district maintains ultimate decision-making authority and governance responsibilities. In practice, the committee's effectiveness can be compromised by several factors, including: unclear responsibilities and authority, lack of training and support for the role, challenge of recruiting and retaining well-qualified committee members, lack of staff support to carry out oversight activities, and, perhaps most important, lack of legal standing rooted in law or contract to enforce their authority.

Some autonomous district school initiatives have taken steps to build the knowledge and skills school-based committees need. For example, in the Fulton County Charter System (see "Categories of Autonomous District Schools," page 7), school governance councils are certified, meaning that all members must participate in and successfully complete a structured training program and a criminal background check, and councils must comply with election and appointment processes. Both governing school councils in Los Angeles' Pilot Schools and school governance councils in Fulton County Charter System schools have significant authority to select and evaluate school principals. Neither of these models, however, provide for independent staff support that would allow the committees to gather information and act more independently of the principal.

Categories of Autonomous District Schools Are Defined by their Governance Model

Autonomous district school models fall into three categories based primarily on the district-school governance relationship.



In **partner-run**¹ autonomous district schools, a complete governance change occurs whereby the district transfers authority over school functions to a partner organization incorporated separately from the district, and all oversight thereof, for a limited, often renewable term, that is revocable only for cause. Generally, the partner has authority to select and hire school leaders and all school staff and may be the actual employer of school staff. Some notable examples include:

- **Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP, Massachusetts).** To avoid a state takeover pursuant to the state’s authority to place chronically underperforming schools in receivership, the Springfield School District voluntarily entered into a five-year MOU effective in the 2015–16 school year with the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP), giving the SEZP full managerial and operational control over 10 low-performing schools assigned to the zone.² Under a new agreement with the local teachers’ union,³ the district continues to employ all school staff, but SEZP selects and hires all school leaders and approves the hiring of school staff selected by school leaders. In 2018–19, SEZP included 12 schools.⁴
- **Innovation Schools, Indianapolis, Indiana.** State legislation passed in 2014 and 2015 allows Indianapolis Public Schools to contract with nonprofit school operators to operate autonomous district schools under renewable contracts lasting for five to seven years.⁵ Innovation School operators have full academic autonomy, employ all school staff directly, and are not subject to the district’s collective bargaining agreement. Initially designed to turn around schools, the Innovation School model was expanded to allow high-performing schools and charters to gain Innovation School status, and new schools to open as Innovation Schools.
- **Renaissance Schools, Camden, New Jersey.** Under the state’s 2012 Urban Hope Act, certain New Jersey urban districts with a high percentage of low-performing schools are authorized to contract with nonprofit school operators to open new schools under 10-year renewable contracts.⁶ Renaissance school operators have full academic and operational autonomy, employ all school staff directly, and are not subject to the district’s collective bargaining agreement. In 2018–19, three charter management organizations operated 11 schools.
- **Luminary Learning Network Innovation Zone, Denver, Colorado.** Under the 2008 Innovation Schools Act (see section on district-run schools below), groups of Innovation Schools may join together to seek status as an Innovation Zone.⁷ In 2016, Denver Public Schools approved its first zone, allowing the Luminary Learning Network (LLN), a nonprofit organization, to manage four schools. While the district continues to employ school staff, an MOU between the LLN and the district that is renewable every three years allows the LLN to exercise comprehensive autonomy over staffing, budget, curriculum, school schedule and calendar, and professional development, and provides for accountability measures that the LLN must meet for individual schools and the zone collectively. In 2018, Denver added a second network zone and added a school to the LLN.
- **District Campus Charter Schools, Texas.** Though the vast majority of Texas charter schools are authorized by the Texas Education Agency (TEA), Texas charter law also allows local school districts to authorize “Subchapter C” district campus charter schools. Texas campus charter schools operate with varying levels of autonomy, depending on the district’s authorizing policies, but in all cases, schools are governed by independent charter school boards that hold a charter-contract

agreement with the local school district board of trustees. In 2017, Texas passed legislation⁸ that has spurred TEA to dedicate significant resources to encouraging and enabling districts to authorize campus charter schools that promote partnerships with independent organizations, which will open innovative school models and turn around low-performing district schools.⁹

In **partner-led autonomous schools**,¹⁰ an independent organization incorporated separately from the district gains authority from the district to manage critical school operations, including responsibility for selecting school leaders who, with the support of the partner, execute the autonomy conferred to the partner organization. But a governance shift does not occur; the district directly oversees some critical issues that affect school operations (such as adherence to collective bargaining agreements) and remains the employer of school staff. Two notable examples include:

- **Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, California.** In a 2007 MOU, the Los Angeles Unified School District authorized the Partnership, a nonprofit school management organization, to exercise managerial control over some of the district's low-est-performing, high-need schools. The Partnership exercises some staffing and curricular autonomies, but it must adhere to some district policies, including the district's collective bargaining agreement, school calendar, and operational policies.¹¹ In 2017–18, the Partnership network included 18 district schools.
- **AUSL, Chicago, Illinois.** Since 2006, AUSL, a nonprofit school management and teacher residency program, has managed low-performing schools in Chicago pursuant to individual school management agreements with Chicago Public Schools. AUSL exercises some staffing and curricular autonomies, but must adhere to some district policies, including the district's collective bargaining agreement, school calendar, and operational policies. AUSL operated 31 schools in 2017–18.

District-run autonomous schools may operate with waivers from certain district policies, collective bargaining agreements, and state laws (when a state law enabling districts to create autonomous district schools so permits). Typically, the school principal or a school-based committee chooses which flexibilities to use on an "a la carte" basis, or districts allow certain waivers uniformly to all autonomous schools. Examples include:

- **Innovation Schools, Denver, Colorado.** Colorado's 2008 Innovation Schools Act¹² allows any district school to apply for Innovation School status to gain flexibility from state law, district policy, and collective bargaining agreements. Schools select and request waivers necessary to meet the particular needs of the schools' students; applications are reviewed and approved by the district and state boards of education. Denver Public Schools first used innovation status in 2009 to facilitate school turnarounds and the development of innovative schools. In 2017–18, the district had 49 Innovation Schools.
- **Fulton County Charter System schools, Georgia.** 2008 Georgia legislation¹³ created options that allow school districts to exercise autonomy from state laws and regulations. Fulton County Schools elected to implement the charter system, whereby all schools are required to select and request necessary waivers to meet the particular needs of the schools' students; autonomy plans and waiver requests are reviewed and approved by the district. Fulton County Schools transitioned all 22 of its non-charter schools to charter system schools between 2012 and 2016.
- **Pilot Schools, Los Angeles, California.** In response to the growing presence of charter schools, Los Angeles Unified School District and the local teachers' union entered into a 2007 MOU authorizing any traditional district schools to seek Pilot School status, which gives them certain staffing and curricular autonomies. Modeled on Boston's Pilot Schools,¹⁴ the Los Angeles schools are subject to the district's collective bargaining agreement, but individual schools execute "elect-to-work" agreements exempting them from certain bargaining provisions as necessary to meet the needs of the school's students. Since 2007, 48 schools have operated as Pilot Schools.

NOTES

1. For more detail, see: Gill, S., & Campbell, C. (2017, October). *Partnership schools: New governance models for creating quality school options in districts*. University of Washington Bothell: The Center on Re-inventing Public Education. Retrieved from <https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-partnership-schools.pdf>

2. MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, & Springfield School Committee. (2014). *Memorandum of understanding among the Springfield School Committee, the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, Inc., and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*. Retrieved from http://www.schoolrestarts.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/MOU_between_district_and_SEA_to_establish_Empowerment_Zone.pdf

3. Springfield Education Association & Springfield School Committee. (2016). *Agreement between the Springfield Education Association and the Springfield School Committee for the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership Schools, July 1-2016-June 30, 2018*. Retrieved from http://www.schoolrestarts.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/CBA_between_union_and_District_for_the_Empowerment_Zone_schools.pdf

4. For more detail, see: Iyengar, N., Lewis-LaMonica, K., & Perigo, M. (2017). *Built to last: The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, Springfield, Massachusetts*. Boston, MA: The Bridgespan Group. Retrieved from <https://www.bridgespan.org/bridgespan/Images/articles/district-innovation-zones-springfield-built-last/Springfield-MA-Profile.pdf?text=.pdf>; Jochim, A., & Opalka, A. (2017). *The "City of Firsts" charts a new path on turnaround*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved from <https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-city-firsts.pdf>; Schuner, E. (2017). *The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership*. Washington, D.C.: Progressive Policy Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.progressivepolicy.org/issues/education/springfield-empowerment-zone-partnership/>

5. See House Bill 1321 (2014) authorizing Ind. Code § 20-25.5 et seq. Retrieved from <http://iga.in.gov/legislative/2014/bills/house/1321#document-6cbcd52>; House Bill 1009 (2015) amending Chapter 20 (see Ind.Code § 20-25.7 et seq.). Retrieved from <http://iga.in.gov/legislative/2015/bills/house/1009#document-ffbfa7a6>

6. See Senate Bill 3173 authorizing N.J. Rev. Stat. § 18A:36C-1 et seq. Retrieved from https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/2010/Bills/S3500/3173_11.PDF

7. See Senate Bill 08-130 authorizing Colo. Rev. Stat. §22-32.5-101 et seq. Retrieved from <http://www.cde.state.co.us/sites/default/files/documents/choice/download/sb130/statutesb130.pdf>.

8. See Senate Bill 1882 authorizing Tex. Bus. & Com. Code § 11.174. Retrieved from <https://legiscan.com/TX/text/SB1882/2017>

9. For more detail, see TEA's Partnership Schools website at <https://txpartnerships.org/>

10. For more detail, see Gill, S., & Campbell, C. (2017, October). *Partnership Schools: New governance models for creating quality school options in districts*. University of Washington Bothell: The Center on Re-inventing Public Education. Retrieved from <https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-partnership-schools.pdf>

11. For more detail on the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, see: Public Impact: Kim, J., Hargrave, E., & Brooks-Uy, V. (2018). *The secret to sustainable school transformation: Slow and steady wins the race*. Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact; and Los Angeles, CA: Partnership for Los Angeles Schools. Retrieved from: <https://partnershipla.org/resources/additional-resources/full-report-secret-sustainable-school-transformation-slow-steady-wins-race/>

12. See Senate Bill 08-130 authorizing Colo. Rev. Stat. §22-32.5-101 et seq. Retrieved from <http://www.cde.state.co.us/sites/default/files/documents/choice/download/sb130/statutesb130.pdf>

13. See HB 1209 authorizing GA. Code Ann. § 2-2-80 et seq. Retrieved from <http://www.legis.ga.gov/Legislation/20072008/85341.pdf>

14. Boston Pilot Schools have been subject to more examination and study than Los Angeles Pilot Schools. See: Center for Collaborative Education. (2006, January). *Progress and promise: Results from the Boston Pilot Schools*. Boston, MA: Center for Collaborative Education. Retrieved from http://cce.org/files/ProgressPromise_Study_2006.pdf; Center for Collaborative Education. (2001, October). *How Boston Pilot Schools use freedom over budget, staffing, and scheduling to meet student needs*. Boston, MA: Center for Collaborative Education. Retrieved from http://cce.org/files/HowBostonPilotSchoolsUseFreedom_2001.pdf



School-based autonomy

Autonomous district schools are given authority to make decisions regarding critical school management issues, including staffing, academic program, school budget, and operations (see Table 2). Typically, an autonomous district school initiative enabled by state law allows districts to exempt autonomous schools from adhering to certain state and district rules and policies; initiatives established through local policy allow districts to give autonomous district schools flexibility on only district policies and regulations. Though the experience of charters suggests that autonomous district schools should exercise complete autonomy over school management decisions, that tends to happen only where a governance shift has occurred. Given the autonomies that are politically and legally feasible for districts to authorize, planning and implementation can significantly bear on their effectiveness (see “Planning and Implementing Autonomies,” page 12).

Staffing. Schools may gain flexibility to select and hire staff, and determine the roles, staffing structure, evaluation, and professional development that best support the school model and staff ability to meet student needs.

Broadly, the type and degree of staffing autonomy that a school may exercise depends largely on whether school staff are district employees. Advocates of autonomous schools tend to favor employing educators and school staff through the independent organization operating the school. Absent a governance shift, however, the district tends to remain the employer of school staff, in which case state law or collective bargaining agreements may restrict the school’s staffing autonomy. Autonomous schools subject to district collective bargaining agreements have found some ways to work within

their limitations—see “Enabling Autonomy under Collective Bargaining Agreements,” page 11.

Academic/Program. Like charters, autonomous district schools must comply with state academic performance standards and end-of-year testing requirements. Beyond that requirement, schools may gain flexibility to adopt curriculum, assessments, and instructional practices that best meet students’ learning needs. Schools may also have flexibility to develop a school schedule and annual calendar that best serves their students and allows a school to implement its model.

Where oversight of a district school has shifted from the district to an external partner that employs school staff, the partner has complete autonomy to implement new and innovative programs in concert with new daily schedules and annual operating calendars. Some autonomous models may have limitations regarding other operational autonomies that affect the academic program (such as full autonomy to adopt any curriculum, but limited autonomy regarding daily schedules or the annual calendar), or budget limitations that curtail the school’s ability to purchase or implement a new or innovative curriculum.

Budget. Autonomy over budgeting decisions gives schools flexibility to develop a budget that best supports their students’ needs. The school may have discretion regarding staff compensation, use of district services, and fundraising that allows it maximum flexibility to allocate resources in support of the school’s highest priorities.

With budgeting autonomy, a school may depart from the district’s salary structure or provide supplemental compensation, reallocate funding from the district according to the school’s

Table 2. School management areas in which autonomous district schools gain decision-making authority	
Staffing	Flexibility to select and hire staff, and determine the roles, staffing structure, evaluation, and professional development that best support school model and staff ability to meet students’ needs.
Academic/ Program	Flexibility to adopt curriculum, assessments, and instructional practices that best meet students’ learning needs. Schools also have flexibility to develop a school schedule and annual calendar that best serve their students and allow schools to implement their models.
Budget	Flexibility to develop a budget that best supports implementation of school model. The school may have discretion on staff compensation, use of district services, and fundraising that allow it maximum flexibility in developing its budget.
Operations	Flexibility regarding use of services (academic and non-academic) and resources (including facilities) that the district manages.

Enabling Autonomy under Collective Bargaining Agreements

Collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) can severely limit the autonomies that district schools may exercise. However, autonomous schools subject to district CBAs have found some ways to work within their limitations, including:

- **New agreements negotiated with teacher unions that authorize schools to establish flexibilities at the school level.** For example, the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP) has a separate CBA with the local teachers' union, which sets up a stipend scale for extra teacher work time and authorizes teacher leadership teams at each SEZP school to determine working conditions that inform the stipend scale structure. Each Los Angeles Pilot School has an elect-to-work agreement that defines staff working conditions and is established and modified with school community input (staff, leaders, families, and students.)
- **At-will or annual contracts rather than multi-year contracts that may trigger tenure protections.** For example, AUSL principals in Chicago are technically "interim principals" appointed by the district CEO, who serve on a year-to-year contractual basis.
- **Support for school leaders and management teams that enhance opportunities to recruit and select staff to fill vacancies, evaluate, and retain staff.** For example, the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools has developed selection criteria and rigorous screening tools and protocols to use in teacher and principal hiring. The Partnership also uses its own enhanced evaluation process and measures to assess principal performance, and it provides teacher leadership opportunities and hiring and retention bonuses.



needs, and raise or use external funds. This autonomy can also affect how much a school may maximize other autonomies such as those on staffing and the academic program. Budgeting autonomy is most useful when schools have complete autonomy to use per-pupil funding however they choose—within state and federal guidelines—as is usually

the case with partner-led autonomous district schools. But any limitations on the use of per-pupil funding (for example, when a certain percentage is allocated to support staff salaries or services the autonomous schools must purchase from the district) potentially curtails the amount of discretionary funds available to the school.

Operations. Autonomous district school initiatives usually allow some flexibility regarding the use of services (academic and non-academic) and resources (including facilities) that the district manages.

Some districts prescribe which services autonomous schools must use (most commonly, food, transportation, and services for special education students and English language learners); others allow autonomous schools to opt in or out of certain services. Schools that opt in to services often pay the district for them on a per-pupil basis. Providing operational

support “a la carte” lets districts preserve economies of scale but can present administrative challenges. For example, districts have to adopt fee-for-service operational and financial systems and coordinate closely with schools regarding opt-in and opt-out operational services. Student-based budgeting can help facilitate cost calculations and transactions, but districts that have not adopted this method must otherwise determine what amount of school funding to withhold for district-provided services.

Planning and Implementing School Autonomies

Autonomous district school initiatives vary in the type of autonomies granted to schools. Some initiatives allow schools to select a la carte which waivers to request (as with Denver’s Innovation Schools and the Fulton County Charter System), while others prescriptively define the areas and types of autonomy that schools may exercise (for example, district policy defines the autonomies that Los Angeles Pilot Schools may exercise). Autonomous district school initiatives also vary regarding how much autonomy schools/school operators have to manage their flexibilities. For example, a school may have autonomy to select a curriculum, but effectively must still seek specific district approval to use it. But three planning and implementation factors are equally, if not more, significant than the type and degree of autonomies granted to schools:

- **Alignment of autonomies to goals that a school seeks to achieve.** For autonomies to be effective, schools need decision-making authority over what matters most to academic innovation or improvement; for example, a school redesigning its staffing model should have authority to develop staff roles and responsibilities, and tailor its recruitment, selection, hiring, and professional development to those roles and responsibilities. The school may also require budgeting and operations flexibility that allows the school to realize “savings” within its budget and reallocate funds to support hiring the necessary staff.
- **Capacity and resources to implement autonomies effectively.** Schools need to have the time, talent, and critical supports (including technical assistance, development and training, and funding) to implement the autonomous district school design effectively (see “Design and Implementation Elements,” page 13). Schools must also have clear policies and processes in place regarding the exercise of autonomies. As previously noted, budget and operations flexibility can help schools reallocate funds to support school priorities.
- **Adequate protection to implement and sustain autonomies.** Schools need systems in place to protect their right to use their autonomies—both legal mechanisms and organization structures. (See “District-school relationship,” page 4, and “Design and implementation elements,” page 13.)



Design and implementation elements

The experience of autonomous district school models implemented to date suggests that how districts approach design and implementation accounts for the quality and effectiveness of these schools at least as much as the autonomies themselves and a school's ability to exercise them. This section outlines a set of important design and implementation elements for districts.

Establish vision and purpose. Districts benefit from clearly identifying their objectives for implementing autonomous schools (such as to facilitate a school turnaround or create innovative schools) and the outcomes that would indicate success. Establishing a clear vision and purpose for autonomous school implementation will help districts identify and define the autonomies schools should have and the supports and resources necessary to achieve goals.

Account for the legal context. State law or district policy dictates how and to whom the district may confer autonomy to operate schools. Given the legal context, autonomous district school planning and implementation should identify the best ways to protect and sustain autonomies. Ideally, the new relationship between the district and autonomous school is rooted in legally enforceable mechanisms (such as state laws, legal contracts, and agreements that create flexibility regarding collective bargaining agreements)—which clearly outline the responsibilities of the district, school, and other parties, as applicable, including school operators and school-based governing committees.

Provide sufficient planning time and resources.

Districts need to have sufficient planning time to 1) design the district's autonomous school model, and 2) implement the model in schools. Adequate planning time greatly affects implementation quality and impact. Districts should have sufficient time to establish policies and procedures for creating autonomous schools that meet legal and state policy requirements, and to address the many operational design considerations described below (see "Critical Design Questions," page 16). Once district-level design considerations are fully addressed, districts need sufficient time to identify and/or develop school leaders or operators to implement the model in district schools and then support the implementation of the model within schools. School leaders and teams need sufficient time to participate in autonomous school design

and planning activities, develop and execute a staff transition process, and engage parents and other community members in the school redesign and transition process. Generally, a minimum of 12 to 18 months from the time a school begins developing its autonomy plan/design to operation as an autonomous district school is enough, especially if timed to allow schools to initiate any staff recruiting and hiring in the spring of the launch year.

Districts also need resources to support autonomous school design and implementation activities. Districts should consider providing funds for stipends or approving release time to support additional staff time focused on planning activities. Districts should also consider providing resources for school leaders and planning teams to hire facilitators or third-party school redesign experts to support the planning process, or to meet with and observe exemplary autonomous district schools.

Establish an organizational structure to support implementation of autonomous district schools.

Design of the autonomous school model should also account for a district infrastructure that best supports the model. Districts should plan for internal systems that:

- Identify where autonomous district schools are needed;
- Support the implementation process, including identifying school operators and working with them to design and plan the autonomous district school;
- Monitor enforcement of new district-school relationships to ensure that school autonomy is protected (so schools make decisions without interference from the district); and
- Monitor effectiveness of autonomous schools to inform decisions on expanding the number of schools that successful operators manage or closing or replacing operators in underperforming autonomous schools.

The experience of some autonomous school models suggests that a dedicated district office, which supports the planning and design of autonomous schools and their implementation, offers key benefits including: 1) focused support for exercise of autonomies; 2) streamlining of district communication for autonomous schools, by limiting and coordinating district contacts for school operators; and 3) serving as an intermediary between schools and the district that helps buffer schools from district pushback when they use their autonomies. For example, autonomous district schools in Los Angeles once worked primarily with the district's Intensive

Support and Innovation Center, a centralized office that supported low-performing schools. Then the district disbanded the office, requiring sub-district offices to support their low-performing schools. Consequently, the schools under the management of the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools fell into three sub-districts, meaning the Partnership now had three times as many district contacts to work with, including three sub-district superintendents who each had their own priorities.

Engage school operators and other support organizations. External organizations offer a range of supports to districts adopting and implementing autonomous district school models, including:

- *Supporting the district in designing the autonomous district school model and planning implementation.* Autonomous district school models reflect a significant departure from traditional district policies and practice. School redesign efforts such as Transend, Summit Basecamp, and Opportunity Culture,⁶ can help district leaders establish a vision for autonomous district schools and guide their redesign of policies and practices for autonomous schools. “Quarterback” organizations can help with other design elements, such as identifying operators or redesign organizations to support or lead autonomous district schools, incubating leaders for autonomous district schools, or developing or executing a community engagement strategy. For example, Indianapolis Public Schools worked with The Mind Trust to help identify talent for Innovation Schools. Working collaboratively with the district, The Mind Trust sponsored incubator programs to develop promising school leaders, including those with ideas for new school models.
- *Supporting planning and implementation of the autonomous district school model at the school level.* School redesign organizations and other education support organizations may provide support to school leaders in designing new staffing models, developing new curriculum, professional development, and more as needed to execute innovative school models.
- *Operating or managing schools.* Districts may look to school operators (including charter management organizations) to manage autonomous district schools. As described above, absent enough school operators, districts may look to quarterbacks to help identify or incubate leaders for autonomous schools. In addition, school redesign

organizations can be instrumental in setting up organizational structures/entities that manage networks of autonomous schools or support school leaders in managing day-to-day school operations and accessing district resources while protecting autonomies. For example, Empower School helped establish the Springfield Empowerment Zone and Denver’s Luminary Learning Network.

Develop a talent strategy. Autonomous district school models must address recruitment, retention, and leadership and staff development to enhance staffing autonomies and/or compensate for limited autonomies. Given the potential limitations that collective bargaining agreements may have regarding staffing autonomy (see “Enabling Autonomy under Collective Bargaining Agreements,” page 11), autonomous district school models working within these agreements should have talent strategies focused on building school leaders’ knowledge and skills in using their autonomies, developing existing staff, and retaining effective staff. Partner-led and partner-run autonomous district school models may rely on their partners’ talent strategy to recruit and develop leaders and teachers for schools. However, all autonomous district schools should have a talent strategy that goes beyond having autonomy to select and hire staff. Schools will find it hard to hire enough excellent teachers needed to take full advantage of their autonomies to improve student learning. Autonomous district school models should therefore include autonomies that allow schools to implement differentiated staffing plans that maximize the talent and reach of an inevitably limited supply of excellent teachers and leaders.

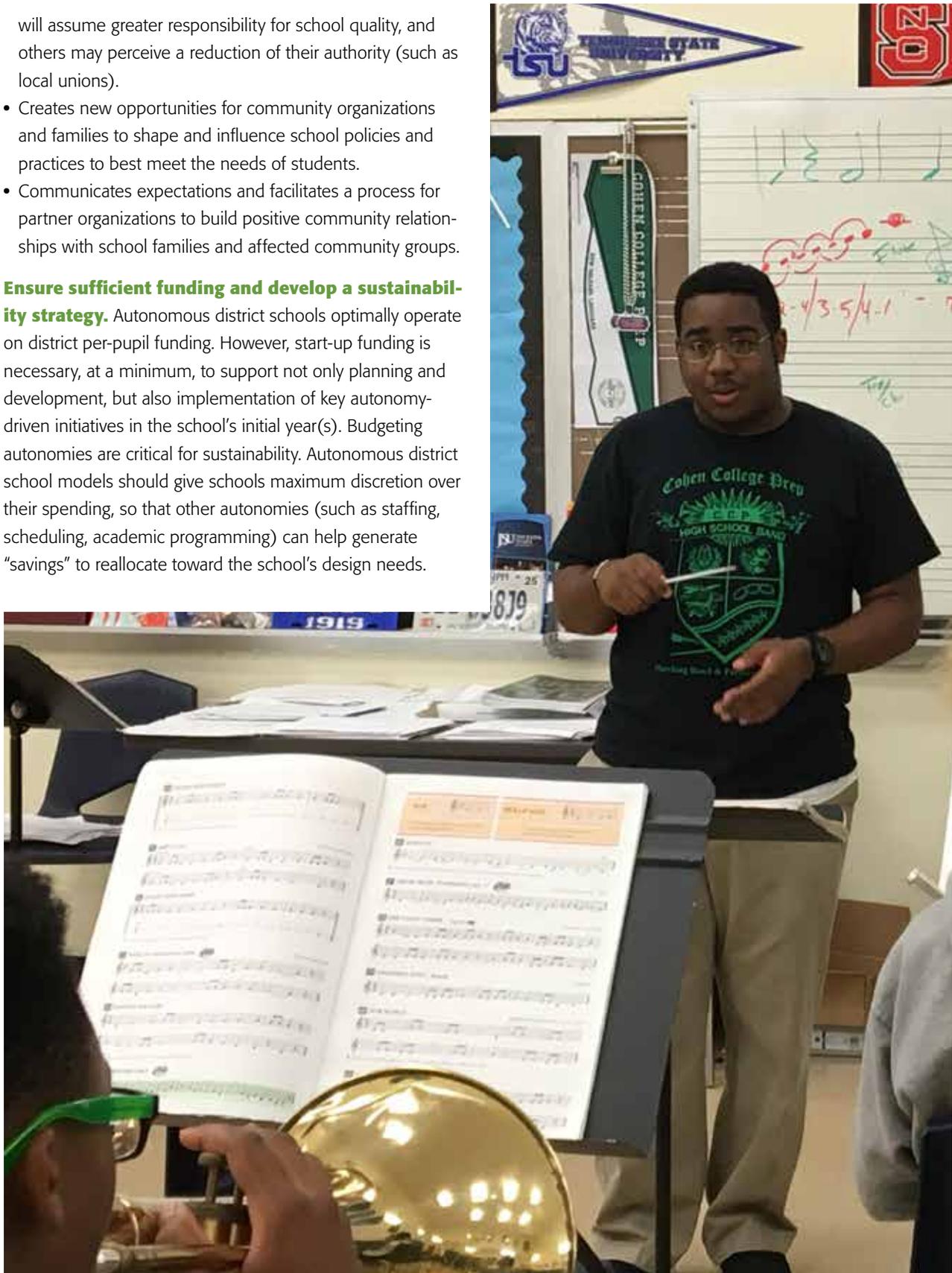
Include community leaders and local residents. Autonomous district school models inherently create significant school-level change. Thus, an autonomous district school model should include a process at the school level for involving students, parents, school staff, and community members that:

- Effectively manages the expectations of how schools and relationships will change. Early in the process, all those affected by the changes should understand and be able to ask questions about new school culture, staffing, scheduling, and more.
- Proactively addresses leadership transitions that will occur. For example, school leaders and local community members engaged through the school governance committee

will assume greater responsibility for school quality, and others may perceive a reduction of their authority (such as local unions).

- Creates new opportunities for community organizations and families to shape and influence school policies and practices to best meet the needs of students.
- Communicates expectations and facilitates a process for partner organizations to build positive community relationships with school families and affected community groups.

Ensure sufficient funding and develop a sustainability strategy. Autonomous district schools optimally operate on district per-pupil funding. However, start-up funding is necessary, at a minimum, to support not only planning and development, but also implementation of key autonomy-driven initiatives in the school's initial year(s). Budgeting autonomies are critical for sustainability. Autonomous district school models should give schools maximum discretion over their spending, so that other autonomies (such as staffing, scheduling, academic programming) can help generate "savings" to reallocate toward the school's design needs.



Critical Design Questions

As this report suggests, districts contemplating autonomous district schools must consider a number of design and implementation issues reflecting the key dimensions that define autonomous district school initiatives.

Key dimensions of autonomous district school design	Key design and implementation issues
District-school relationship	How are autonomies established and protected?
<i>Legal authority for school autonomy</i>	Does the district have sufficient authority to implement autonomous school models under state law and/or local policy?
<i>School eligibility</i>	What is the purpose of the autonomous school initiative—school turnaround, education innovation, expansion of successful school models?
<i>School-based decision maker (school management/oversight agent)</i>	What school-based entity is to be accountable for day-to-day oversight of school leadership and operations?
<i>Student enrollment</i>	What are the rules for student enrollment, transfers, and service to special student populations?
<i>Governance relationship</i>	Does an organization independent of the school district make unfettered decisions regarding all aspects of school operation? What legal mechanism documents the terms of the new district-school relationship?
School-based autonomies	What autonomies are schools authorized to exercise?
<i>Alignment of autonomies to school goals</i>	What autonomies are critical to achieve school goals? What other autonomies would maximize effectiveness of critical autonomies?
<i>Capacity and resources</i>	Does the school have sufficient capacity and resources to exercise autonomies effectively?
Design and implementation strategies	What strategies are necessary to effectively implement autonomies to create high-performing schools?
<i>Purpose</i>	What is the district’s vision for autonomous district schools?
<i>Legal context</i>	What implementing mechanisms are required/necessary per the legal authority authorizing autonomous district schools?
<i>Planning and implementation timeline</i>	What amount of time is sufficient to 1) design the district’s autonomous school initiative, and 2) design and implement autonomous district schools?
<i>District infrastructure to support autonomous district school implementation and operation</i>	What internal district structures and systems would most effectively support autonomous district school design and implementation?
<i>Third-party school operators and support organizations</i>	How may third-party organizations support design or operation of autonomous district schools in a way that optimizes the district’s vision and capacity for autonomous district school implementation?
<i>Talent strategy</i>	How will autonomous district schools identify, develop, and retain excellent leaders and teachers to work in autonomous district schools? How will they collectively staff their schools given the inevitably limited number of talented teachers and principals?
<i>Community engagement</i>	How should students, parents, school staff, and community members be involved in the design and implementation of autonomous district schools?
<i>Funding and sustainability</i>	What start-up and ongoing funding is available to support autonomous district schools? What autonomies are necessary for schools to maximize available funds?

Conclusion

Districts are increasingly considering implementing autonomous district schools as a means of creating innovative, high-quality schools. However, simply authorizing schools to exercise autonomy will not result in improved or new school models. Districts must carefully design and implement plans for how autonomous district schools will be governed, and

how they will support and protect schools' autonomies. Ultimately, autonomous district schools can help districts develop a portfolio of schools that includes an increased number of diverse school options and school operators and fewer underperforming schools.



NOTES

1. Gill, S., & Campbell, C. (2017, October). *Partnership schools: New governance models for creating quality school options in districts*. University of Washington Bothell: The Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved from <https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-partnership-schools.pdf>; Iyengar, N., Lewis-LaMonica, K., & Perigo, M. (2017, October). *School district innovation zones: A new wave of district-led efforts to improve economic mobility*. Boston, MA: The Bridgespan Group. Retrieved from <https://www.bridgespan.org/bridgespan/Images/articles/school-district-innovation-zones/school-district-innovation-zones-a-new-wave-of-district-led-efforts-to-improve-economic-mobility.pdf>

2. Public Impact conducted an analysis of a representative sample of autonomous district school initiatives to better understand whether 1) student outcomes improve; and 2) school performance changes over time in autonomous district schools. Using an “adjusted state percentile rank” to compare student proficiency rates in reading and math at regular intervals, we assessed the change in percentile rankings over time. Though we found the analysis insufficient to draw any strong conclusions about the impact of autonomous schools on student achievement, or the correlation between autonomous school design choices and school performance, the analysis revealed some general trend data among autonomous district school models. It also suggested variations among schools within models, with some schools demonstrating improvement, some more quickly than others, and others demonstrating declines within the same periods. The available data used for the analysis do not on their own provide enough information to explain these differences.

Deeper investigation of autonomous school design and implementation at the school level for each autonomous district school initiative would be necessary to enhance understanding of the impact of autonomous schools on student and school performance. At a high level, however, the data analysis showed that most autonomous schools included in our analysis had gains in percentile rankings in both ELA and math over time. Specifically, the data analysis demonstrated that median results were underwhelming for schools in the first few years of operation, especially in English language arts. But over a longer term (such as, 3 years or more), increases in percentile rankings become more pronounced.

3. Public Impact: Hassel, B. C., Locke, G., Kim, J., Hargrave, E., & Losoponkul, N.; and The Mind Trust. (2015). *Raising the bar: Why public charter schools must become even more innovative*. Indianapolis, IN: The Mind Trust. Retrieved from www.themindtrust.org/raising-the-bar.

4. David, R., & Hesla, K. (2018). *Estimated public charter school enrollment, 2017–18*. Washington, D.C.: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Retrieved from <https://www.publiccharters.org/our-work/what-we-stand-for>

5. Based on a review of a sampling of district school models exercising flexibilities and school-based decision-making authority that traditional district schools do not usually have, we identified an analytical framework for comparing and contrasting autonomous district school models.

6. The authors are employed by Public Impact, the education research and consulting firm that developed the Opportunity Culture initiative.

