Rethinking "Innovation Schools": Strengths and Limitations of Autonomy-Based School Improvement Plans in Contexts of Widening Racial Inequality

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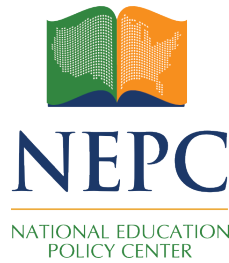October 2020

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I. Executive Summary

School districts around the country have launched new reform strategies that are designed to expand autonomy for public schools, often called "Innovation Schools." Pursuant to these state- and local-level plans to create more autonomous schools, school leaders are granted greater amounts of authority over school operations such as curriculum, budgeting, and hiring, while districts continue to manage services related to teacher payroll and benefits.

Compared to traditional district schools, these schools operate with greater levels of autonomy, similar to that of charter schools that function outside district systems. Important differences exist, however, when autonomous schools are organized *within* districts, as these arrangements can ideally improve educational quality via autonomy without abandoning structures for democratic participation. This type of autonomy-based school improvement plan also has limitations, as they shift a host of responsibilities (and often blame) for the education of children from districts to individual schools and school leaders.

In this brief, we consider two questions about these reforms: As systemic inequities persist in the form of deepening poverty, racism, segregation, and unequal funding in schools and in society, what supports and conditions should districts provide to ensure that school leaders and educators are empowered, rather than beleaguered, in their efforts to improve the quality of education for their students? What role should districts play to ensure that decentralized management and decision-making leads to greater democratic participation and community engagement on the part of local stakeholders?

We use an equity framework informed by critical theories of race and education policy and

the role of districts as institutional actors in advancing achievement and equity in public education. We highlight examples of state and district initiatives that rely on school-level autonomy as a primary improvement strategy, focusing on in-district models. We summarize what we learned about the various designs of in-district autonomous schools in different states and districts, their impact on student performance and equity compared to each other and compared to non-district and traditional models, and the challenges they face in light of widening racial inequality and the need for community input and support.

Based on our analysis of these reforms, we make the following recommendations for leaders of schools and their districts:
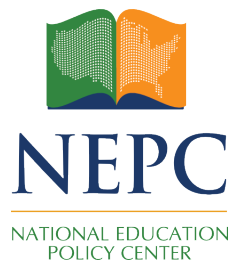
District Leaders

- Districts should temper their calls for "unrestricted autonomy" of public schools. This suggestion to exercise caution is due not only to evidence of the varied and short-lived nature of academic gains among autonomous schools, but also because of unequal geographies of opportunity within districts. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted such inequities and the severe limitations of localized control (and weak central supports) that are often indifferent to, or that exacerbate, disparities between schools as they struggle to access supports for students.

- Districts should couple autonomy and accountability with robust central supports for active learning and collaboration within and across autonomous schools, in order to sustain progress over time.

- District responsibility for equity should not be displaced, or too broadly diffused across schools. Districts can and should play a role in shaping districtwide norms and priorities for equity for all schools, including central supports for justice-centered and anti-racist approaches to equity (e.g., fair discipline practices, culturally sustaining curriculum, asset-based social and emotional learning, and diverse staffing of leaders and teachers).

- Schools should be viewed as more than units of management with autonomy over in-school functions. Schools are also nested in local contexts with distinct cultures and histories that (if engaged authentically) can strengthen sustainability of reforms and can foster cohesion, trust, and civic capacity among stakeholders to challenge inequity and improve achievement.

- School improvement strategies should be tied to regional and community-based approaches to improving educational equity and opportunities to learn.

School Leaders

- Efforts to retain teachers should be met with as much vigor as efforts to gain flexibility in staffing. Shared decision-making and other aspects of working conditions in

autonomous schools should be regularly evaluated in terms of their impact on teacher retention.

- School leaders and teachers should embrace "democratic professionalism," whereby decisions are valued for their *responsiveness* to students and parents in the context of strong community engagement and democratic participation.

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II. Introduction

While known for their remarkable stability as an institutional form of governance, districts have nonetheless, over time, accommodated a number of initiatives to foment change and to improve instructional quality.[1] Substantive and enduring changes include remarkable efforts in the 19th century to provide universal access to education in a growing country[2] and subsequent expansions a century later, guided by federal agencies, to improve equity for minoritized students. At the same time, the core function of districts as central managers of public schools has held constant for nearly two centuries. Perhaps this combination of stability and adaptivity is why for some, districts represent a uniquely decentralized and localized system of education in the U.S., while for others, they represent bureaucratic inertia—particularly by the late 20th century, when the popularity of charter schools signaled a marked shift in district-school relations.[3] The nearly three decades since then of charter expansion, concurrent with the focus of policymakers on educational excellence via student outcomes, represents an enduring countermovement to the centrality of district-run public schools.

The charter movement began with a range of actors who pushed for the autonomy of public schools from traditional district oversight, including educators who sought spaces for experimentation with instruction,[4] parent and community groups that longed for smaller schools aligned with the cultural and language practices in their communities,[5] and entrepreneurs interested in market-based approaches involving choice and competition and thus a complete departure from the "monopoly" of district-run schools in a bureaucratic system.[6] While charters enticed many to experiment with autonomy from districts, a host of criticisms have mired these schools in contentious debates due to variation in student outcomes,[7] concerns

about financial inefficiency,[8] racial segregation in charter schools,[9] and weak systems for accountability and transparency.[10]

In light of such weaknesses, the expansion of autonomous schools *within* districts has emerged as a unique organizational form that restructures district-school relations. Increasingly, state- and local-level innovation plans have allowed school leaders greater flexibility and autonomy to make innovative decisions about school operations, such as curriculum, budgeting, and hiring, often resembling levels of autonomy granted to independently managed charter schools.[11] Some examples include the Innovation Schools Act[12] in Colorado, the Districts of Innovation Act[13] in Texas, and the Transformation Zones Act[14] in Indiana, which all allow waivers for district schools to opt-out of restrictions related to staffing and teacher certification, class size, minutes of instruction, school calendars, and other areas. Some operational and funding services, however, are still managed by central district offices, such as payroll and benefits services for teachers.[15]

These *in-district autonomous schools* (IDAS) are perhaps the most complex and fragmented chapter yet in the evolution of public school management. IDAS today serve as a "middle ground"[16] between a highly centralized system of district-run schools and a highly decentralized system of charter schools modeled on quasi-markets of choice and competition. IDAS are poised to fill important gaps in educational demand, gratifying a patchwork of desires for flexibility and innovation, fiscal and structural support, and the preservation of a public system with a "bird's-eye view" on the collective goals and needs of large and diverse communities.

This brief focuses on the various recent examples and iterations of autonomous schools in the country, both IDAS and non-district autonomous schools (NDAS), focusing particularly on IDAS. We leverage critical theories of race, policy, and district oversight to consider what autonomous school initiatives mean for improving racial equality and democratic participation in education when most of these schools serve communities of color in a context of vastly unequal power. In doing so, we highlight the challenges that have emerged, such as weak forms of collaboration, beleaguered work cultures and high teacher turnover, barriers to democratic participation by communities, and enduring forms of segregation and racial inequity. We then review what is known about the relative performance of these models, including those that began as a turnaround effort to improve low performance and those intended to foster innovation.

The pandemic exacerbated the already vast inequalities in our nation, highlighting the role of public schools as perhaps the sole institution providing social supports to children.

Despite challenges and mixed results, we conclude with recommendations for IDAS, noting their potential for innovation, collaborative learning, and flexible decision-making. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the already vast inequalities in our nation, highlighting the role of public schools as perhaps the sole institution providing social supports to children. The pandemic laid bare, more than ever, the inadequacy and unfairness of market-based approaches to education reform and other aspects of our economic and social systems, but advocacy for business models is still powerful. And even before the pandemic, the Black Lives Matter and other social justice movements were foregrounding the need to address structural inequities. Some

degree of centralization during times of crisis is needed, but flexibility to deal with these huge and unprecedented challenges is also needed.

Table 1. Characteristics of In-District/Non-District Autonomous Schools and Traditional District Public Schools

	Traditional District Public Schools (TDPS)	In-District Autonomous Schools (IDAS)	Non-District Autonomous Schools (NDAS)
Definition	• Schools that are publicly funded, publicly governed, and publicly accountable	• Central office can delegate governance of certain systems to individual schools or zones • Operates within a traditional district • Accountable to elected school board	• Authorized to have self-governance, separate from the district
Examples	• Traditional public schools (neighborhood schools)	• Innovation schools • Magnet schools • Pilot schools • "Alternative" schools • District led charter schools	• Most charter schools • College and university affiliated schools • State-run schools in takeover / turnaround districts
Governance	• Elected school board (state and local school district) • School board makes most decisions relating to direction of schools	• School may have an appointed board of governance involved in decision-making • Still operates under governance of elected school board	• Appointed board of directors • Charter authorizing board • Must meet standards outlined in the charter (contract) or possibly subject to non-renewal

	Traditional District Public Schools (TDPS)	In-District Autonomous Schools (IDAS)	Non-District Autonomous Schools (NDAS)
Management Structure	• Centralized management or • Portfolio management "Choice"	• Operates within the management of the district as either a "choice option" or alternative programming for a given group of students	• Operates independently of traditional district, although may buy back some services
Funding Structure	• Districts are funded by state and local tax structures pursuant to statutory formulas that determine how much money is allocated by state agencies to local districts • Generally, centralized services and teacher compensation and benefits are allocated through a district budget • Individual schools' budgets assigned on a per pupil, per school, or program basis.	• Waivers to state and local funding codes allow for more budgetary decision-making to occur on a school level • Generally, dollars are assigned either on a per pupil basis, or as a grant funded program • Local districts assign school-based budgets, factoring the cost of maintaining central office services • Schools may buy back certain services from central offices, for a fee	• Funded on a per pupil basis with state and local tax dollars. Some also receive substantial private and philanthropic funding, as well as start-up funding from the federal government • These funds may come directly from the state, or be funneled through a local district, which may withhold a small percentage as a fee for services • Schools can purchase services from a district
Staffing	• Collective bargaining compensation agreements • Negotiated contracts around dismissal and transfer procedures • Certified teaching staff (although may request emergency licensure)	• Waivers around compensation, dismissal, and transfer procedures • Waivers for teaching certification may be allowed • Generally staffing decisions are made at a local level by school leaders	• All teachers may not have to be certified, but this differs between states • Teachers in most charters are at-will employees, working without collective bargaining agreements

	Traditional District Public Schools (TDPS)	In-District Autonomous Schools (IDAS)	Non-District Autonomous Schools (NDAS)
Enrollment	• Schools must offer a free public education to all students enrolled as residents in a district area • Students can be assigned schools based on geographic boundaries or participate in a choice system that operates through central office services • Students in surrounding areas may 'choice' into a district, depending on policy • Students do not have to apply to attend a school in their district	• Some schools have admissions requirements (such as GT identification) • Some enroll via a lottery system (which may operate on set targets for equity between differing student demographics) • Some operate within a portfolio management choice system. • Some have students assigned based on geographic boundaries	• May operate within a choice system of public schools • May have open enrollment via lottery • May have selective admissions requirements
Curriculum	• Must adhere to the education standards set by federal, state, and local education boards • Schools districts may design or purchase curricular materials (including professional development) in accordance with these standards	• May request waivers to allow for curricular flexibility	• May request waivers to allow for curricular flexibility

III. Review of the Literature

To guide our review, we used critical theories of policy and analysis, including critical theories of race and policy and views of districts as institutional actors in advancing both achievement and equity in public education.[17] These theoretical frameworks helped us to understand, illustrate, and synthesize important tensions at stake in the implementation of autonomous school models, including weak structures for reciprocal learning and collaboration, management practices that lead to "beleaguered" rather than "empowered" work cultures among teachers and leaders, and enduring forms of racial inequality and disfranchisement due to limited democratic participation on the part of parents, families, and communities. We first summarize our theoretical frameworks and then illustrate how these tensions have emerged in the literature on contemporary school reforms, including the movement toward autonomous schools.

Critical Theories of Race and Education Policy

In our review of autonomous schools, attention to race and equity are important, as these schools unfold more often in contexts that serve communities of color. For example, researchers Sonya Horsford, Janelle Scott, and Gary Anderson note,

> Given that [new public management] is less prevalent in well-financed suburban districts, and that the student demographics of most urban school districts tend to be majority African-American and Latinx children from low-income families, this means race and social class are central to these reforms.[18]

These scholars encourage researchers to look beyond a policy's rhetoric, intentions, or claims, and view it as embedded in processes of race and power. Angelina Castagno and Charles Housman draw on Critical Race and Whiteness theories in their study of shared governance in a Midwest district. They note the importance of a "racial realist" perspective of policy, which focuses on "the ways policies, laws, and practices come about and have real, material impacts on people's lives."[19] Indeed, scholars with a critical race lens acknowledge that policy has functioned historically as a mechanism of White privilege, by aiding the production of discourses and practices that can fuel, rather than mitigate, forces of anti-Black racism in schools and communities.[20] We consider how autonomous schools as a popular effort intersects with politics of race and power in its development and implementation.

We also leverage critical policy analysis in our understanding of the development and implementation of autonomous schools. For instance, we consider autonomy-based efforts to improve schools, which focuses on changes in management and governance, as part and parcel of broad, dominant (and global) logics rooted in market competition, austerity, and deregulation. Policies driven by such logics often embrace top-down strategies to improve public institutions and are structured by leaders in government, philanthropy, and business rather than by local groups of parents, students, and educators whose experiences and participation have been historically and presently marginalized. In particular, we connect autonomous schools to larger global trends in management—what critical policy analysts call the "New Public Management" (NPM), a term that emerged in Europe in the 1990s,[21]

wherein public organizations resemble corporate management models, in terms of embracing competition, prioritizing outcomes based on quantitative data, and relying more and more on highly mobile, non-unionized and contingent workers.[22]

Horsford, Scott, and Anderson note, "Public organizations have always been managed, but in the last four decades, there has been a shift from a rule-governed, administrative, bureaucratic management regime to a market- and outcomes-based, corporate management regime borrowed from the business world."[23] In NPM, ideas about "professionals" have shifted to include views of leaders and teachers as individuals driven by competition, incentivized by audit culture and performance pay, and whose pedagogy (in the case of teachers) is oriented toward test-score production.

In these work environments, shaped by entrepreneurs outside of education, Horsford and colleagues ask whether professionals are "empowered" or "beleaguered," particularly as they are asked to work more, but with less power to determine work goals and fewer resources to work effectively. Indeed, in light of austerity measures that limit resources in many districts and states, the intensity of test-driven and scripted curriculum, and the weakening of unions to support the rights of teachers to organize collectively for living wages and salaries, Horsford and colleagues note that, "The new teacher and administrator are put in a position in which they must look to market and test-based forms of accountability for direction rather than their professional instincts, training, associations, or unions."[24]

In light of these concerns, we highlight literature that illustrates tensions between the stated intentions of autonomous schools to empower leaders, teachers, and communities and the often weakened forms of formal participation, power, and control to actively shape and determine educational goals. Ultimately, we support calls for democratic participation and professionalism at local levels. For instance, "democratic professionalism" is a dynamic view of shared governance and professionalism where decision-making by school leaders unfolds in the context of strong community engagement, including involvement of community organizations and organizing, as well as equitable resources and asset-based, culturally responsive pedagogy.[25]

Impact of In-District Autonomous Schools on Achievement, Innovation, Empowerment, and Equity

Reforms that seek to free schools from district oversight via greater forms of autonomy are bold and well intended. These reforms, however, result in mixed impact on student outcomes and do not mitigate systemic forms of inequity (e.g., segregation) that have shaped unequal educational outcomes between students and between schools. In our review of literature on recent reform strategies across districts in the country, we find a few important issues and challenges worth noting.

Achievement in IDAS is mixed and often short-lived

Overall, improvements in student performance among IDAS is mixed. While researchers

find positive and significant impact on performance in these schools, the impact occurs in the early years of implementation, particularly in the first and second year, but typically fades over time.

Tennessee's "Innovation Zones" (iZones) provide the most consistent and long-standing evaluation of the impact of in-district autonomy-based interventions on student performance. Based on six years of data from the continuous operation of innovation schools since 2012-2013, researchers at the Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA) found that on average and across all subjects (reading, math, and science), iZone schools in Tennessee had positive and statistically significant effects in math and science.[26] Average effects were smaller in reading, however, and were borderline in statistical significance. Moreover, researchers found that nearly all of the gains in math and science occurred in the first two years of the intervention, with the last cohorts of schools experiencing negative effects across all subjects.[27]

Because Tennessee's turnaround model was based on the federal government's Race to the Top program and relied on School Improvement Grants, the state adopted multiple in-district and non-district turnaround strategies, which allowed researchers to compare the impact of different levels of change in management and governance. Comparative groups included IDAS such as iZones, wherein districts established internal localized zones of innovation schools, and NDAS, wherein low-performing schools were removed from their local districts and placed in the state's Achievement School District (ASD). Most of the schools in the ASD were matched with a charter management organization (CMO).

In a 2017 study, published in *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis,* researchers compared academic performance of students in iZone schools and ASD schools, and found that schools governed and managed by districts were more successful at improving chronically low-performing schools than reforms requiring governance and management outside of district auspices.[28] These findings were also supported by TERA researchers in 2019, who found similar lackluster performance of ASD schools, which performed no better or worse than comparison schools in any subject or any cohort during the six-year period of its data collection and analysis.[29]

Colorado's "Innovation Schools" produced similar trends, where in-district autonomous schools yielded positive and statistically significant outcomes in the early years of the intervention but tended to fade over time. A paper published by the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education (NCSPE) found that Denver's "Innovation Schools" increased end-of-year standardized test scores in math, reading, and writing by 0.1 to 0.3 standard deviations (effects greater than 0.2 SD are considered large).[30] These effects, however, "faded out" in the following year of the implementation, with steep declines in subsequent years.[31]

Similar trends were found among schools experiencing reconstitution in an urban district. Beginning in the 2010-2011 school year, Katherine Strunk and colleagues studied teacher mobility and student performance in three low-performing schools over time, including the year of reconstitution and at least two subsequent years.[32] School interventions included new administrators, re-staffing (retaining only 50% of previous teachers), and additional resources in the form of professional development for staff. Focusing on students outcomes in ELA and math, and using a Comparative Interrupted Time Series (CITS) estimation ap-

proach, the authors found that school reconstitution in the early years lead to positive gains in achievement in ELA in the first year of reconstitution with continued but smaller effects in subsequent years.[33] The authors found no significant effects on student achievement in math.[34] Importantly, the authors found that diminishing effects in student achievement went hand-in-hand with significantly high rates of teacher turnover, particularly weak recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers over time.

Massachusetts's Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP) is also an insightful case for understanding the effects of school-level autonomy as an improvement strategy within districts. In 2014, the Springfield Public Schools sought to improve outcomes for its lowest-performing middle and high school students, and by 2016-2017 reported some of the largest gains in the state for urban middle school students, particularly in ELA. Leveraging the state's General Laws Chapter 69, which permits superintendents to select a non-profit entity to operate underperforming schools, the district formed a memorandum of understanding with key stakeholders, including the state department of education, the Springfield Education Association (SEA), and the SEZP board.[35] The zone encompassed nearly all of the district's schools (80% of its middle and high school students) and designated direct control of approximately 85% of all per-pupil funding to the SEZP board.[36] Autonomies permitted by school leaders included decisions related to resource allocation, staffing, scheduling, curriculum, and professional development, while the district provided facilities and operational supports for human resources, transportation, enrollment, and maintenance. The board also negotiated a special collective bargaining agreement with the SEA that allowed working conditions to be negotiated at the school level between principals and teacher leadership teams. The agreement was approved by 92% of SEZP educators. The MOU included stipends for teachers and the creation of new career ladders for teacher leadership.[37]

Diminishing effects in student achievement went hand-in-hand with significantly high rates of teacher turnover.

Results of the partnership after years 1 and 2, using median Student Growth Percentiles (SGP), showed that eight of the nine schools in the SEZP improved in ELA when compared to the previous year, and five of the nine schools in the zone exceeded two-year goals for a median SGP of 50 or greater in ELA.[38] Math performance, however, remained flat and no schools in the zone met goals for a median SGP of 50.

Similar to IDAS in Memphis, Tennessee, and Denver, Colorado, Springfield's gains were in the early years of intervention and must be monitored over time to see whether effects hold, and in which subject areas. Importantly, and like Memphis, the empowerment zone in Springfield was widely regarded as a "last resort" before state takeover and full "charterization" of public schools. For instance, in a separate report published by the Progressive Policy Institute, Springfield's experiment was described as a "Third Way," as "neither watered down charters nor charterized public schools."[39]

On a smaller scale, Waco, Texas, has also implemented a system of in-district charter schools—Transformation Waco Schools—that are designed to improve student achievement using school-level autonomy as an improvement strategy. The initiative was permitted under a law passed in 2017, which allows chronically low-performing schools to stave off closure via partnerships with charter schools, nonprofits, higher education institutes, governmental

entities, or out-of-state school operators.[40] After a year of partnership between Waco Independent School District and Prosper Waco (a local nonprofit), which then created Transformation Waco, dramatic results were reported by the Texas Education Agency, including gains in reading and math in three of the five Transformation Waco schools.[41]

While the system of in-district charters receives the most attention as its innovation strategy, the partnership also included a host of interesting initiatives, including an extensive mentoring program for middle school girls (called the Hidden Figures Project), a spring break academy to support tutoring, family support specialists on each school campus, support for field-based experiences and book studies in the STEM fields, free eye exams and corrective lenses for students who need them, free clinical care, collaboration with local community organizations, and specialized alternative certification programs designed to combat teacher turnover.[42] Waco's efforts were driven by robust strategies for school improvement, which included school-level autonomy but also out-of-school supports in light of social constraints shaping opportunities to learn. As former mayor of Waco and the board president of the in-district charter system, Malcolm Duncan Jr., noted, "[We] think that the social determinants of education are as important as the academic inputs."[43] Similar to performance in other districts, Waco's gains are early, and it must find ways to sustain its success, with particular attention to curbing teacher turnover.

Lastly, some studies have reported that performance of autonomous schools corresponds to differences in levels of autonomy. Researchers for the Policy Progressive Institute found that performance in Boston Public Schools varied along levels of autonomy, with higher performance in district-run autonomous schools with relatively "high" levels of autonomy (e.g., Boston's in-district charter schools, Innovation schools, and Pilot schools), and lower levels of achievement among schools classified as having "mid-level" autonomy (e.g., Boston's turnaround schools).[44]

The authors note, for instance, that when compared to students in traditional public schools and controlling for student characteristics, students in Boston's in-district charter schools and innovation schools were more likely to be proficient on state assessments.[45] Students in the city's pilot schools were less likely to be proficient, as were students in turnaround schools.[46] It is unclear, however, whether or how classifications of autonomy align neatly with achievement, as Pilot schools performed less well despite similar categorizations of high autonomy. The authors note, moreover, that "autonomy is necessary but not sufficient to deliver high student achievement" and that success varies substantially between models as "not all autonomies are equal."[47]

Innovation in autonomous schools is often stalled due to limited resources, lack of shared learning, and lack of meaningful oversight

A recent review of the legislative IDAS measures reveals that 24 out of 33 states with this type of legislation specifically name "innovation" in justification for the passage of these acts—for example, "Innovation Schools" in Colorado, "Districts of Innovation" in Texas, and "Innovation Zones" in Minnesota. Perhaps one of the most compelling cases for de-bureaucratization and decentralization of TPDS management stems from the belief that such re-

forms help to create necessary conditions to foster the type of innovative practices that lead to educational improvement.

To date, research indicates that decentralization in reform has largely fallen short in creating these conditions. Christopher Lubienski, in his comprehensive review of innovation in charter schools, examines external forces surrounding innovative practices in the context of organizational theory and market economics.[48] His findings indicate that, while such policy reforms assume that competition and choice will lead to increased diversification and improved educational opportunities, these desired outcomes are often constrained by the same mechanisms. For example, market forces incentivize reproducibility (not diversity) of a desirable product to become "mainstream," and accountability measures obligate schools to standardize instruction (not innovate practices), to converge on specific and duplicative techniques.

A 2012 review by Preston, Goldring, Berends, and Cannata quantifiably corroborates these assertions in a comparative analysis of innovative practices in over 200 charter and 700 public schools.[49] They use multiple regression to predict the varying degree of "innovation" between charter and traditional school models in four main areas: support services (summer school, tutoring, language supports, etc.), staffing (pay structures, tenure, etc.), organization (scheduling, age grouping, calendar, etc.), and governance (leadership), controlling for other factors that could drive such practices (enrollment, achievement, principal background, and "turbulence"). Findings indicate no statistically significant differences in the degree of innovational practices in charter (NDAS) vs. public schools (TPDS)—the one exception being in teacher pay structures. This study also confirms the tendency for practices to become more homogenous over time as external accountability pressures reward "institutional isomorphism" in both types of school models.

Similarly, Joshua Childs, in a critical policy analysis of Districts of Innovation (DOI) in Texas, reveals marked differences in how IDAS policies are interpreted and enacted between local DOI contexts—and evidence of how such enactments can be utilized by stakeholders to undermine the interests of public education.[50] Childs documents how stated policy intent is filtered through local TPDS leaders to address the distinct challenges faced by that district. This includes the rhetoric surrounding innovation as a means for school turnaround, and what it means for that district if they are unable to meet the "accountability" goals.

In his analysis of multiple policy documents, Childs demonstrates that the increased autonomy offered to schools without the accompanying financial or structural support has often been used as a way for a central district to pass off responsibility onto an under-resourced district in a move that serves to undermine the overall goals of educational improvement. His data demonstrate that not only have schools in DOI zones been unable to innovate in turnarounds, but many schools in lower-performing districts have actually become increasingly isolated from structural supports from a centralized district. Childs ends his analysis with several important considerations for future iterations of this type of reform, in the light of how other states can mitigate against these effects.

Work cultures on the part of teachers can resemble feelings of "beleaguerment" rather than "empowerment" in autonomous schools due to lack of shared decision-making, power, and control

Empowerment is a common term and stated goal in nearly all policy interventions premised on expanding autonomy for public schools. But how exactly school actors become empowered, what it means to empower communities, and which communities are able to utilize this power becomes muddied as current policies play out in different contexts. We highlight studies that frame power and control as largely elusive for teachers, parents, and communities in contexts of decentralization and autonomous schooling.

In Colorado, for example, 106 schools have been granted innovation status (as of July 2020), with nearly half these schools (52) located in the state's largest urban district that serves a high proportion of students of color and students considered "at-risk" of academic failure—Denver Public Schools. The most frequently requested waivers included: adjustments to the school year and increased pupil contact hours (85%), easing restrictions on teaching licensure (75%), curriculum and programming (72%), exemptions to staff performance protocols for hiring and firing of teachers or to contracted pay agreements (70%), and exemptions to teacher transfers and non-renewal of status (67%).

While such requests appear innocuous to state leaders, the frequency and concentration of such requests in one district, and perhaps in particular schools, have implications for the quality of workplace conditions, hiring practices, or pay structures for teachers. Waiver types should be considered in light of teacher mobility and turnover patterns, as the quality of innovation in autonomous schools hinges in large part on the sustainability of an effective teacher workforce. Importantly, it is unclear whether or how policies work to "empower" teachers if waivers are used to institute more contact hours and instructional time, less compensation, and more contingent work in light of at-will or non-renewal contracts. Lastly, the adverse impact of such policies on teacher subgroups, including teachers of color, is worth noting, as researchers have noted *declines* in the population and portion of experienced teachers of color in urban communities undergoing policies of decentralization, including in-district charter schools and other types of autonomous schools.[51]

Parents' experiences with empowerment have also been elusive. Sociologist Mary Pattillo explored themes of "empowerment" among 77 low-income African American parents participating in school choice in Chicago Public Schools. Published in a 2015 paper in a *DuBois Review* article, Pattillo challenges common definitions of "empowerment," regarded often as merely the "ability to choose," and argues for a stronger definition that includes ability to *access* school choice.[52] In the latter view, empowerment must also mean removal of the various forms of *constraint* that parents face when attempting to access choices available, such as transportation, internet availability, social networks, time, and know-how, which are not equally distributed among individuals in a choice system. While proponents framed "choice" as "empowering," Pattillo describes existing school choice systems as offering "weak" forms of empowerment. We leverage Pattillo's warnings in districts with increasing numbers of autonomous schools. These schools not only exist within school choice systems, but may fail to consider more substantive forms of parent empowerment rooted in institutional responsiveness, removal of barriers to access autonomous schools, and equitable forms of engagement

and decision-making.

Community empowerment is also an elusive goal for advocates of decentralization and autonomous schooling. In a critical analysis of decentralization policies in Las Vegas, Nevada, researchers Sarah Diem and colleagues take up the framing of "empowerment" within policy discourse.[53] The purpose of the study was to examine various stakeholder rationales for decentralizing the district and document how these rationales changed over time. The authors highlight how original efforts to allow smaller suburbs to form their own district morphed into forms of inequity that perpetuated racial and economic disparities. In particular, the study notes significant disparities in how different neighborhoods were able to access systems of power, and how schools in high-poverty areas actually *lost access* to support services they had once received through the central district and were given *more stringent* controls regarding their test scores. In this vein, these schools were largely *dis*-empowered by policy enactment.

Autonomy can create obstacles to equity and inclusion, if regulatory freedom is emphasized over practices that support vulnerable students

Studies have explored the relationship between shared governance (via school-level autonomy) and the advancement of educational equity. In Castagno and Hausman's study of a midwestern school district that practiced site-based management and shared decision-making for several years, the authors found that existing inequities across the district by race and ethnicity and language were exacerbated in the context of shared governance.[54] The authors interviewed school leaders in the district and evaluated their approach to key equity agendas, such as multicultural education, language, and refugee services, and accountability measures.

In the absence of meaningful district oversight and external pressures, school leaders and teachers expressed varied commitments to equity in these areas. Indeed, the district itself was under agreement with the Office of Civil Rights due to failure to adequately serve English Language Learners. Federal accountability mandates, per No Child Left Behind, were also external forces that shaped attention on the part of school leaders to the needs of minority student groups. In the absence of these pressures, however, school leaders in different parts of the district did not implement robust practices for vulnerable student groups, such as refugee students. The authors conclude with an unpopular but worthwhile claim that progress toward educational equity is sometimes best achieved through more directive leadership practices, including top-down approaches to the implementation of valued educational practices.

Similarly, Preston Green and colleagues (2016) compare the predatory lending practices of subprime mortgage providers in Black communities to the saturation of charter providers in districts serving Black students and families.[55] The authors note that the absence of strong regulation and oversight created conditions for fraud and abuse of communities already vulnerable and historically underserved. In the charter sector, the authors note that fraud and abuse are often in areas related to harsh discipline and neglect of students with special

needs. As such, the authors recommend steps that federal and state governments should take to avoid "policy bubbles" that leave already underserved groups vulnerable to predation and neglect amid the popularity of deregulation.

Greater autonomy does not mitigate enduring forms of inequity like segregation and lack of community engagement and participation

While autonomous schools and shared governance are popular reforms, so too are district secession campaigns and rezoning efforts, leading mostly to more segregation by race and SES. To some extent, the heightened emphasis on district governance (and relative autonomy of schools from districts) has overshadowed the importance of district boundaries as politically constructed and contested and as mechanisms for improving or weakening equity in the form of integration. Indeed, current reforms that promote site-based management and greater school autonomy have typically framed districts as units of governance *only*. Genevieve Siegel-Hawley and colleagues, however, have noted that districts are also geographic units and their boundaries have implications for equity and inclusion, particularly as they can lead to less or greater segregation.[56]

School improvement strategies via autonomous schooling are largely disconnected from regional and community development strategies and from the participation of local stakeholders.[57] As researchers Glazer and Egan note, "academic outcomes and community involvement need not be mutually exclusive."[58] The authors note that policymakers and reformers should move past narrow views of schools and their local contexts as units of governance in a market competition. Instead, reformers should recognize that communities are rooted in local cultures and histories. As such, schools are key institutions in local communities that can build cohesion, trust, and civic capacity to organize for equity and justice in education and in other sectors.[59]

IV. Recent Developments

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights how far we still have to go in creating educational systems that holistically support marginalized communities and allow equal opportunities for social mobility. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the unequal geographies of opportunity in the country and the limitations of localized control that are indifferent to (at best) or exacerbate (at worst) disparities in access to social services such as health care, mental health, childcare, food, and technology. Indeed, the crisis has illustrated the enduring consequence of public schools in the U.S. as perhaps the sole institution for social provision and welfare for children in a highly unequal society.

As schools have closed, access to systems of support has been limited, and consequently "gaps" have widened. Therefore, as calls to reopen public institutions strengthen, the importance of the role of public schools in ensuring our national economic well-being is underscored. Thus far, it appears that countries with established systems of greater governmental control and distribution have demonstrated more success in quelling the spread of

the virus. Therefore, the deficiencies of the US system of such localized control during times of crisis must be considered. In order to control the spread of the virus, there is a need for a centralized system that takes an active role in equalizing access, democratizing resource distribution, and mitigating against "unfair" market advantages to ensure that we do not further exacerbate inequalities. This is particularly so in securing educational equity for those in socially and economically marginalized communities.

However, many neoliberal reform groups are still pushing for marketizing our school system based on standardized performance measures. Recently, a coalition of education reform CMO groups in Colorado advocated for state legislators to utilize CARES funding for a "uniform" statewide test to measure how learning has occurred during the pandemic between local school contexts. Lorrie Shephard and others at the University of Colorado Boulder issued a letter of rebuttal to this approach, arguing that this money is better spent on equalizing opportunities for children who are most vulnerable. Shepard argues that "uniform" implies that the tests are blind to "children's emerging bilingualism, special needs, or past learning experiences and could not tell teachers which particular skills and learning objectives have been mastered versus those still in need of attention."[60]

Even before the COVID crisis, a growing backlash against testing and accountability built a resurgence of unions, community coalitions, and the power of collective voice to "transform" schools. Since the crisis, the Black Lives Matter movement brings to the forefront issues of ongoing racial, social, and economic injustices that must be addressed systematically—our education system perhaps most of all. The response to these crises is an opportunity to address these issues by creating centralized governmental and structural supports to reimagine how education systems can be designed democratically to create schools built by and for local communities.

V. Discussion and Analysis

In some ways, the impetus for autonomous schools is based on the premise that districts are barriers to innovation and change and unresponsive to local communities, and are thus undemocratic.[61] There are as many examples that illustrate these limitations, as there are examples that contradict it. Indeed, even as "remarkably resilient organizations,"[62] school districts have responded to decades of critique and have accommodated numerous waves of bold initiatives. Autonomous school initiatives, in this sense, are the latest wave of reform in district-school relations. This brief outlined the characteristics and implications of the growing number of autonomous public schools in the country, which operate with greater levels of flexibility and decision-making over school practices that were previously organized by districts and central offices.

While autonomy is typically associated with charter schools, new assortments of autonomous schools include innovation schools, pilot schools, and partnership schools that (like charters) create distance between schools and districts in the management and operation of schools. The new forms of autonomous schools are enabled by a mix of complex state and district policies that create significant change in the governance of public schools and in the role of school districts altogether.

In these new arrangements, schools are granted waivers (or can apply for waivers) from various policies that regulate budgets, the hiring of staff, or adoption of curriculum, and wherein school leaders are provided a menu of services and resources to allocate toward the operation of their schools. District leaders focus less on the management of schools in their district and more on opening new schools and closing schools that do not perform. In this vein, autonomous schools are part of broader experiments to decentralize education, by creating a "portfolio" of differentiated schools that offer a range of "customized choices" rather than a system of uniform schools.[63]

Designs of In-District Autonomous Schools

We learned the following about the various *designs* of in-district autonomous schools:

- In-district autonomous schools are typically designed to foster innovation to improve outcomes for diverse students by allowing school leaders greater flexibility and autonomy from state and district requirements.

- In some contexts, schools apply for and thus opt into autonomous status, with the consent by vote of school teachers and school boards; while in other contexts schools are eligible based on district and state interventions for low-performing schools and as a "last resort" to state takeover.

- In some states, hundreds of districts have allowed schools to apply for, and establish, autonomy as part of an innovation plan (e.g., Texas); whereas in other states autonomous schools are concentrated in only a few districts and schools with chronic low performance (e.g., Tennessee).

- Schools applying for autonomous status typically seek autonomy via waivers from specific district policies, state policies, and collective bargaining agreements. Autonomy is most often sought in areas of: class size and student/teacher ratio, staffing restrictions and teacher contracts, curriculum and learning models, school calendar and minutes of instruction, professional development, and budgeting.

- Most initiatives work in close collaboration with local stakeholders to develop specialized memoranda of understanding, between teacher unions, superintendents, and school boards.

- While many districts include charter schools as part of innovation plans and an option for autonomous schools, many plans encompass a range of school models and innovations that are non-charter schools.

- Some districts allow for multiple forms of autonomous schools at a time, including district charter schools, innovation schools, pilot schools, and schools with specialized partnerships with organizations.

- Groups of schools across many campuses can seek autonomous status and are often categorized together as Innovation Zones (iZones), Transformation Zones, or Empowerment Zones.

Impact of In-District Autonomous Schools

We learned the following about the *impact* of in-district autonomous schools:

- The performance of in-district autonomous schools is mixed and elusive. While positive and significant impact has occurred in the early years of new school models (in years 1 and 2), these effects typically fade over time.

- In some cities, in-district autonomous schools perform better than similar schools, including non-district autonomous schools that are part of state takeover or turnaround districts.

- While some studies have found that strong performance corresponds to "high" or "low" levels of autonomy granted to schools; other studies have found that schools with high levels of autonomy performed no better, and in some cases worse, than schools with moderate levels of autonomy.

- Factors shaping performance of autonomous schools varies as "not all autonomies are equal."[64]

- Autonomous schools are regarded as viable "last resorts" to state takeovers, particularly in contexts where stakeholders are concerned about local control under external management.

- Lastly, we found that the goals of autonomous schools are not new, and neither are the challenges they face. School-based management and managerial restructuring date back to the 1970s and 80s; one of many chapters in a long story of ambitious efforts to bring about *instructionally focused* schools with high-quality organizational and curricular choices.[65] These efforts were routinely stalled, however, not so much by the policies themselves, but by the multiplicity of policy logics and theories of action that create incoherence and turbulence in school systems.

Challenges of In-District Autonomous Schools

Some of the *challenges* these schools face include the following:

- Gains in student performance are achieved early, but often not sustained over time.

- Despite attention to performance differences in autonomous schools, sustainability of outcomes hinges on teacher retention. Flexibility and autonomy with staffing does not automatically lead to improvements in the retention of effective teachers in schools.

- Shared leadership and decision-making vary within autonomous school models, as well as supports and guidance for teachers who may feel beleaguered rather than empowered.

- Efforts to increase school-level autonomy can leave unclear what new roles districts can and should play as institutional actors, particularly as facilitators of shared learn-

ing and collaboration among networks of autonomous schools, school leaders, and educators.

- While districts and schools are not exempt from federal requirements that protect vulnerable student groups, some studies suggest that these students are served less well in contexts with decentralized and diffused authority and where school leaders exhibit varied commitments to equitable practices that support these groups. For instance, in the absence of meaningful oversight by district offices, greater autonomy and regulatory freedom can erode protections for vulnerable students, such as students with disabilities, emergent bilinguals, and students of color, particularly in areas of discipline and access to broad and culturally enriching curricula.

- Autonomous schools are still highly segregated schools. Most reforms occur in districts and schools with the highest concentrations of poverty and racial segregation in the state. Reforms based on school-level autonomy do not address, or resolve, systemic inequities that are regional and geographic in nature and are significant factors in chronic low student performance.

- The popularity of market competition as a mechanism for school improvement often drives the creation of autonomous schools. These rationales often lack broader conceptions of schools as embedded in social and cultural histories that are important to parents and local stakeholders. Autonomous school initiatives can fail to acknowledge the importance of civic capacity building and other forms of participation and engagement that are meaningful to local community stakeholders.

- The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the severe inequities within districts and the limitations of school-based responses to systemic inequities in social supports.

VI. Recommendations

Our recommendations include the following:

District Leaders

- Districts should temper their calls for "unrestricted autonomy" of public schools. This suggestion to exercise caution is due not only to evidence of the varied and short-lived nature of academic gains among autonomous schools, but also because of unequal geographies of opportunity within districts. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted such inequities and the severe limitations of localized control (and weak central supports) that are often indifferent to, or that exacerbate, disparities between schools as they struggle to access supports for students.

- Districts should couple autonomy and accountability with robust central supports for active learning and collaboration within and across autonomous schools, in order to sustain progress over time.

- District responsibility for equity should not be displaced, or too broadly diffused across schools. Districts can and should play a role in shaping districtwide norms and priorities for equity for all schools, including central supports for justice-centered and anti-racist approaches to equity (e.g., fair discipline practices, culturally sustaining curriculum, asset-based social and emotional learning, and diverse staffing of leaders and teachers).

- Schools should be viewed as more than units of management with autonomy over in-school functions. Schools are also nested in local contexts with distinct cultures and histories that (if engaged authentically) can strengthen sustainability of reforms and can foster cohesion, trust, and civic capacity among stakeholders to challenge inequity and improve achievement.

- School improvement strategies should be tied to regional and community-based approaches to improving educational equity and opportunities to learn.

School Leaders

- Efforts to retain teachers should be met with as much vigor as efforts to gain flexibility in staffing. Shared decision-making and other aspects of working conditions in autonomous schools should be regularly evaluated in terms of their impact on teacher retention.

- School leaders and teachers should embrace "democratic professionalism," whereby decisions are valued for their *responsiveness* to students and parents in the context of strong community engagement and democratic participation.

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