



NEPC Review: The Third Way: A Guide to Implementing Innovation Schools (Progressive Policy Institute, October 2020)



Reviewed by:

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Executive Summary

The Progressive Policy Institute recently published *The Third Way: A Guide to Implementing Innovation Schools*, a “how-to” guide for entities (e.g., charter management companies) seeking to develop innovation schools in urban communities. Unlike charter schools, which often do not have access to district resources (e.g., facilities, transportation), the companies/entities that operate innovation schools are provided with both district resources *and* the authority to autonomously lead and govern these schools in exchange for improving student performance. The guide highlights case examples of states and localities that have “successfully” implemented innovation schools, with a focus on test score data and student demographics. It argues that equitable educational opportunity is achievable when schools have complete autonomy and strong accountability to increase academic performance, adopt diverse learning models, and expand school choice. However, many of this convoluted guide’s long list of 53 detailed recommendations are improbable and overlook potential disadvantages of innovation schools. These recommendations are highly complicated, largely unexamined, and likely infeasible, especially if a district’s goal is to serve *all* students and their families equitably.



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I. Introduction

Between COVID-19 and racial unrest, 2020 revealed and exacerbated enduring systemic inequities minoritized communities have long experienced. In education, these dual pandemics have resurfaced the undeniable gaps in opportunities across demographics, such as race, income, language, ability, and citizenship. Even after decades of education reforms, these gaps have persisted, and in some cases have been further perpetuated.

Of these reforms, many advocates have pushed for school-level autonomy via decentralization in the form of charter schools, site-based school management, portfolio school districts, empowerment schools, and innovation schools. These school models aim to shift power and authority from administrative agencies and locally elected governing bodies to school-level leaders, including private and nonprofit organizations. Often, education reformers argue that such shifts will improve academic outcomes by increasing efficiency and effectiveness but overlook other inequities that might arise from these shifts.¹

Tressa Pankovits and David Osbourne, Associate Director and Director of the Progressive Policy Institute, argue for one particular model of decentralization, *innovation schools*, in their recent report, *The Third Way: A Guide to Implementing Innovation Schools*.² These are autonomous schools, which unlike charter schools, operate within a district and utilize district facilities and services, yet have complete control of school-level decisions.³ The guide uses both COVID and racial unrest as a backdrop to how implementing innovation schools, along with school choice, can address educational inequities. It targets education reformers who are interested in the creation and implementation of innovation schools, particularly in urban communities that serve relatively more racially and economically minoritized students.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

Divided into six major areas, the guide offers a **list of 53 points** reflecting rationales and recommendations for implementing innovation schools. These include: 11 advantages, 10 key factors, 9 steps, 5 lessons learned, 6 do's and don'ts, and 12 suggestions for navigating politics. Below, we describe the six areas emphasized in the guide.

Advantages

- The 11 advantages focus on innovation schools leveraging district resources and cultivating competition with collaboration to improve academic performance districtwide.

Key Factors

- The 10 key factors to achieve effective innovation schools emphasize that these schools must be fully autonomous, appoint a governing body, be accountable for success and failures, be allocated additional funding, promote school choice, and include schools that were successful before transitioning to innovation schools.

Steps

- The nine steps highlight how districts should develop and monitor innovation schools, including offering administrative support and recruiting/retaining strong leaders.

Lessons Learned

- The five lessons learned focus mainly on how to avoid potential failure, including elevated transparency, retaining original “traditional” school staff, offering district benefits (e.g., retirement, insurance), and implementing practices/policies to enhance schools’ racial and economic diversity.

Do's and Don'ts

- The six do's and don'ts direct districts and states to effectively authorize innovation schools, provide statewide oversight, train governing boards, and welcome new ideas such as teacher-led schools.

Political Suggestions

- The 12 political suggestions largely reflect how to avoid and navigate external resistance by creating buy-in, demonstrating the need for innovation schools based on existing district failures, and marketing these schools positively, especially in the media.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The guide's underlying argument for supporting the expansion of innovation schools is twofold. First, it indicates that educational inequity is the crux of the problem in public education, specifically pointing to racial and economic disparities in academic outcomes. Second, it argues that innovation schools are the "simple answer" to the educational inequity dilemma. Although the 53 recommendations are far from simple, the guide explains that educational disparities will dissipate when schools have full autonomy matched with accountability. The guide's rationale includes the idea that increased autonomy and accountability, along with potentially diverse learning models and school choice, breeds a competition that incentivizes innovation that can improve all schools' academic outputs.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The guide argues,

The fastest improvements in urban school districts over the past 15 years have been found in cities that give public schools the most autonomy, have stronger accountability, encourage a variety of learning models, and make it easy for families to choose the learning model that best suits their children's needs.⁴

On the contrary, research examining efforts to increase autonomy and transfer control to school-level principals and school-level governing bodies is mixed. These types of reforms are especially popular in urban school districts serving larger populations of minoritized and low-income students.⁵ The guide highlights "successful" reforms in cities such as New Orleans and Chicago, among others. Yet, reforms that include expansive decentralization and charter schools have not sustained meaningful improvements in academic gains, participation on local school councils, and equitable access via school choice.⁶

The guide lacks supporting evidence concerning advantages and key factors that contribute to successfully implementing innovation schools. For example, the authors discuss the challenges elected school boards experience when making employment decisions and closing schools. Yet, they do not discuss the equity implications of such decisions,⁷ nor the significance of school board representation when it comes to minoritized communities. Without equitable representation on local school boards, political inequalities will likely persist.⁸

The guide also highlights the benefits of additional, temporary funding associated with these reforms yet fail to discuss what happens when funding is depleted, making reforms unsustainable. For example, the Nevada State Legislature allocated funding for an empowerment schools pilot program (used interchangeably with innovation schools), which included 30 of over 300 schools in the Las Vegas metro-area Clark County School District (CCSD).⁹ The "implementation of the model, however, quietly ended after lawmakers withdrew funding, and private grants dried up."¹⁰ Thus, it is critical to consider how diverting funds that might otherwise be used to support traditional schools for reform efforts that cannot be maintained

might place already financially strapped school districts in even more precarious situations.

An additional area of the guide presents the benefits of diverse schools¹¹ and establishing enrollment systems that increase the probability of racial and socioeconomic school desegregation. Although some research offers evidence that desegregation contributes to academic and interpersonal benefits, the guide fails to reference research which also presents the complex perspective of how school choice policies often collide with outcomes related to diversity, integration, and equity.¹² Moreover, although the guide presents demographic data that illustrates the higher enrollments of minoritized students in innovation schools, it does not address the realization that these schools are often racially and economically segregated,¹³ and will likely remain this way until larger societal inequities are resolved.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The research methods that led to the guide's conclusions are not defined. Instead, it highlights lessons learned from school districts that include autonomous schools. Then, it concludes with model legislation that states can emulate to establish innovation schools.

The guide showcases innovation schools, paying particular attention to those in Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS), including Purdue Polytechnical High School (PPHS). PPHS serves majority minoritized and low-income students, and according to the guide, shows "what is possible when school districts give more of their schools significant autonomy to reinvent their learning models."¹⁴ The guide cites simple descriptive data of demographics and test score outcomes from PPHS and IPS, lacking robust analysis that accounts for similarities and differences across school funding, demographics, and other factors known to also influence academic performance. Moreover, there is no data concerning students' and families' experiences with innovation schools.

Using National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, this guide attributes average or above-average test scores among two of 27 big U.S. cities to schools in these cities being autonomous, and thereby, innovative. Based on this logic, the guide makes a sweeping call for innovation schools in big cities but fails to consider outcomes aside from test scores or other factors associated with test scores across these cities, including differences in education funding, student demographics, and curricular standards. The guide offers similar unconvincing evidence of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test scores used to compare various countries. Overall, it lacks a comparative analysis of innovation schools currently in operation throughout the U.S., offering readers a shallow understanding concerning these schools' effectiveness across different geographic areas.

In terms of qualitative data, the guide includes interview content with education leaders experienced with implementing innovation schools. However, the guide does not clarify how these interviews were obtained, including how many people were interviewed, how they were selected, what questions they were asked, and how interviews were analyzed. Moreover, the guide does not explain what other types of data, beyond test score outcomes, led

to its conclusions.

Additionally, the model legislation at the end of the guide for states to adapt lacks transparency about its development. Further, it is void of key considerations along the legislative process for those who are interested in using it. Finally, given that minoritized communities are often excluded in the process toward such reforms,¹⁵ it would have been useful for this guide to include interview data across different communities to signal who is advocating, resisting, or excluded in the policymaking process toward innovation schools.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The conclusions, both implicit and explicit, in this guide are not substantiated by research-based evidence. Of the selected literature, the authors of the guide often reference their own previously written work and rarely use any peer-reviewed research. Similarly, the methods by which the guide came to its conclusions are unstated. The guide cites a handful of examples from districts that have implemented innovation schools and offers some basic descriptive outcomes, such as demographics and test scores. Additionally, it includes quotes from a few educational leaders.

Overall, the literature, district/school outcomes, and insights offered in this guide are both minuscule and selective. Importantly, these do little to validate the crux of the argument put forth in this guide—to offer schools autonomy along with the accountability that will resolve racial and economic disparities in education.

In fact, the guide's assumption that innovation schools could resolve educational inequities contradicts with decades of scholarly research on school decentralization and school choice that shows consequential flaws in such reforms. Further, relevant scholarship has identified that significant shifts in resources, services, and the treatment of minoritized youth and their families are a prerequisite for resolving long-standing and systemic educational inequities.

To be sure, this guide includes some interesting ideas. However, the lack of quality research fails to support the argument for innovation schools. Most disturbingly, it fails to highlight these schools' potential limitations and disadvantages. While the guide points to racial injustices reflected in the tragedies of George Floyd and COVID-19 as a preface to how innovation schools can serve as a simple solution, it ignores the fact that these schools can do even more harm by perpetuating educational inequities and enhancing the status quo inherent in the fallacies of school choice, competition, and privately managed and governed schools. Below we offer a few cautionary examples of this guide's limitations focused on inequities.

Inequities in Implementation

The guide applauds reforms in New Orleans for improving test scores but fails to mention other consequences that contribute to foundational inequities across schooling opportuni-

ties. The guide also emphasizes the importance of instituting an authorizing entity, similar to charter authorizers, which “investigate . . . and scrutinize their applications” to approve innovation schools.¹⁶ Yet, as Henry’s research pointedly demonstrates of the New Orleans’ charter school authorization process, implicit bias favored White applicants and those who supported a “no excuses” model with a competitively-driven agenda over the mostly Black applicants who adopted a social justice, community-driven agenda.¹⁷ Thus, authorizing entities can easily serve as a barrier for those seeking to leverage innovation schools as a way to advance equity and social justice in education.

Inequity of Access for Youth and Families

Although the guide highlights that “sometimes innovation schools also get free access to district resources that charters do not usually enjoy, such as transportation, maintenance, and special education services,”¹⁸ access is not guaranteed. Moreover, access is often not even feasible given many districts’ limited resources. Equitable transportation to an innovation school of their choice, for example, could require excessive funding and time to bus children across major metropolitan cities. As shown in *The Illusion of Choice* episode,¹⁹ featuring the districtwide innovation schools model in New Orleans Public Schools, the dilemma reflects the inherent falseness of school choice. In particular, it begs the question concerning which families really have a choice, and the answer that racially minoritized and least affluent families are often left with much less choice when it comes to their children’s school.

Inequity of Democratic Governance

The guide’s conclusions for autonomy via a separate governing board contradict its recommendations for district support, including creating a district office and using district resources (e.g., transportation, maintenance). The questions that arise with this, which the guide fails to address, include “Who picks these governing officials?” and “Given these are appointees, and not elected officials, how does the broader school community hold this governing body accountable to adequately represent their needs and desires?” As cases of mayoral control, state takeover, and charter school governance show, the disruption to democratic engagement in public schools is a critical concern in the recommendation to establish a separate and appointed governing board. Such reforms, as Hernández and Castillo’s research indicates, “alter the democratic character of school governance by limiting transparency and community responsiveness,”²⁰ impacting minoritized communities most negatively.

Inequity of School Funding, Services, and Human Resources

The guide’s recommendations urge those implementing innovation schools to secure the best resources and services. They include recruiting strong school leaders and teachers, obtaining additional funding, and acquiring district services. Thus, the question is “Where are these educators, sources of funding, and services coming from?” For many districts working with limited resources, this might mean innovation schools will siphon funding and talent from existing neighborhood schools, thereby furthering school inequities.²¹

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

This guide, and its 53 recommendations, offer some interesting points. Yet, it lacks research-based evidence to support these recommendations and ignores research illustrating its potential disadvantages. Those policymakers and practitioners who consider using this guide risk adopting a model of school governance that not only fails to resolve educational inequities, but may even perpetuate them. Overall, this convoluted guide reflects a long list of detailed recommendations that are highly complicated, largely unexamined, and likely infeasible especially if a district's goal is to serve *all* students and their families equitably.

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