

Texas Innovation Schools:

A Pathway to Success for Autonomous Schools in Texas

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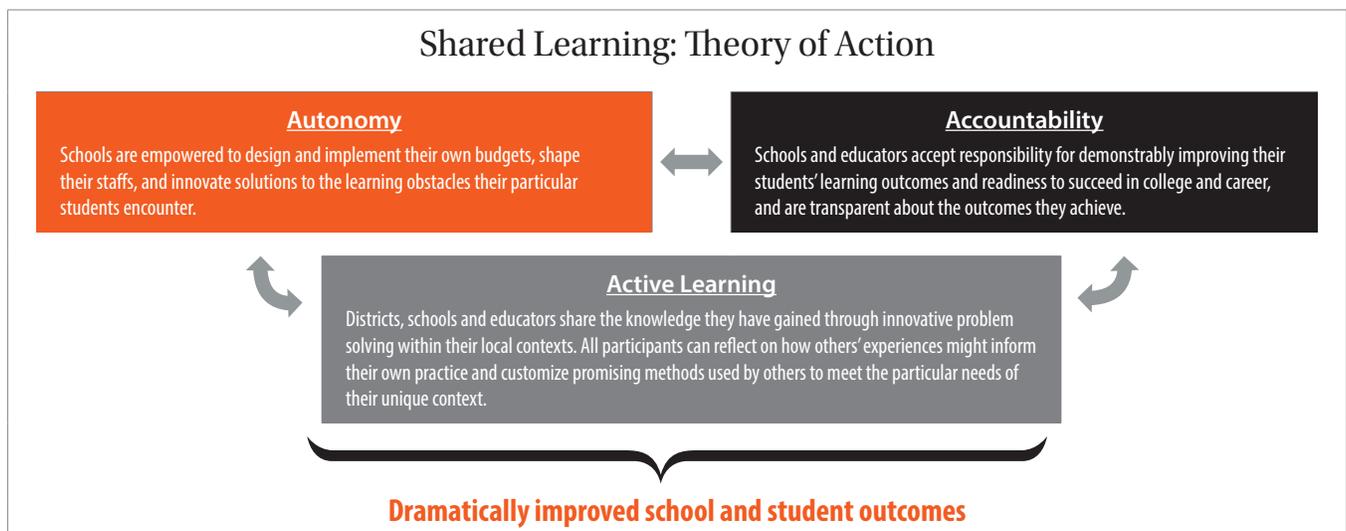
Texas policymakers are faced with a conundrum: how to ensure accountability for student outcomes while at the same time creating the conditions that allow the state’s public schools to innovate and better meet the needs of students. A focus solely on accountability has led to a top-down, compliance-driven system, and many districts have predictably responded with similarly restrictive approaches to managing their campuses without producing significantly improved outcomes for their students.

The current public school system in Texas produces uneven results with regards to students’ academic success. Although many of its schools and districts achieve impressive results, the state’s low-income students and English language learners are not performing well.¹ Fourth graders who do not qualify for free or reduced-price lunch are twice as likely to be proficient in math as those who do.²

It is not just the numbers that suggest the importance of addressing the challenges Texas public education faces. Many employers in the state report that its high school graduates are not prepared to succeed in the workforce, and economic development experts fear that Texas’ public education system is an obstacle to its ability to continue attracting business and investment.³

Now imagine a public school system in which each school’s principal, teachers and community are motivated and empowered to make all the decisions necessary to meet the particular needs of their unique set of students. Envision principals with the flexibility to build and develop an effective staff. Imagine educators provided with all the tools and data they need to innovate curricula and instructional materials, determine what works for each of their students and adjust and improve instruction every day.

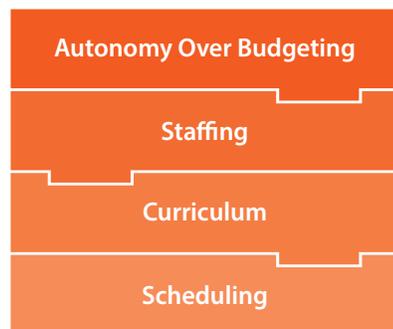
In a powerful study of 442 schools in eight large U.S. school districts, UCLA Professor William Ouchi discovered that the schools just imagined were the ones most likely to succeed at improving outcomes for students. These schools have three traits:⁴



Although many school systems have attempted to grant autonomy to school leaders over the last two decades, only some have experienced consistent and sustained improvements in student outcomes.⁵ Those that have succeeded have used *all three* of the levers identified in Ouchi’s research: autonomy, accountability for results and active adult and student learning.

This Shared Learning model of accountable autonomy and active, data-rich adult learning and innovation offers Texas an opportunity to balance accountability with the autonomy and structural supports needed to allow innovation in Texas public schools for the benefit of all students—one need not be sacrificed for the other. It is clear that the current Texas model with its overreliance on compliance-driven systems is not producing the desired result.

Autonomy: the “Four Freedoms”



When adopting a Shared Learning strategy, states and districts must first identify the areas in which schools should receive autonomy.

Ouchi found that schools were most successful when they had the “Four Freedoms”: autonomy over budgeting, staffing, curriculum and scheduling.⁶

International comparative studies by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) similarly associate better student performance with greater school autonomy over resource allocation, curriculum and assessment, together with transparency as to student outcomes.⁷

Accountability

In order for greater autonomy to lead to improved student outcomes, states, districts, schools and educators must also accept responsibility for demonstrably improving every student’s learning outcomes and readiness to succeed in college or careers. They must define their own success by the academic progress their students make and use the information provided by measures of student success to guide their efforts to improve instruction and outcomes.

Active Learning and Support

To avoid uneven outcomes across schools, autonomy must be coupled with deliberate steps to build the capacity of school leaders and educators to use their autonomy effectively. Specifically, school leaders must be able to use all available data about student and instructional outcomes to plan, innovate, evaluate results and rapidly adjust—to engage, that is, in active learning and support.

The following Texas school districts are in the forefront of active learning efforts:

- **Aldine ISD:** In Aldine, the district office helps principals and school leadership teams establish effective professional learning communities by providing training on structured protocols for data meetings and helping schools restructure time for grade level and department collaboration.⁸
- **Leander ISD:** In Leander, the district hosts principal collaborative meetings several times a year, during which school leaders visit one another’s campuses to observe classrooms and learn about school programs and initiatives.⁹
- **Spring Branch ISD:** Spring Branch created a voluntary school visit program based on a model used by KIPP schools. Leaders of participating schools visit each other’s schools, observe classrooms and share feedback.¹⁰

Keys to Effective Implementation

In order for the Shared Learning system to succeed, state, district and even school-level central offices must work hard to ensure that actions taken to implement active learning and enforce accountability do not unnecessarily encumber school leaders' and educators' autonomy.

The following are recommendations to guide all levels of government in effective implementation of shared learning and autonomy practices:

School Role:

- Together with educators and families, develop a school-wide strategy for using autonomy from state and district policies and active learning to improve results, and share that strategy with district leaders.
- Engage educators in the instructional leadership of the school, including through collaborative problem solving by teams of educators.
- Use state- and district-support mechanisms to facilitate and extend instructional innovation.
- Co-develop and share effective practices with other educators within the school and with other schools in the district and statewide.

District Role:

- Survey school principals to identify district rules and policies restricting autonomy.
- Develop a district-wide plan for using autonomy from state and district policies, together with accountability and active learning, to improve results; identify schools that will benefit from that autonomy; and invoke new and existing state mechanisms, such as District Charter Authorization, to extend the autonomy to those schools.
- Consider rigorous accountability measures that align to and augment the state system, such as district-wide interim assessments, surveys and qualitative external reviews of how well schools use their autonomy to identify and implement improvement strategies.
- Reorganize the central office to replace top-down regulatory and compliance-oriented operations with a service ethic that respects and enhances schools' use of autonomy.
- Facilitate active learning within and between schools, for example, through collaborative problem solving by teams of educators and networks of schools.

State Role and Policy Recommendations:

- Adopt an initially restrained approach to autonomy that generates a rich set of informative experiences from which future policymakers can learn.
- Free districts that choose to opt in, and schools those districts identify, from a specified list of key legal and policy restrictions in exchange for the districts' agreement to develop and implement plans that encompass the District Steps laid out below.
- Survey state law, district superintendents and principals to identify state rules and policies restricting autonomy, particularly over budgeting, staffing, curriculum and scheduling, and selectively release districts and schools from those mandates.

- Restructure state education office operations to limit compliance-oriented actions and augment targeted service provision to districts and schools that improves their use of autonomy.
- Facilitate active learning statewide through working networks of districts and schools that face similar challenges and are developing allied innovations.

Sources

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